

Rekindling the Gift
2 Timothy 1: 1-7
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Last Sunday we celebrated communion of Saints and we reaffirmed how through the power of the resurrection we remain connected with all those who have gone before us in faith. Many of you came forward at the end of the service with a white carnation to place here before the chancel in the front of the church in memory of a loved one.

I spoke last week about a pandemic of loneliness affecting our society, particularly among the young and the very old. And I urge you to connect or to reconnect with someone who is struggling with isolation, or loneliness, or with loss. I believe many of you took that message to heart last Sunday – because the very next day when I was out calling I found a member of this congregation visiting a neighbor in rehab – a neighbor who lives alone. And as the three of us traded stories and jokes together, there were smiles, and laughter, and even a shared prayer.

That's what it looks like to be a living and a loving church. It's about connection. It's about our stewardship to one another, about our stewardship of life. Today our subject is faith – specifically what to do when our faith grows cold. In our text here today we find the apostle Paul in the imperial capital of Rome – a city with a population nearing one million in the first century A.D. These residents are crammed into about 16-square miles. Compare that to the city of Chicago that is 234 square miles.

These people literally lived on top of one another in ancient Rome. And outside the city walls the pretorian guard – the troops of the emperor who guard and protect him from all evil while they had their sprawling encampments. And it was here that Paul was imprisoned living in chains in a rented room guarded by soldiers and depended on other people for food and clothing and other necessities of life. The year is probably 65 or 66 A.D. And a young man named Nero – handsome, ruthless – sits upon the throne. Nero came to power at age of seventeen when his mother Agrippina had his father, Claudius, murdered along with his half-brother, Britannicus.

Nero himself returned the favor a few years later by murdering his own mother because Agrippina had grown too meddlesome for him. The public was appalled by this behavior but there was nothing they could do about it. And in AD 64 there was a fire in Rome that we believe was caused by Nero himself that hit the poorest districts of this packed city. It lasted for seven days. Thousands died. It was his way of exercising eminent domain. He wanted to build a circus. He blamed the fire on the Christians and this is the political context in which we find Paul imprisoned awaiting the judgment of Nero.

We learn from the letter known as 2 Timothy that he had already been arraigned once before the authorities and he narrowly avoided being taken to the lions in the colosseum for the amusement of the crowds. And so now we find him facing a violent and painful future and certain death. And what is he doing? He was writing what was probably his last letter not to many, but to one – to his protégé and

partner in ministry, young Timothy. Paul met Timothy on his missionary journeys in Asia in the city of Lustra just before crossing over to Macedonia and Greece.

According to the book of Acts when Paul came to Lustra he met this young man who was the child of a Jewish mother, Eunice, and a Greek father. He was a child of a mixed marriage. We learn that both women – his mother and grandmother – were women of strong faith. Paul, as we know, is unmarried and childless – a man that most ancient Christian commentators describe as bald, unattractive, his eyebrows met in the middle. He was bandy legged and he stood about 4’6” tall. That’s the guy who has given us much of the New Testament, small in stature, but great in faith and on fire for Jesus Christ.

Paul took Timothy into his ministry and they traveled far and wide visiting many cities – it was their final trip to Jerusalem that Paul brought Timothy, a half mixed Greek and a Jew, into the temple and there was a violent reaction by the Sanhedrin. There was a riot, and Paul was arrested and there was a plot to murder him, so he was transported at night where he awaited trial by Roman authorities for two years before exercising his rights as a Roman citizen to a trial before the emperor. And that led to his adventures of his travels across the Mediterranean, landing him in Rome where we find him now awaiting the pleasure of Nero under house arrest.

And again, what do we find this man doing? Is he filled with self-pity? Is he filled with fear? Uncertainty? On the contrary. He is using every bit of his strength, love and his faith to reach out to a young man who

is faltering in his faith and who is trembling in his trust, and who has recently been sent from Paul's side to return to Ephesus and the believers gathered there.

