

November 9 2014

Scripture Lessons ~

Psalm 150, No. 109

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-15

Timothy 1:1-14

Sermon *The Faith to Let Go*

You know even an apostle and hero of our faith can have hard times, sometimes harder than for the average person of faith. I once had an elderly member in a former parish corner me and say, “Pastor Russ, being a follower of Jesus isn’t for sissies, is it?” I said, “No, sometimes it certainly is not.”

Consider the plight of St. Paul as he writes to his coworker Timothy. Paul in this letter was bearing up under great personal hardship and from the larger context of the letter we know in fact that Paul was in prison at the time that we encounter him here. Because he asks Timothy to bring him a cloak and we can, also, assume that things are cold and pretty uncomfortable in his circumstances. And he had to be lonely and he had to be disillusioned too, since his trusted companions either completely deserted him or they have been called to work in other places around the Mediterranean. I can sort of tell from the reading of this too, that Paul seems to be profoundly tired. He is kind of nearing the end of a long ministry. His life has been beset by more than the usual kinds of hardships- betrayal, shipwreck, flogging, jail time, abused by the mob, and it all seemed to sense as he is quoted in another part of the letter of being at the point of being sacrificed; sort of between the lines in this letter there is the underlying tone of great fatigue and tiredness. You know, it sounds kind of weird for me to say this but I kind of find it sort of comforting. I am relieved to see that even somebody as faithful and bold as St Paul sometimes found himself looking at the dark valleys of life as well. And I am glad to be reassured that I am not the only one that gets worn out. I’m not the only one who gets discouraged during those moments when things are falling apart in life and when the center seems not be holding and no one or nothing in my life seems reliable.

Today the theologian Soren Kierkegaard often used parables and stories to make points in his theology. He once compared his life to swinging on a trapeze at the circus. It reminds me of that old circus song we used to sing, “He flew through the air with the greatest of ease that daring young man on the flying trapeze”. And like that trapeze artist, we, too, sometimes swing out in life and then we let go. When we let go at least, I think three things can possibly happen. Maybe someone will be there to catch us as we grope in the void, maybe there will be strong and

comforting hands closing around ours and gripping us firmly and bringing us to a sense of safety.

A number of years ago as we were riding down to the store to get some frozen yogurt my son Shawn was telling me all about how Halloween sometimes scared him. He said at that point, he felt a little bit bad and I told him it was Ok to be a little bit afraid sometimes. He said, "I can always come and get a hug from Mom or from Dad when I'm is afraid." And I told him that when he gets bigger maybe Halloween won't scare him quite so much. He said, "It's OK Dad I'm happy just the way I am."

You know lots of time in life, we discover people near at hand upon whom we can rely on. But what if we, like Paul have been abandoned by some of the very people that we have put our trust in; what if nobody seems to understand us. What if our friends and family are far, far away; what if we have grown up and we don't have our parents loving arms nearby in those times when we are afraid. Of course, if we let go of the trapeze and nobody is there we may still be able to catch the next trapeze all by ourselves. Sometimes we discover strength and sometimes we discover possibilities right here within ourselves that we never expected would emerge in a time of a crisis. When others let us down we might prove strong, we might prove capable enough to grab that next trapeze all by ourselves. But what if, what if our resources aren't enough this time. What if we are too tired or too weak or too afraid to reach out to grab that trapeze any more?

Why then, I think of the third possibility may come true. Let's say that when we let go, we discover there is no body there to grab us and there is no trapeze for us to catch and so we fall and we fall and we fall and we topple headlong from the height but not to the ground instead helplessly into the safety net of God's loving arms. In so doing we learn there is still something trustworthy in this universe even after everything seems to fail.

Even when others let us down, those ever arms of God are right there beneath us, even when we fail ourselves. God will not let us fall; even when we fall we are not going to fall forever. I think this is Paul's great message to his friend Timothy. That broken down, abject, those great apostles write in what we would call death row and says this. "I know the one in whom I put my trust and I am sure that God is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me." Even behind prison walls Paul focuses his sight on Jesus who cannot fail and he looks forward to the day when grace will heal every heart and bind up every need. As Paul put elsewhere "the righteous shall live by faith." People of God can watch everything else can fall apart all around them and still trust God to be in control and of course that is not an easy thing to do. I don't have to tell you that; but maybe it would be easier if we didn't keep putting the cart before the horse in our life of faith. You know many people wait for feelings of trust before they dare to be bold in their

faith but feelings are not a reliable test of faith and some of us might wait a whole lifetime before we feel like trusting God. I'm afraid we have got bold enough then to step out in faith and then chances are in the doing, we will find feeling that will match the action that we have made. We always think we must wait for faith which will allow us to go and grab that trapeze but really it's the other way around. I have to remind myself that faith is not certainty. Faith is faith and we can only learn about faith after we have let go of the trapeze.

Now certainly, faith is a gift and one which must be exercised and nurtured every single day. And Kierkegaard calls this step the leap of faith and when Paul is speaking of Timothy's faith he compares it a coal that has to be rekindled; a coal that has to be fanned back into a flame. And this is one reason why Jesus instituted, for example, the sacrament of Holy Communion. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is a great object lesson on his life and work which helps to rekindle our faith when things are waning it is especially important thing for us to remember when we take Holy Communion together like we did last week. For a world that has brokenness, a world where there is fear and hatred and violence like the one in which we live we need to be reminded again and again that there is another way to deal with our problems there is another way we deal with our differences and that way is this way is Jesus' way; the way of unity; the way of peace a way of faith; to fan the flame then maybe we need to act on the faith that we are not sure that we have; if we fail in thinking ourselves of new way of life then why not live ourselves into a new way of thinking about our faith. God doesn't give us faith so that we can take risks. God invites us to take risks so that we can learn the lesson of faith. We are encouraged then this week to grab a hold of this promise. To grab a hold of that trapeze the next time you find yourself flying through the life and not having anything to hold onto.

And together we say AMEN