

Pentecost 21, Proper 23, Year C, 2013  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today is the fifth week  
that we've been reading  
from the letters of Paul to Timothy,  
and I suspect  
that you may be beginning  
to sense a theme  
running through them.

Paul  
is a prisoner,  
perhaps in Rome,  
under guard  
because of his faith.  
And Timothy  
is struggling.

He's young. He's the leader of the church.  
And it's not easy.

It seems that there are a couple of people  
who disagree with him,  
and not only with him,  
but with what he has been taught about faith in Christ,  
What he learned from his mother and grandmother,  
what the apostle Paul taught him,  
what has been the consensus among the apostles  
since the day of Pentecost.  
And what he has been charged  
with passing on  
to the next generation  
of followers  
of Jesus.

But these couple of people  
disagree,  
and they are making trouble in the congregation.  
And Timothy  
is done. He's ready

to give up.  
So what we have here from Paul  
is his advice  
to Timothy.  
Paul knows what it is  
to be fed up;  
Paul knows what it is  
to have just run out of energy for fighting the same battles over and over again;  
Paul knows what it is  
to be attacked for sticking  
to what he knows is right and true.  
Paul knows what it is  
to suffer.

And so he is writing to Timothy  
as someone  
who has been where Timothy is  
to encourage him  
to stick with it.

And he begins this part of his letter, what we call chapter two, by saying,  
“You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

It’s a reminder  
on two levels.  
First, it reminds Timothy  
that Paul knows him and loves him  
like a child.  
He is not alone.

Second,  
not only is Paul behind him  
but Jesus Christ as well.  
Christ is the one  
who offers Timothy grace.  
And grace, it seems in this letter,  
is like a shorthand  
for all of God’s generosity,  
all of God’s power,  
all of God’s strength,  
all of God’s love.  
Timothy has all of God’s generosity and power and strength and love  
behind him.

He doesn't have to do it all himself.  
He is not alone.

That's the background to our reading today,  
which begins at verse eight.

"Be strong,"  
Paul says to Timothy,  
"Be strong  
and remember  
who is behind you.  
Jesus  
has your back."  
Remember Jesus  
who himself suffered,  
suffered not just by being laughed at  
and attacked  
and ridiculed,  
but by being executed.  
His suffering culminated  
in his death.

But God was on his side. God was on his side.  
And so for him,  
death was not the end.  
Three days later,  
just three days,  
he was raised from death,  
resurrected, in glory.  
New life, unending life.

"Be strong," Paul says,  
"because God,  
in Christ,  
has your back."

And remember  
that Jesus  
was a descendent  
of David.  
Remember those words  
from the psalms and the prophets  
that we've been reading  
these last few weeks,

the utter despair of the people of God  
forced into exile.  
They had no hope.  
Everything  
that God had promised,  
a place they could call their own homeland,  
the freedom to govern themselves,  
all that was lost.

But remember  
Paul says,  
remember  
that after the exile  
the people returned,  
returned to the land  
that they feared they would never see  
and the royal lineage  
that they thought had been destroyed  
lived.  
Jesus from the line of David,  
a descendent  
of the first king  
of the people of God.  
A visible sign  
of the promise of God.  
Proof  
that God  
had their back.

“Be strong,” Paul says,  
“because God,  
in Christ,  
has your back.”

And then  
he goes into something  
that sounds almost like a hymn,  
something  
that people might have learned  
from memory  
and recited  
during church services.

“If we have died with him, we will also live with him;  
if we endure, we will also reign with him;  
if we deny him, he will also deny us;  
if we are faithless, he remains faithful--  
for he cannot deny himself.”

At first glance  
it might seem kind of discouraging.  
It's that third line that gets us.  
Deny Christ  
and he will deny you.

You're having a tough time and you hear that?  
You might as well give up.

But I don't think  
it's meant to be taken alone,  
at face value.  
After all,  
think about the apostle Peter.  
He denied Christ,  
and not just once  
but three times!  
Yet Christ came back to him,  
and three times asked him,  
“Do you love me?”  
And Peter answered  
“Yes.”  
And was given the task  
of sharing the good news of Jesus  
with the world.

