

Proper 25 – 22 Pentecost – Year C – October 27, 2010 Homily
Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:4-6, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14
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Past, present and future merge in tonight's lesson from second Timothy. Paul is in prison – which was certainly no picnic in the first century. His ministry has been one of great passion, combined with a great deal of suffering. In his second letter to the church in Corinth (2 Cor. 11:24-28), Paul admits, “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.” That's a lot of punishment for one man to endure in a lifetime. Yet Paul considers suffering no more, and certainly no less, than the honor of imitating Christ, and sharing in Christ's suffering for the sake of the Gospel.

All disciples – followers of Christ – are called to the way of the cross. Some, like Paul, endure massive physical hardship for the sake of their faith. Others suffer great emotional or spiritual stress in order to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. As I was reminded this week, sharing the Good News is what all Christians are all called to do and to embody. Paul is nearing the end of his life, and he has some significant reflections about life and death; justice and injustice; betrayal and forgiveness; as well as good and evil. In other words, it is the big questions of faithful living that ultimately embrace the greatest significance as our horizons become narrower. I know that my deepest desire when I meet Jesus is akin to hearing the words, “Well done, faithful servant.” Faithful. Servant. Faithful to God. Servant to God and others. The simplicity is divine, yet it does not mask the challenges and daily struggle inherent in each statement.

Paul likens his own faithfulness to a marathon runner who may stumble from time to time, run faster or slower, need a rest, and endure a variety of climate conditions throughout a long race, but one who never gives up. What keeps us strong in our faith? Is it timely words of encouragement, or the good feelings we have when we are confident that we have served God in some way? Is it our community of faith, sometimes challenging, but more often a great source of comfort and strength in our spiritual journey? Maybe it's coming to the Table and receiving the gifts of grace in and through Holy Communion that strengthens us? It's worth reflecting on this very carefully, because we will all have days when we are not strong in our faith. Days when we are faced with great temptations, or when we are simply exhausted or fit to drop, when nothing seems worth the effort, or when everything seems to be going haywire. What we know and learn about endurance and courage before those days will help us to keep going. Do you remember the parable of the sower and the different types of plants that germinate from the seeds? When the sun gets hot, we don't want to wither up and die, or walk away from Christ when life gets tough. Just like Paul, we need to be deeply rooted and have resources to help us grow, and complete the work that God has given us to do. As he says, “the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully

proclaimed.” Whatever happens to him, Paul has the amazing gift of never taking his eyes off God in Christ Jesus. We can all envy such single-minded focus, or we can learn to emulate it.

Paul’s reflections on death, embrace his knowledge and sincere belief in the hope of the resurrection. He is confident, as we are, that the end of our earthly lives means that we are stepping into our new life with Christ in the heavenly kingdom. God is faithful in all His promises, and Paul reflects this aspect of God’s faithfulness in his own life. More specifically, God is just and merciful to all who call on His name. Most importantly, God is our judge – no one else. So in embodying divine grace, Paul also prays for mercy for his companions along the way who were not as strong as he was, and fled during the most difficult times. He forgives others as God has forgiven him. The Lord knows Paul has had a checkered life, including documented persecution and the murder of Christians, before his own conversion experience. None of us is blameless in our own lives. Jean Paul Richter says this about forgiveness, “When we forgive, the one who has pierced our heart stands in relation to us as a sea-worm that perforates the shell of a mussel, which straightaway closes the wound with a pearl.” Forgiveness may well be the pearl of great price, because it is close to our own hearts, and at the very heart of the Gospel. That makes forgiveness one of the hardest gifts of love that we can ever give. Yet, when we forgive, we participate in the reconciliation and renewal of all creation, according to God’s will. Again, just as Paul is using his time in prison to reflect on his life, faithful living is reflective living. If we have a hard time forgiving others, what is getting in the way? When the Lord Jesus died so that we might be forgiven for our own sins, who are we to withhold that gift from another? Forgiveness, like mercy, is also a double blessing. Forgiveness is a cup of grace poured out on the other, and in turn, it releases us so that we can continue to grow and move forward.

Perhaps the greatest lesson Paul shares in his reflections is his continuing concern for others. He has lived his life loving God and loving his neighbors. His concern for his young protégé, Timothy, is obvious. Paul’s genuine love for all believers is written in every line. He has allowed himself to be poured out as a sacrifice in order to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. Someone once postulated that when we meet Jesus the only question we will have to answer is how well have we loved in our earthly lives. The good news for us this evening is that God is not finished with us yet! Whatever is in our past, cannot be changed, any more than Paul could change his own history. We do not know what the future holds. We only have this moment in which to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. In the movie, *Titanic*, third class passenger Jack is dining with the fiancé, mother, and friends of Rose, a troubled young woman and first class passenger. At dinner, Jack muses that life is a gift, that he has everything he needs in any given moment, and that he intends to make each moment count. We too make our lives count when we give thanks to God for the gift of life, and transform gratitude into gifts of love in action now, in the present.

Here’s to always making life count!

Amen.