

**October 2, 2016**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**II Timothy 1:1-14 / Luke 17:5-10**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

Bishop Audrey, in her weekly web blog Friday, described the nearly lost art of letter writing. It's not that commonplace anymore to receive handwritten letters in the mail – not since we have other much faster and efficient ways to communicate - email, texting, tweets, and Instagram. Letters by “snail mail” have become a pretty rare occurrence. Bishop Audrey said she that when she was away at college, she looked forward to receiving the letters her mother wrote to her – every day. The bishop then went on to explain that years later while in her mid-40's as a seminary student, she set about the task of writing an Ember Day letter to her bishop four times a year, as is required. An Ember Day letter is a sort of “check in” with the bishop and an opportunity for the writer to reflect on the condition of his or her heart, mind, and spirit – to describe the joys, the struggles and challenges, where consolation and comfort have been found on the journey, what he or she is learning, where he or she is being stretched and invited to grow into their sense of call to serve God. Those letters are a way to build and strengthen relationships over time. Bishop Audrey went on to say that now that she is a bishop, she wants to take intentional, thoughtful time to respond to each of the writers of those Ember Day letters she receives. No doubt that will be precious correspondence for everyone involved. Who of us doesn't need encouragement and support throughout life? Who of us doesn't need reminding that we are loved by God far more than we can imagine, “desire or deserve”?

We have in today's epistle reading a portion of a personal letter attributed to the apostle Paul, as mentor and friend, written to his younger colleague, and pastor of the Ephesian church, Timothy. “The situation in which Paul and Timothy find themselves is a veritable pressure cooker. Paul is in prison, the church is being persecuted, opposition is hot and fierce – even from those who call themselves Christians, and Timothy is trying to stay true to his work in the midst of doctrinal confusion and hardship, trying to help his congregation keep their love for Jesus, the Christ fresh and fervent. Paul's

letter is a stirring call to Timothy to persevere and remain faithful in his ministry, even while under pressure.” [Eugene Peterson, *The Message*].

This encouraging letter of Paul, along with Jesus’ response to the disciples’ plea in today’s gospel, offers a basic outline for strengthening our relationship with Christ. We have here an outline to help us remain faithful and deepen our commitment to living Jesus’ way. Think of this brief outline as the “4 R’s to **“flourishing in faith”**”, the theme you will see and hear over the next six weeks, as we consider our care of, and our response to the many gifts God has entrusted to us.

*1<sup>ST</sup>*: “REKINDLE THE GIFT THAT IS WITHIN YOU” writes Paul. Rekindle the gift of faith in Christ by *remembering, Timothy*. Remember the faith your mother and grandmother taught you, planted like a tiny seed in you. Remember my own instruction to you and encouragement when we worked together. Remember the gift of faith every time you share in the Lord’s Supper. Remember who and whose you are – a child of God called to live and share the good news of God’s gift to the world in Christ. REKINDLE YOUR GIFT OF FAITH BY REMEMBERING.

*2<sup>nd</sup>*: “REQUEST HELP”. “*Lord, increase our faith*”, began today’s gospel reading. Just before the disciples make this plea to Jesus, he has given them some challenging instruction. First Jesus tells them: “Hard trials and temptations are bound to come, but woe to the one who brings them on. Watch yourselves, so that you don’t cause others to sin.” And then follows this: “Be alert. If you see your friend, your brother or sister going wrong, correct them. If they respond, forgive them. Even if it’s personal against you and repeated seven times through the day, and seven times he or she says to you, ‘I’m sorry, I won’t do it again,’ forgive them.” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Luke 17:1-4). No wonder the disciples asked Jesus - “Lord increase our faith!”. They did a good and wise thing asking Jesus for help.

But Jesus didn’t (and still doesn’t) have a magic wand that with one swish grants us huge “Miracle -Gro Faith”. “We tend to think that Jesus’ response to the disciples

was chiding. But what if he wasn't scolding them? What if he is not clucking his tongue and shaking his head over their lack of faith, but speaking those words in a voice of encouragement and love, as one who would give up his life for his friends? For us?

What if we listen with new ears and hear Jesus answer the disciples with kindness and patience, and maybe even a hint of a smile. "Friends, you don't need more faith," he says. "Even this much faith (his thumb and forefinger pinched together) is enough!" If we can imagine Jesus speaking with the voice of love, we will hear him telling the apostles, that in fact, they already have enough faith to do whatever is required of them." (Kimberly Bracken Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Yr. C, vol. 4).

Encouraged and fortified with the deep love and confidence of our Lord, we come to the 3<sup>rd</sup> R in our outline:

3<sup>rd</sup>: RISK DOING ONE NEW THING. With courage in hand, that one new and bold act for each of us can take many forms: down-sizing our possessions or our home; extending forgiveness to one who has hurt us, or asking for forgiveness from someone we have hurt; sharing an idea for a new ministry with me or a vestry member; making a first time pledge, or increasing our financial pledge for next year to help support Christ's ministry in this community; building a new relationship with someone – a neighbor, one of our Thursday breakfast guests, someone here whom you don't know very well who you see here every Sunday. Developing an ongoing, caring relationship is the best way to listen and learn from one another. Building a kind, caring and conversational relationship is the best way to share the love of Jesus we have received, and to be open to receive the love that God offers us through others.

Now just in case you are entertaining the thought, "I don't think I can try one new thing to strengthen my relationship with God," listen again to what Paul wrote to Timothy: ". . .for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, and of love and of self-discipline", or as I learned it in the King James

version, “for God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” For Timothy, the bold act was to set aside his fear of conflict within the church and persecution from outside the church, set aside any embarrassment about his mentor Paul being in prison for preaching the gospel, set those things aside so that he could be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to lead others with confidence in following Christ faithfully and fervently, even when under the intense pressures he faced.

4<sup>th</sup>: REJOICE IN GOD’S GOODNESS AND STEADFASTNESS, demonstrated for us through the life and love of Christ, that “TREASURE ENTRUSTED TO US”, as Paul described faith in Christ to Timothy.

So that’s the outline: *REKINDLE* the gift of faith by *remembering* how the seed of faith was planted in you, and how it can be nurtured today to grow more deeply rooted and grounded in the soil of God’s love. *REQUEST* help to grow, to flourish in faith by praying for it! And then act by taking the *RISK* to do one new thing – each of us taking that next step that will stretch our hearts to trust that God will provide all we need to grow and flourish, because this is what God desires for us. And always, *REJOICE* in God’s goodness and steadfast love.

This sermon began with our thinking about the power of handwritten letters, and how such letters can help build relationships of caring and trust, relationships of deepened faith, love, and connection. I invite you to consider in the coming week, writing a letter or card to someone who has helped you grow and flourish in faith. If the person is no longer living and has gone on to larger life with God, write the letter and read it aloud to God. Write what you would say to that person if he or she was alive. After you have written the letter, seek out a friend or family member and share how it felt to try this experiment of writing a letter to someone who has helped you flourish in faith.

We are bound to one another in Christian community so that we can be taught and fed and sustained by Christ. We are bound to one another in Christian community so that we can be reminded often who and whose we are, because the world around us will not and cannot tell us those important things – who and whose we are. We are fed and sustained, and then sent by Christ to nurture and encourage each other's growth in faith, and growth in love of God and neighbor. We are meant to participate in each other's flourishing because that is what the body of Christ does – brings God's love and hope, healing and reconciliation to the world.

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed" – it is enough to make a difference in this world. So let's just DO IT! Do it, and then be on the lookout for signs of flourishing!

Amen.