

love, God's love. This means living with the overarching question of what is the most loving thing to do in each situation, in each relationship. God gives us a spirit of confidence, strength and love, a living faith that gives us a solidity in the midst of all kinds of experiences and circumstances. But this doesn't happen by itself. It happens as we do the work of rekindling the flame of faith in ourselves, giving attention to our spiritual lives, and yet to allowing the ember to grow in us. If we are working with these things, then whatever work God calls us to, we will find in increasing measure a courage and peacefulness and strength with which to carry it out.

Paul asked Timothy to rekindle the gift of God that was within him through the laying on of Paul's hands. Paul commissioned and blessed Timothy for the work he was to do. We don't practice the laying on of hands when we make our commitments to membership. However, as you who are recommitting as Covenant and Community Members come forward in a few moments to sign your respective covenants for another year, hands are being laid on you. The hand of Christ, the hand of God, the hand of this community. You, like Timothy, are being "set apart" to live your lives as those called and sent by Christ, to be those in whom "faith lives". I pray that this year may be for you, for all of us, a time of rekindling the living faith that is in us. I pray that each of us may receive in greater measure the spirit of confidence, love, and self-discipline that God has already given us.

October 7, 2007/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

### **Rekindling a Living Faith**

1 Timothy 1:1-7, 14

*for this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you....*

Paul is writing to encourage Timothy, a young man who has been working with Paul in the ministry of the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ and the life of following him. Now Paul is in jail and Timothy is carrying on the work without him. Maybe Timothy is feeling inadequate to the task because of his youth. Maybe he fears opposition or rejection. Or maybe there is the fear of failure, of not being up to the challenges. With his mentor in jail, Timothy may simply feel alone.

Paul must have known Timothy's family. He speaks of Timothy's sincere faith, the faith he inherited from his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. This faith "lived first" in them, and now "lives" in Timothy. This is a very provocative passage. Paul is talking about a faith that "lives in" us, not a dead faith. This "faith" is more than a set of religious ideas or beliefs, religious practices or adherence to a formal creed. It is a deep knowledge of Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection, not as doctrines but as formative realities in our spiritual awareness. Faith is the receiving of this new life embodied in Jesus, living it out in our unique lives and circumstances. It is a life of harmony with God and God's purposes, with our true selves and other people, and indeed with all creation.

This faith that "lives in us" is a daily trusting of our relationship with God, the source and power of life itself. It is discipleship to Christ lived out in each present moment, through the uniqueness of our own lives. Paul gives us a dynamic image so that can help us be mindful of when faith becomes more dead than alive, something that makes us rigid and inflexible, rather than something that enlivens and energizes the way we live.

All of us have "inherited" this faith from others or learned it through the church, in some fashion or other. We have all been touched by the Christian gospel in one way or another. Maybe we were fortunate to have known persons in whom this faith "lived," just the way Paul is talking about. For them it was a way of life, not just words. We may have known persons who had this aliveness about them, their compassion, their patience or spiritual courage, their wisdom born of a wider and deeper insight into life and what really matters, their self-giving. We may have had adverse experiences, when we encountered persons or churches where there were a lot of religious words but not much meaning or real life. We may not have seen much that was compelling enough for us to take on Christian faith as a way of life ourselves.

The point is, in Paul's view, faith has to become real for us. We need to make it our own. It cannot remain in our heads as ideas or doctrines. Paul is talking about faith as a lived reality in our own lives. And for that, we need to rekindle the fire of faith in ourselves.

"For this reason I remind you to kindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands...." Rekindle the "living faith" you have received, the faith that is to live in your unique and precious life. Rekindle in your own life the good news of God's presence in Christ and Christ's complete faithfulness to God, and discover in your own life how this is the way, the truth, and the life. This faith, this core message of the gospel is to be constantly rekindled in us so that it becomes more and more the energizing and enlivening center of our lives. We may have inherited this faith, but the really exciting part is when we begin or begin again this rekindling of faith so that it becomes real for us.