So whatever these words mean,  
you can't just take them  
at face value.

And what I suspect  
is going on here  
is that Paul is - and it's not unusual for him -  
Paul is using hyperbole  
to try to get his idea across.  
He's using an extreme example  
to talk about something

much more ordinary.

Timothy  
is struggling,  
and he's ready to give up.

He's wondering  
if he got it wrong  
when he decided  
to follow Jesus,  
and even more  
when he accepted the job  
that the church leaders in Jerusalem gave him,  
to go preach, build the church,  
make disciples.

He's ended up in Ephesus  
and there's just so much opposition,  
and he's wondering whether  
he got it wrong.  
Maybe he's not the person for the job.  
Maybe someone else  
would have done better.  
Maybe his failure  
is all his fault.  
He's ashamed.

Or maybe, maybe,  
and he can hardly bear thinking it,  
maybe  
it was all wrong  
from the very beginning.  
Maybe  
he was stupid to believe in Jesus  
in the first place.  
Maybe it's all just a fairy tale.  
Maybe  
there's no God.

“If we deny him, he will also deny us.”

You see, it's the normal progression.  
We feel like a failure,

then we blame ourselves,  
then we begin to question  
the basis  
of whatever we do.

Or maybe it's not even about us.  
We suffer.  
We feel like God has abandoned us.  
We begin to think we're stupid  
even believing in God.  
We lose our faith.

Paul can see the pattern,  
he can see the path ahead  
that Timothy  
is tempted  
to follow.

NO!!!!  
Don't do it!!!!  
There are  
other options.

And the option that Paul himself knows,  
that Paul himself has taken  
is to endure.

You see,  
it's not inevitable  
the progression from suffering  
to shame  
to denial.

There is another option.  
From suffering  
to endurance  
to hope.

You might have heard those words before.  
Remember  
Paul's letter to the Romans?  
It was written  
probably five or more years

before this one,  
and there Paul laid out the theory  
which has become  
the reality  
of his life.

In chapter five, Paul writes that  
“suffering produces endurance,  
and endurance produces character,  
and character produces hope.”

How he has survived his own suffering has been to endure.  
To survive.  
To make it through one day,  
and the next,  
and the next.

And the next.

And what he has found  
that in the end,  
perhaps  
when he least expected it,  
in the midst of his suffering  
in the midst of his endurance  
he found hope.

He wrote,  
“And hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through  
the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Somehow,  
in the midst of his suffering  
Paul experienced the love of God  
poured into his heart.  
Because God  
is faithful.

And that’s what he wants,  
what he wants so much  
for his beloved Timothy.  
To experience that wonderful love of God  
that has filled him  
to overflowing.

Most of us  
are not in Timothy's position.  
Our struggles tend to be  
not so much about what is going on in church -  
    though we do have our issues on occasion -  
but that doesn't mean  
that we don't struggle.

Many of us struggle  
with issues in our families, and in our jobs, and in our  
personal  
lives.  
And I think that we can learn from the wisdom  
that Paul offered  
to Timothy.

Sometimes it feels as if the progression  
is inevitable.  
We struggle or suffer.  
We wonder if we are crazy believing in God.  
We lose faith.

And we keep quiet about it,  
because somewhere  
we got sold on the idea  
that Christianity  
is all about being happy and successful and fulfilled.

But it's not.  
Christianity  
is about being followers of Christ,  
in good times and bad.  
And sometimes  
times are bad.

But the progression  
from suffering  
to shame  
to denial  
is not  
inevitable.  
Paul stands as a witness.

When you are suffering, he says,  
remember Jesus.  
Remember Jesus, who gives you strength.  
And endure.

You don't have to make happy.  
You just have to survive.  
To make it through one day,  
and the next,  
and the next.  
And keep on remembering  
that Christ  
is your strength.  
And one day,  
probably unexpectedly  
you will discover  
something growing in you.  
And that something  
is hope.

Hope  
because God is faithful  
and the one who in Christ  
brought life  
out of death  
will indeed bring us life  
new,  
and  
rich,  
and everlasting.