

November 22, 2020 (St. Andrew's Sarnia)

New Testament: II Timothy 1:3-7, 3:14-17

³ I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. ⁶ For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷ for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Message *“Embers & Sparks”*

About five years ago, in August,
I was in the midst of wrapping up my life in the UK
and preparing to move home to Canada.
I had already felt the call to ministry the Christmas before,
had worked the last months of my contract
at the University of Bristol
and now found myself
with two weeks of freedom
before flying out
and beginning a new chapter
in my life.

So I decided, as an aspiring Presbyterian minister,
I ought to go to Scotland and see where it all began:
St Giles' Cathedral, the High Kirk of Edinburgh,
the so-called ancient “Mother Church”
of world Presbyterianism.

I arrived in Edinburgh late on a Sunday, s
so I could go to their evening worship service at St. Giles
in the Thistle Chapel.

The evening worship was lovely;
a small congregation but we sang and prayed
and had a short message
from one of their ministers.

I went back the next day to play tourist and have a proper look around.
What struck me most was how distinctly different St. Giles is
from the big Church of England cathedrals, churches and abbeys

I'd visited in places like Oxford, Bath and Durham.
 St. Giles is architecturally beautiful,
 but distinctly lacking in church bling:
 statues and paintings and gold-leaf and so on.

The cathedral has beautiful stained glass, but it's all relatively modern;
 the building dates to the 1400's,
 but the glass is from the late 1800's and onward,
 as are the few plaques on the wall and the statues.
 So it bears the marks of its tumultuous history
 and its Presbyterian past;
 John Knox, who was minister there and
 whose prayer and confession we are using today,
 was a leader in the emergence of Presbyterianism
 and he, as they all did, opposed any sort of images
 or decoration or even crosses in church.
 So the medieval stained glass, the statues and relics
 were all stripped from the cathedral in the 1500s,
 and not until the last 180 years or so
 has stained glass, plaques and the ornate Thistle chapel
 become part of St. Giles.
 Ironically, there's even a bronze statue
 of John Knox, too, now in the church,
 which would have displeased him
 greatly.

But St. Giles is not primarily a tourist attraction or some kind of museum;
 I remember being really thrilled to see
 modern worship banners hanging from its ancient pillars,
 comfortable, modern seating
 arrayed around a central platform,
 and an active congregation
 that was in no way burdened
 by their gorgeous old building
 or their long and significant history.
 So, for a prospective Presbyterian minister,
 it was incredibly uplifting and encouraging
 to see that the ancient home and heart
 of our global denomination
 was full of life and beating strong,
 that the roots of our Presbyterian heritage
 were still thriving,
 even after so many centuries.

Heritage is very much at the heart of the letter Paul wrote
to his young friend, Timothy,
at the end of Paul's life
and near the beginning of Timothy's ministry.

Paul writes of their common experience
of being the descendants of people of faith.

He refers to his own ancestors who,
though at least some of them were likely Jewish,
all worshipped the same God that Paul himself does.

Timothy has a wonderful inheritance of faith
from his grandmother Lois
and his mother Eunice,
a faith that lived
in each generation.

Paul encourages Timothy to keep that faith alive in himself,
to continue on in what he'd learned,
from childhood onward,
from his grandmother and his mother,
and from Paul himself, too.

At the time of writing, Paul would've been in prison for the last time,
waiting to be executed.

At the very end of the letter,
Paul anticipates one last visit from Timothy
and asks him to bring his books and
"above all, the parchments"
so he could work right up until the end.

But nothing is ever certain;
and so, Paul gave some final advice to Timothy in this letter
and to us, really, too.

And Paul last advice was to...

...keep going.

Follow my example by persevering
in your faith and in the Gospel,
in spite of the challenges
and suffering you will experience.

The message of Paul's letter to Timothy is that
whatever your moment of history throws at you,
keep going, and hold on to the Gospel, to who you are
and to the faith you have.

