

2 Timothy 1:1-7

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

WHAT MAKES A CHRISTIAN A CHRISTIAN?

Focus on POWER, LOVE, SELF-DISCIPLINE (THE CHRISTIAN WITNESS)

I was drawn to this scripture passage because today we celebrate the baptism of Jonathan James Vargas, and we can't help but notice that Jonathan's mother and grandmother are both here and have been active members of this faith community for many, many years. I think Carol is one of the main reasons that Karlynn is an active member of the church, and Karlynn is one of the main reasons that Julian and Jeremy are both active in Sunday School...and I may be a bit presumptive to say that George and Jorge are also beneficiaries of the faith of their wives – maybe I'm projecting, but I know that I am a beneficiary of my wife's faith and the faith of my mother and mother-in-law.

And Julian, and Jeremy, and now Jonathan are certainly beneficiaries of their mother's and grandmother's faith. ***But what is the nature of that faith?*** We live in a time where it can be quite confusing to be a Christian. In his book *Religion in America* Timothy Beal notes that while 77% of Americans self-identify as Christians there is little agreement between those who claim the title with regard to what a Christian is or isn't, and many who claim to be Christian would deny that name to others who in fact claim to be Christian. It seems that it's easier to

point out the differences between Christians than it is to identify what we have in common.

But when Julian and Jeremy (and soon Jonathan) claim that title – Christian – it is my hope and belief that the title means something much more profound than a doctrine. I believe that Julian and Jeremy and Jonathan will understand that being Christian is not about a list of beliefs but rather a lifestyle that we embrace. When they look at their mother and grandmother they don't think, "Here's a person who believes in a triune God and that Jesus was born of a virgin and was God incarnate who was crucified as an atonement for sins of all humanity and rose on the third day, ascended into heaven fifty days later and is seated at the right hand of God the Father..." That is not what they think about when they look at Karlynn or Carol (or George or Jorge). *What they see is the love of God that was manifest in Christ now made manifest in Mom and Dad and Grandma and Grandpa.* They see love, and love above all else is what defines a Christian.

That is the essence of what Paul is saying to Timothy in this letter. The passage we read this morning ends with Paul reminding Timothy that **"God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."** Why does Paul mention cowardice? Most likely the Church of Ephesus was a persecuted church, and it was a big temptation for those who were going to church to hide that fact from their neighbors and certainly from the authorities, and if confronted they would likely deny any affiliation with those "Christians." The spirit that God gives us should lead us to quite a different response, not a denial but a bold and proud affirmation: YES, I AM A CHRISTIAN.

And Paul captures the essence of what a Christian is with that word "LOVE." I don't consider those three "spirits" that Paul mentions as distinct from one another; I would place the spirit of power and the spirit of self-discipline under the rubric of love. It is the spirit of love, God's love, which empowers us to heal when we see something that is broken, that emboldens us to proclaim our faith even when we know that there are others who claim the title but discredit the name "Christian" by speaking and acting in ways that are completely counter to what Jesus said and did. Love is what propels us to claim the name despite the confusion and division and scandal that we so often see in the Church. Love is what prompts us to speak and act in ways that boldly express God's love, even

when our words and our deeds are unpopular or even dangerous. Our power is grounded in God's love.

As is our self-discipline. Paul reminds us in today's passage that he is very much indebted to his ancestors who were Jews, and he worshipped the same God as his ancestors did with a clear conscience. Paul did not abandon his religion when he met Jesus; he always understood Jesus to be completely compatible with Judaism. And what made Jews special was that their God was the one true God who was not fickle and erratic, not self-serving and remote. The true God was loving and caring and involved with his people. And his people were expected to be involved with him; Listen to what Moses tells the Israelites when they come out of Egypt:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

When we read this we're immediately impressed by the seriousness of this commandment – We're to love the Lord our God with ALL our heart, ALL our soul, and ALL our might, and we're to keep these words in our heart, recite them to our children, talk about them everywhere and all the time, we're to bind them as a sign our hand, fix them as an emblem on our foreheads, and write them in our front yards. To do all of that requires DISCIPLINE, BUT NOTICE THAT THE REASON WE ARE TO DO ALL THESE THINGS IS BECAUSE WE LOVE GOD! That's the essential commandment. And unless we keep reminding ourselves to love God we will quickly stop loving him; our minds will turn inward and our focus will only be upon ourselves and what makes us happy. But if our lives are disciplined in loving God our lives will also be disciplined in loving others. We will be disciplined in our forgiveness of others, in our tending to the needs of others, in our fairness to others, and in our advocacy for others, but all of those things should fall under the heading "loving others"

So when Julian or Jeremy or Jonathan...or Julianne or Tyler, or J.J. or Joshua or Jada or Lea or Sky or Alyssa or Sophia or Cristian or Serena or Sophia or Addison or Austin or Hunter or Belle or Eric or Alexis or any child looks and Mom or Dad or Grandma or Grandpa they should see a lifestyle that is disciplined in love for God, for them, and for others.

And that discipline also involves patience. I know my son is not a very "churchy" guy, and I have a feeling that many of you have children or grandchildren that aren't involved in church in any way, who don't profess to any religion. But we need not lose heart, and all we can do is love God, love them, and love others consistently and without fear. None of us know for certain if our witnessing of God's love will give birth to faith in our children and grandchildren, but there's a good chance that it will. So walk closely with God, love him with all your heart and soul and might. Pray and meditate on God's love everywhere and all the time, and trust that your children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, will take note, and that a faith in Christ will take root in them.