

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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October 2, 2016
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
2 Timothy 1:1-13

A Legacy of Faith

The strongest people in the world are those who have faith.

Ten years ago today a gentle rain was falling on the farmland of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. It is Amish country, where clothing hangs on lines, and buggies drawn by horses are a common sight. Children at the one-room schoolhouse at West Nickel Mines had just come inside from morning recess when a man pulled up in a pickup. He came into the school with weapons, he barricaded the doors and windows, and within half an hour he had killed five girls, seriously wounded five more, and killed himself. Charlie Roberts' motives went with him to his grave. He came from a loving family, had a wife and three small children, and worked as a milk truck driver.

The story circled the globe, as such stories do. But what really caught the world's attention was the response of the Amish community to the tragedy. Within hours, they expressed both words and acts of forgiveness toward Charlie and his family. In a news cycle accustomed to anger and vengeance, the media were stunned. Where does this come from, this ability to forgive and have compassion? Previously obscure scholars were interviewed endlessly. They explained to bewildered reporters, "The Amish follow the example of their persecuted ancestors, and of their Lord Jesus Christ, who said on the cross, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'"

Just this week, Charlie's mother, Terri Roberts, had another opportunity to tell her story, on the radio show called "StoryCorps." She recalled the private funeral for her son a few days after the shooting. As they went to the gravesite next to a Methodist church, as many as 40 Amish began coming out from around the side of the graveyard, surrounding them like a crescent. Terri says, "Love just emanated from them."

And the healing balm which the Amish community shared with her has motivated her to reciprocate. One of the surviving children, Rosanna, now 16 years old, is unable to talk or walk, and needs to be tube fed. Terri asked if she might help with Rosanna's care once a week. Her offer was accepted. "I read to her, I bathe her, dry her hair."

Terri reflects, "I will never forget the devastation caused by my son. But one of the fathers the other night, he said, 'None of us would have ever chosen this. But the relationships that we have built through it, you can't put a price on that.' "

<http://www.npr.org/2016/09/30/495905609/a-decade-after-amish-school-shooting-gunman-s-mother-talks-of-forgiveness>

The strongest people in the world are those who have faith. For faith can see us through the ordinary and the unimaginable, what a day or a lifetime can bring. Faith is the most valuable treasure entrusted to us, for with it we are stronger than any muscles or weapons or armor. With faith, we are stronger than armies, stronger than our feelings, stronger than words.

Oh, you may be thinking, that's great that the Amish could forgive, but I sure couldn't do it, at least not that quickly. Maybe you're thinking, "if I were Charlie's mother, I'd have moved away and started a new life as soon as I could." Or maybe you're imagining being the parent of Rosanna, reminded every day of the injustice visited on an innocent child.

Where does such faith come from? How can we cultivate it? How can we be faithful stewards of the gift of faith? Second Timothy has some wisdom for us, all these centuries later. Whether it was written by Paul for Timothy, or written by an admirer of Paul several decades later, the Holy Spirit meant for it to be heard by people like us, in the 21st century, people who ask questions about faith and wonder what good it is for us in our time, and where we might get it.

For though we live in an era in which faith is often scoffed at or belittled, deemed irrelevant or sometimes even dangerous, we are still human beings, and human beings are spiritual beings. In our culture, many think faith is antiquated, a vestige of a less advanced time and place—yet 84% of the world's people claim a religious faith (Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012). Religious observance has declined throughout Europe, and the number who answer "none" to questions about religious preference in America is rising quickly—yet I still maintain that to be human is to be religious. Instead of traditional religious practice, people are choosing to worship other gods: recreation, sports, the accumulation of wealth, technology. But where will they be when life takes an unexpected turn? What will they do when they receive a life-threatening diagnosis, or when a family member dies by suicide, or when their fortune disappears in an economic downturn? **When we put our faith in our own ability to construct and run our lives, we live on a knife edge without a safety net.** A cultivated, nurtured faith makes us more resilient, for it gives us a stronger connection to that which is greater than ourselves, that which lies beyond us. Paul calls this gift "a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." (2 Tim 1:7) This is the strength of faith in God.

Paul knew what he was talking about. He was in prison when he wrote this letter, one of many imprisonments. He endured floggings, stoning, shipwrecks, threats from all kinds of people, hunger, lack of shelter, sleeplessness, some ailment he called "a thorn in the flesh," and on top of all that, problem churches to worry about. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28, 12:7) For someone who was educated and had status both as a Jew and as a Roman citizen, all that he endured must have been humiliating. Yet he writes to Timothy, "I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust." And elsewhere, "whenever I am weak, then I am strong." He lived on faith, faith was his bread and butter, his shelter in the storm, his healing and enduring source of power, and so he counseled Timothy.

Find the roots of your faith once again. Faith grows in community. Remember your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice? Remember their faith and how they shared it with you?

Perhaps you have a mother or father, a grandmother or grandfather, who are your models in faith. You watched them pray, you saw them reading the Bible, and you observed them living generous, faithful, trusting lives. In a church community, especially in our transient way of living these days, those intergenerational examples may not be related by blood, but by being in Christ's family together. We have a gift, and thereby a responsibility, to share faith from generation to generation. Did you ever think you'd become the role model, an example of faith for those younger than you? Faith is a legacy which we steward so that we can pass it along to the next generation.

The Presbyterian Church hasn't been doing such a great job of that in recent generations. The average age of a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) member across the denomination is—are you ready for this? 62 years old. I'm still in the younger half, by one year! That is a daunting statistic.

But I'm encouraged that I learned that fact from a 21-year-old member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), one of our Presby Cats who, unsolicited, just a few days ago, told me how impressed she is that our particular congregation engages children and youth and college students and people of all ages. I'm not always so optimistic—I guess I don't always have enough faith—but that's what she sees.

The statistics, and society's trends, challenge us to keep innovating, to stay with it, to nurture the generations with hope and love. To share with them this spirit of power and love and self-discipline that we are given in Christ Jesus.

And by doing so, to help them be strong enough to face whatever life brings, and true enough to Jesus Christ that they can follow his way of forgiveness, compassion, and grace. It takes time, and commitment, and practice to grow a Christian. It takes intentionality, especially in a culture so full of distractions and alternatives. But isn't it the greatest gift we can give the next generation, to have faith in our loving God?

My friends, we have a treasure, a deposit, a legacy that we inherited from the generations which preceded us. It is the treasure of faith, that life-sustaining gift which can make us the strongest people in the world because our strength is God's strength. Though we may feel inadequate to this mission, it is our mission and God gives us all that we need to carry out the mission to which God calls us. If you personally feel weak in the faith department, that's what the Christian community is for. We have study groups and ministry groups and prayer chains to grow our faith together, and there's always room for more. Maybe, like Timothy, you already have been chosen for a particular ministry and hands have been laid on you to bestow the spiritual gifts needed for that ministry. Those gifts don't go away, though they may be neglected. Take them out and use them, in the company of others who are seeking to grow their faith as they live it. None of us are pros—we're all still practicing faith. And in the process, we can encourage one another, and make each other stronger, by the Holy Spirit who gives power and love and self-discipline.

In this season of reflection upon the theme of stewardship, I have reached the conclusion that there is no treasure more precious than the gift of faith. May we guard it, and grow it, and share it with the generations who follow us, to the glory of God.