What Paul calls Timothy to do, he himself has already done:
lived his faith without hesitation or regret.

Our own personal heritages of faith may be long-established, like Timothy's; stretching back to our parents and grandparents, or even further. Some of us may have ancestors who were not just Christian but Presbyterian Christians, even, perhaps tartan-wearing Scottish Presbyterians; some of you may be sitting right now in the church that your parents and grandparents loved and within which they faithfully worshipped every Sunday. And some of you may be the first generation of a new heritage of faith for your families and that is really exciting, too.

Today is, of course, our Kirkin' of the Tartan Sunday, and we are celebrating the Scottish heritage of many of our families, and the Scottish roots of our Presbyterian denomination.

But it's also St. Andrew's 179th anniversary! And that is a heritage of faith that each one of us is part of, simply because we've been called by God to gather together, to worship God together and to serve Sarnia and the surrounding communities in Christ's name together, as we have done since 1841.

But whether we are new to church or long-standing believers, we are connected to an even greater and older heritage of faith, that Paul and Timothy knew themselves to be inheritors of, too: the sacred writings of Scripture, inspired by God, that shape and re-shape us as Christians. Towards the end of his letter to Timothy, Paul reminds him of Timothy's own personal history with Scripture, how he's read and learned from the Bible since childhood and how it has the power to equip everyone who reads it to serve God well.

Woven through this letter from Paul to Timothy are reminders of their heritage of faith, from their families to the sacred writings of Christianity.

These days, we think of heritage as something that comes from and lived in the past:

our traditions, our culture, our history.
 Heritage is background, context and foundation
 for the present;
 it adds colour and dignity and variety
 to our lives...but it is not central to our lives,
 not every day.

But Paul seems to view it differently,
 when it comes to the heritage of faith.
 In this letter to Timothy, he offers an image of faith as
 a fire that needs rekindling.

Timothy's heritage of faith, his learning from Scripture,
 the faith of his mother and grandmother,
 that has laid the fire;
 it's set out the tinder, the bits of wood and paper,
 ready to be lit.

Timothy's first steps into faith, his own belief in the gospel,
 lit that tinder,
 but it was up to Timothy himself
 to stir up that slow flame
 to a white and living heat.

Every fire needs feeding and tending;
 more wood at the right time, a good draft of air,
 even a poke or two to break up the embers.
 An untended fire fades in strength, flickering and fading;
 and as fierce and bright as tinder catching fire may look at first,
 it burns out quickly.

But there's no mystery or secret tool we need
 when it comes fanning the flames of our faith.
 We do it by praying, by worshipping together,
 by immersing ourselves in the Scriptures,
 by serving God in imitation of Jesus
 here at church and in our communities.

We feed our faith
 by embracing what God has given us;
 not a spirit of cowardice, that causes us to run away
 at the first sign of trouble
 but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.
 A spirit of power makes us bold and courageous
 – perhaps not fearless – but able to stand firm and persevere
 in our faith and in our belief in the Good News.
 A spirit of love – active, outwardly-directed *agape* love –

that love helps us to serve others well
as Christ taught us and showed us how to do.
And a spirit of self-discipline is the balance and constancy,
the abiding peace and committed faith,
that transforms us as we continue to nurture our belief in Christ.

That's what being equipped looks like;
that what is seen by the light of that
steady, burning flame of faith within us.

When it comes to our faith, our heritage of faith
– our families and our ancestry, our Presbyterianism,
our 179 years here as St. Andrew's –
all of that has laid a good bed of tinder for each of us,
ready to be lit.
What we ought to seek
– what God wants for us –
is not a quick, bright flash of faith...
...but rather a long, hot, steady burn;
a faith that lasts, that helps us keep going,
that enables us to persevere in our faith
and in the Gospel,
no matter what challenges
our own moment in history may throw at us...
...a faith that equips us to continue in the good, hard work
of serving God together,
to keep building up
our heritage of faith for generations to come.
Amen.