

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost • July 27, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Acts 16:1-5; 2 Timothy 1:1-14

“Portraits of Faith – Timothy: Youthful Service”

When I was in kindergarten, I was entrusted with the feeding of our classroom's fish. In the morning, I had the special privilege of entering the classroom early to perform this awesome task. I'd leave everyone else behind in the gym, which served as a staging area before the school day started. I remember thinking just how great that felt to be able to go in do that job, even if it wasn't all that complicated. I was full of joy and enthusiasm in carrying out this responsibility. But something happened – I don't recall exactly what went down, though I think I was framed – so that someone else was given entrusted with fish-feeding. (Rest assured that no fish were harmed in that incident. I think.) You've probably had a similar experience growing up... with responsibility, **not** fish-feeding. We have all been entrusted with *something*. Today we turn to Timothy and learn about that with which he had been entrusted.

Who is this Timothy? Take a look at our first pericope, from Acts 16, where Timothy first enters the scene, as it were. We know that he came from near the middle of the area of the world we now know as Turkey, a town called Lystra. Apparently, the Gospel had already arrived in Lystra some time before, because we learn that both Timothy's mother and grandmother were Jewish Christians. Eunice and Lois had been converted to the faith some time in the past as the Good News spread through Asia Minor, and they shared this faith with young Timothy. Like any respectable Jewish boy, Timothy would have been raised with knowledge of the Scriptures; however, he also learned that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Scriptures, the promised Messiah who would save the people from their sin. Timothy's father, as a Greek, probably was not a believer – the Bible does not indicate that he was, and Timothy would likely have already been circumcised if his father was a proselyte to Judaism. The main thing to note in all this, though, is that the faith had been passed down from one generation to another.

As Christians, we have been entrusted with the same responsibility of passing on our faith. We share in the joy and privilege, not of feeding fish, but of feeding the littlest ones in our midst. All of us have a part to play in building up the young people of our fellowship, sharing the Good News with them and preparing them for a life of service in Christ. We entrust to them that which has been entrusted to us. Like Timothy, we have been gifted by those who have come before us in the faith. In a way, my background somewhat similar to Timothy's. My grandmother, Jeanette Paul, had come from a Roman Catholic family, but converted to the Lutheran church in marrying my grandfather and embraced our Lutheran confession of the Christian faith. She shared that faith with her children, including my mother, who in turn shared it with her family. My father, who came from an unchurched background, was converted as well, was baptized, and now serves in the leadership of their congregation back up in suburban Chicago! The gift of the Gospel is not something that comes by our doing, but the Holy Spirit is at work throughout the generations of believers like a wildfire, going from soul to soul, not burning down, but building up.

The Good News of forgiveness of sin through Jesus is the message that was shared with the youth in Timothy's day as well as ours. This is the true message that Jesus is God. That he came and was born and lived among us. That he died for us on the cross to save us from sin. And that problem of sin is still all around us, regardless of our age.

In this world, we struggle with the effects of sin in life, like fear. Timothy, it seems, felt this in a particular way. In our reading today, along with other references in the New Testament, we hear Paul encouraging Timothy directly, or asking the Corinthians to support Timothy by not treating him harshly. Going about as a young pastor – another connection I feel with Timothy – people may likely have been somewhat dismissive. If some young person comes up to you to teach you, you might just assume that such a little whippersnapper couldn't possibly know what they're talking about – what could *they* know

about anything? But as with Timothy, young people who serve in the sharing of the Gospel news do not do so all alone. You do not have to be afraid, nor should older people discount your work, because the Holy Spirit will go with you. Sin may be at work all around us, but God is stronger than sin. The cross of Christ is stronger than the devil and all his works.

As we grow older, may find that we no longer have to contend with that fear of being dismissed by others because of our youth; however, we often leave behind an important aspect of youthful service: enthusiasm and joy. Try comparing an adult's report of a raise or promotion at work with a five-year-old's announcement that they've been invited to a friend's birthday party: pound-for-pound, the child's enthusiasm will blow anything else out of the water. I hear that energy and enthusiasm each day around our congregation's Early Childhood Education Center. God forbid that we lose the joy that should come as we announce His Good News, the truth of what He has done in our lives!

Youthful service applies to us all, no matter how many candles may appear on your birthday cake. As Timothy did, you may provide **support and encouragement** for others. Timothy would go on in life to be a servant – a “super servant,” even. He traveled across the Roman world with Paul and others, providing aid in times of need, supporting Paul in his ministry. He was circumcised so as not to give offense to the Jewish people with whom he would share the Gospel. Paul came to think of Timothy as his son in the Spirit, so close was their bond and so valued was Timothy's friendship. The letter to Timothy from which our second pericope is taken illustrates this, as Paul is languishing in prison and awaiting the end of his life on earth. Paul writes Timothy for support and encouragement, asking him to come and visit. Even though he was young, Timothy was able to serve in this way.

But in addition to the seemingly low-key service of support and encouragement, Timothy and other young people take on “**big time**” **responsibilities**. You may have to step up and feed the fish. As a Christian, no matter what your age, you are called to share Jesus' self-giving love with the people around you – that's a huge responsibility. You have the opportunity to live in witness through action by obeying your parents, being nice to your brother or sister... all the time! Thanks be to God that He makes such things possible as His Spirit is at work in our lives!

Finally, one of the most important parts of youthful service is **learning**. God may call people to faith at any time during their life, so young people have the special blessing of being able to spend all the more time in the study of God's word, growing in understanding of the way God wants us to live. Even if you're not chronologically young, everyone should seek to embrace this aspect of Timothy's life. In learning, in the study of Scripture, God build His people up to be better prepared for the challenges of this world.

Regardless of your age, God has entrusted you with the “good deposit” of the Gospel message. The Holy Spirit will watch over you and lead you in giving that deposit away, only to have it build. May we, like Timothy, all share in the youthful enthusiasm that comes through God's grace!

Amen.