

Proper 24 – 21 Pentecost – Year C – October 20, 2010 - Homily
Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119: 97-104; 2 Timothy 3: 14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8
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This week's New York Times bestseller lists include hardback fiction titles *The Reversal*, by Michael Connelly, and *Fall of Giants* by Ken Follett. We have to wonder if these books will be remembered five, ten or twenty years from now. It is a well-known fact that The Holy Bible is the all time bestselling book, translated into numerous languages with sales of over six billion (with a "b") copies.

In our reading from 2 Timothy, the author is reassuring Timothy that despite what is going on in his community, he has been grounded in sound doctrine from childhood, must continue to use the scriptures, and to preach the Gospel at all times. This reading is a solemn call to a steadfast and authentic life of faith. It is a wake up call for all of us to live lives that affirm and reaffirm Christ's own faithfulness and ministry. Why would the author even have to send such a letter to a Christian community, and its leader? Can't we take it as given that Christians desire closeness to God in Christ Jesus, and have a heartfelt longing to discern and obey God's will, to become disciples of Jesus, studying His ways, proclaiming His name, and enduring whatever the world's response might be? What does your own experience tell you? We could all wish that this were true, although it isn't.

As measure of our constant seeking for new and interesting, even in the early church the temptation to seek out something new, or to listen to false teaching was present. Today, we just have to look at the latest religious fads including things like praying the prayer of Jabez, where some teachers would have us believe that God wants us to be financially wealthy. Modern technology has probably increased the misuse of Scripture or at least made it easier for the flimflam artists of religion to do their work. In fact, those who have itching ears now find it easier to hear whatever pleases them couched in religious terms, using sound bytes from the Bible to authenticate a most inauthentic message about God, about Jesus Christ, and about Christianity. You don't have to flip the channels much on a Sunday morning to find this kind of preaching and teaching, usually involving a plea for money that will guarantee God's response to your deepest desire. But it can also be more subtle than that. Our modern lives are deeply influenced by a culture of consumerism. We have learned to shop around, and be demanding consumers. Church leaders find themselves constantly under pressure to conform to the latest fads or pleasures concordant with a consumer mentality. Christians are not immune to the temptation to shop around different churches until they find something that meets their needs. Sadly, in doing so, many miss the point that authentic Christianity and discipleship is much more about surrendering our lives to Christ and serving God and our neighbors, than about pleasing ourselves.

The author of this portion of second Timothy experienced the same thing two thousand years ago. It could well have been a situation where Timothy wrote to Paul or another close associate expressing dismay at the fact that some of his followers were leaving the faith community. Maybe turning away from the Scriptures or avoiding some of the harder teachings of Jesus, especially when times got tough. There are even those who were suddenly going after a new teacher whose message was not in accord with the gospel of Jesus Christ, or simply more to their taste. The truth is that the gospel is not always comfortable all the time, and can be distinctly uncomfortable when God demands that we learn, grow and pick up our cross daily. On the other hand, false teaching frequently promotes personal comfort rather than the challenges of God's truth that shape us in our formation as disciples of Jesus. The world, even the world of religion, is full of choices. We have all

learned to avoid pain as much as possible. In the name of modern psychology and promoting self-esteem, we've created a society where almost everyone thinks they are right and good, and where almost everything has become relative. Another way to say it is "I'm alright, you're alright." The result is a culture where compassion for others, amongst other Godly virtues is a distant star in a galaxy far far away from many individuals standing at the center of their respective universes. No wonder so many people have itchy ears and just want to hear what accords and affirms their own opinions and desires. When our lives can seem overwhelming in so many ways, can we really be surprised that so many are attracted to a message that promotes pain avoidance, asks for nothing in return, and just makes us feel good about ourselves. It's frightening, discomforting and very hard to hear the truth writ large throughout all of Scriptures, that at the core of our natures we are sinners who readily stray into selfishness and greed, who consistently forget that we were made to worship God, and to do God's will, that we are not in control, and that cannot save ourselves.

Now for some really good news. God loves us wherever we are in the vast spectrum of humanity and all our failings. God is constantly seeking us out. God has sent His only Son, Jesus Christ to show us the way, the truth, and the life, and by God's grace to reconcile us to God through faith in Him. This is the message that endures from age to age, that we must pass along. In baptism, we give our whole lives to Christ; we die and rise again with Him. We are not left like orphan infants to fend for ourselves, or like newly released prisoners who seek out the only friends they have known and fall back into criminal ways. We are, like Timothy, surrounded by a community of witnesses, a community of loving, caring Christians who have promised to support us in our new lives in Christ. We are also empowered by the Holy Spirit, who breathes life into our understanding of the Scriptures. You and I are constantly being guided in God's ways, by Christ's light, and filled with the peace of the Holy Spirit.

The reading gives specific instructions on what we must all do, whether or not the Gospel message is currently popular. We continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. We persevere in faithfulness – our faith in action – whereby we share our spiritual gifts, and follow Jesus' disciplines of studying Scripture, of regular prayer, and of worshipping God in community. We pray for patience, knowing that patience is a fruit of the Spirit, and knowing that the more we lean on God, the stronger we are. The Bible is the all time bestselling book, because a key part of its power and authority is purely divine. God-inspired means God-breathed. That in turn means that Holy Scripture bears the imprimatur of God's presence and blessing in its substance. Being God-breathed, we recognize the human element in its writing, and the divine inspiration that informed its content, its vision, its spirit and wonder, as well as its enduring authority. As such, the author reminds Timothy that the purpose of Scripture is formational in emboldening our hope, training us in Christ's ways, and all the ways of right relationship with God. Scripture is also re-formatational, reforming us in Christ-likeness, realigning our wills to align with God's will, and convicting our hearts as necessary for our growth.

We are so blessed to have our Bibles – everything we need for our salvation is contained in Scripture, we just need to keep reading it faithfully, with open hearts and open minds. I once read about a pastor who shared that when he retired from full time ministry his parishioners told him that he only ever preached one sermon. If that was the story of the good news of Jesus Christ as told to us in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, then it's surely the greatest compliment he could have received. Everything else is just window dressing.

Amen.