We see in verse one that Paul invokes the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus. That's how he begins this letter which I don't think is insignificant given the poignancy of what he is personally facing – his imminent execution – he begins with the promise of life in Christ Jesus. And then he moves to his gratitude addressing Timothy as 'my beloved child' like the son he never had. There is an affection here that goes beyond a partnership and ministry. Paul longs for Timothy's return which will fill him with joy, and he's very concerned about Timothy's own spirit as he recalls the tear filled goodbye. Life was uncertain in the first century. Neither Paul nor Timothy were sure that they would see each other again.

Life was uncertain in this century too, for us. Timothy no doubt wondered if he would ever return to see Paul. Paul for his part is determined to build up this young man who he's commissioned through ministry and laying on of his hands a practice that continued then and is continued unbroken to this day. I was the recipient of that same ministry when I was installed as a pastor at this church.

Let's look at what Paul's intent is and how well he built up Timothy. First he reminds Timothy of the faith of his own mother and grandmother and how different from Nero's family this is with all that wealth and power – he reminds him of his own family. We don't come to believe in God and to know Jesus Christ all by ourselves – it

doesn't happen in a vacuum. We need people and we're taught to believe by people who genuinely love us and care enough about us to take us to church, to pray with and for us, even to open the pages of the Bible and share their teaching with us. As verse 6 of our text affirms faith is a gift of God through the fire of the Holy Spirit.

We don't find our way to faith – faith finds its way to us. John [Crisenstone], one of the early church fathers had this prayer to say, “Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us a fire of your love.” If you've ever been camping or have a fireplace in your house you know how to build a fire, right? First you need to lay that fire with dried seasoned wood and then you need kindling to light it – either twigs or paper, or both. I have been known to kindle a fire with gasoline (that is another sermon). So you set the kindling aflame and then you have it a blazing fire. But what happens when the fire goes out? You wake up – you're camping, it's cold, you go over to the campfire with just a ring of ashes and you think the fire is gone, don't you? But it's not if you stir up those ashes you'll find the embers that are waiting within them that still have life. And if you blow on those embers the fire will be rekindled. It's no different – our faith is built on a trust in God's promises, our hope for the future and our love for each other.

But life has a way of causing our trust to falter at times, and our hope to fade and our love to grow old. And when this happens – and it's happened to most of you – at one point or another in your life that our faith needs to be rekindled and God's gift received again. So how do you rekindle a fire? First you have to stoop and kneel beside the ashes,

and second you need to gather the embers together, and third you need to blow on those embers again and again and again until they spring into flame. It's no different with the rekindling of our faith and if your intention is to encourage and even rekindle the faith of someone that you care for, the first thing you need to do is get on your knees and touch and feel and place your hands in the ashes of their sorrow, and their loss, and their pain, their uncertainty and vulnerability – even their despair. And then you need to sift gently through those ashes and find where those embers are and then you need to gather those embers together.

Embers don't last long when they are isolated. Coals can't spring back a flame unless they are gathered together. When we come to church we are gathering the coals together. We bring our ashes here – the ashes of our sorrows, the ashes of our sorrows and our disappointments and sinfulness. But we bring our faith – however dim that faith may be – and when we ask God in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to stoop down on us and blow those embers into flame, into the power of love and self-discipline and perseverance – that's how the fire of our faith gets rekindled. And that's Paul's purpose with young Timothy – the beloved son he never had and that ought to be our purpose too – when we think about the stewardship of life.

We are all here today because somebody brought us here, or invited us here and cared enough to do that. Maybe it was our parents, or grandparents. And if we reflect on this and we can perceive how God's gifts of faith are actually given through people – are given

through us through examples and commitments of those who go before us.

Friends, it's hard to keep the fire going when the embers are scattered. First Presbyterian Church is our fireplace and this is where we can come and continue to come to give of ourselves in every way for one another and for these children you saw earlier in the service. We can give of our presence, our passion, our money, and most of all, our love to keep us together in this fire place, so when the Master of the House stoops down to blow on us all with his spirit of power and self-discipline and enduring love that we all be rekindled again. Amen.