

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“Fan into Flame the Gift of God”

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Timothy was a young man from the town of Lystra in the province of Galatia. His mother was a Jewish convert to Christianity as was his grandmother. His father was Greek. Some time earlier, Timothy too had come to faith in Jesus and had been baptized. Later, he would join Paul on his second missionary journey to Greece. He probably even went with Paul to Jerusalem where Paul was arrested and then on to Rome where Paul was imprisoned. It's interesting to note that most Biblical scholars think that in the beginning Timothy was rather timid and shy and probably not in the best of health but that eventually he became bold and courageous and even worked with the apostle John in Ephesus before he, like many others, died as a martyr for his faith in Christ and for the sake of the Gospel.

This is the Timothy that Paul addresses in today's epistle lesson. Paul says that he thanks God for Timothy whom he even calls his “beloved son” and that he remembers him in his prayers all the time. He thanks God for the faith that, as Paul says, now lives in him. And with that faith in mind he encourages him to “fan into flame the gift of God.”

Now this gift to which Paul refers is none other than the gift of faith that God planted in Timothy through the power of the Holy Spirit active in Word and Sacrament. This faith, using Paul's analogy, was like a match that was laid to Timothy's soul. Now, Paul says, Timothy needs to get it going by fanning it into a burning and all-consuming fire. And apparently that's exactly what Timothy did for, as we said, he became an even stronger Christian and a leader in the New Testament church even to the point of death. But he wouldn't have been what he would become nor would he have done what he did if he had not first fanned into flame the gift of God.

Many of us are familiar with the concept of fanning a fire into flame whether in our homes or out there camping or wherever. One of the things that Debbie and I have enjoyed in a number of the places we've lived over the years is a fireplace. We love fireplaces. And unlike those who have fireplaces but seldom use them, we liked to use them as often as possible. To have a good fire, though, you need three things – wood or something to burn, fire, and last, and often thought of least, air. You can have the best wood in the world and even set it on fire but if you don't have air it'll go out. But with air you get the fire blazing so that it sends out light and heat to all around.

So it is with fanning into flame the gift of God. The new life that is ours by grace through our baptism into Christ is like the wood and our faith is the fire which feeds on the wood. But we need air if we are going to grow in the faith, if that fire is going to burn, we need the Holy Spirit, the very breath of God, and the means of grace if we are to send out light and heat to those around.

I'm reminded of the story of the little boy who kept falling out of bed during the night. When his parents asked him why he thought he kept falling out, he replied, "I guess I stayed too close to where I got in." And what was true for that little boy can be true for us Christians too. Often times, we fall out of faith because we stay too close to where we got in – that is, our faith grows cold and dies because we don't continue to fan into flame the gift of God.

But for those who do fan that gift into flame – for those who are faithful and regular in their use of the means of grace that God has provided for that very purpose in Word and Sacrament – for those who not only seek to grow in faith but actually do so that they may grow in their life and ministry in Christ's name – they become a blazing fire spreading light and heat to all those with whom they come into contact. And they become, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it, "heroes of faith" – heroes like Paul, heroes like Timothy, heroes who are heroes because they fanned into flame the gift of God and through them the spark of the faith spread.

Think about the heroes of faith in your life – those through whom the gift of faith was given to you and who fanned into flame the gift of God in their own lives and how the light and heat of their faith enlightened your darkness and warmed your soul. It all started for them when the fire was lit in them but it only continued as they fanned that fire over the years.

How about us? We too have been given the gift of faith. Are we doing those things that fan that gift into flame? Are we shedding light and heat with those around us? Are we heroes of the faith to someone?

God stands ready to breathe His Holy Spirit upon us again today through Word and Sacrament so that we might continue to grow in faith and life and ministry. I encourage you to fan into flame the gift that God has given you not only for your own sake but for the sake of this cold, dark world in which we live. And may God help us all to that end for Jesus' sake. Amen.