Whenever I read this passage, I think of a campfire. I think of a mound of ashes that have grown cold overnight. And yet deep within the ashes there is still a tiny ember from the evening's fire. What care it takes to rekindle that campfire! How easy it is to rush and extinguish what fire is left! The fire of our faith grows cold like that. Jesus knew that faith in terms of living faith could grow cold and get buried in people. In his teachings and with his life Jesus worked to awaken people to that ember of faith that was in them and to fan it into a flame. Mostly it was religion itself that doused the fire in people's hearts. Too much preoccupation with formalism, too little of the life of compassion. Too much emphasis on rules and laws; too little attention to responding to persons in need. Too much emphasis on knowledge; too little wonder and amazement and contemplating the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. Too much guilt and blaming; too little forgiveness and love.

There are many things that cause our faith to shrink to a faint ember. But the point is, says Paul, to rekindle that faith in ourselves. This is a good image for the spiritual life, for the things we work with here. Those recommitting to Covenant or Community Membership today are taking up anew the spiritual practices or disciplines of prayer, study, meditation, financial giving, sharing their gifts for ministry, striving in love and forgiveness, and finding ways of being accountable for working with those disciplines. Someone told me the other day that Bev Cosby used to refer to this time of year, when we re-examine ourselves in light of our commitments, as a time of the "recommitment blues." That may be the case if we are approaching it as a psychologically and spiritually heavy exercise in self-criticism or indulging in guilt about our shortcomings. That is not the right approach. The spiritual life is not about perfection or achievement or even making progress. Paul's approach is better. Our spiritual work is rekindling work. It is getting back in touch with our deepest self, our truest self, the self that is in communion with God. It is becoming aware of the things in us that diminish our faith...fear, guilt, anger, discouragement, and so forth...and

gently working with them through compassion and deeper understanding. Rekindling the gift of faith in ourselves is about letting our faith come alive in us, at the core of our being. It is letting God's love in Christ burn brighter in us so that we experience the freedom of belonging to God and trustfully doing what we feel God has called us to do.

Rekindling the flame of a "faith that lives in us" is a process of what we do and what we let happen. The spiritual practices we work with give a fruitful shape to our lives as spiritual persons, as those in whom faith is to live. And yet if we become aggressive or obsessive about it, we can douse the ember of living faith. To get a fire going from a small ember, we may blow on it while adding tinder, dry twigs or a bit of paper. If we blow too hard or force too many twigs at it, we can put it out. Besides what we do, we must also LET the ember of faith grow. There is a balance between right effort in the spiritual life and non-effort, when we do nothing but let the flame grow. If there is something about ourselves that we want to change, we often turn our inner life into a battlefield, trying to drive out the unwanted feeling or attitude or way of acting. I don't like this anger I'm feeling! I don't like this guilt I'm carrying around all the time! I don't like this feeling of depression or discouragement! So we pour another layer of anger on the anger, guilt on the guilt, or depression on the depression. And all the time we go around feeling dissatisfied with ourselves and life.

If that is the way we approach our spiritual life, then nothing is going to change. It's going to get worse. The inward journey involves learning when to "work at it," and when to let it grow. That's how change takes place. There is something in Zen Buddhist spiritual practice that I like very much. It is called "effortless effort." Sounds contradictory. But that is just what I'm getting at. Spiritual practice, working with our spiritual disciplines, cannot become the driving of ourselves toward some goal of perfection. That only makes us perpetually dissatisfied. Our spiritual disciplines enable us to be aware of, breathe life into, and yet let grow this faith that lives in us and through us.

Finally Paul writes that God does not give us a spirit of cowardice. This can also be translated timidity or shrinking back. Instead, God gives us a spirit of power, love and self-discipline. Self-discipline means ordering our lives in fruitful ways, so that our faith can shape and breathe through every aspect of our lives. Paul is saying that self-discipline is a gift of God's spirit. It isn't a heavy burden we impose on ourselves, but a gift from God for the fruitful living of our lives. A word I have grown to appreciate is "autonomous." It doesn't mean that we don't need anyone else or that our lives are somehow separate from life around us. Autonomous means literally "self-governing," and I think that is what Paul has in mind. We have the capacity to govern ourselves as followers of Christ, and yet this capacity is also a gift from God.

Also a spirit of power, God's power. This can mean confidence and inner strength to face difficult situations without being overcome by them. And a spirit of