

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 2 Timothy 1:1-14 October 6, 2019

World Communion Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

ROOTED IN FAITH

Let us pray: Gracious God, as your Word is proclaimed, enlighten our hearts to the reality of your divine presence in our midst. As we hear your Word and come to your table today, may our gathering be an experience of deep communion with you and our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. In the name of Jesus Christ, this is our prayer. Amen.

Robert Gabriel Mugabe died on Friday, September 6 and was buried eight days ago on Saturday, September 28. He was a revolutionary leader who fought against white colonial rule in the country formerly known as Rhodesia. When a peace agreement was reached in 1980, he became prime minister of newly named Zimbabwe and served until 1987, when he was elected President. He remained as President for thirty years until he was placed under house arrest in 2017 and removed from office in a coup d'état.

Despite hopes that Zimbabwe's economic situation would improve once Mugabe was removed from office, things have only gotten worse. Wednesday afternoon I listened to a radio report about medical doctors going on strike because their incomes have been slashed so drastically, to about \$100 a month. Inflation is rampant. In one week the minimum wage lost 40% of its value, to about \$20 per month. In addition, the head of the doctors' union was recently abducted. Many people think the government is responsible. The country's foreign minister, Sibusiso Moyo, claims the government had nothing to do with the abduction and said in the interview, "It's not easy to move from one regime into the next." The reporter then commented on the foreign minister's explanation with a very interesting observation. She said, "This is a new government, he says, decongesting minds and teaching people to unlearn the past."¹

I sat in my car in our driveway Wednesday afternoon to hear the end of the radio story. I scrounged for a piece of scrap paper so I could jot down that phrase - "decongesting minds and teaching people to unlearn the past." That idea jumped out at me, for I had just come from the church where I had spent time reading for and working on today's sermon and the order of service for this World Communion Sunday. "Unlearning the past" stands in stark contrast to the apostle Paul's advice to his younger protégé Timothy. The introduction to Paul's second letter to Timothy is full of remembering and learning from the past:

* "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." (2 Timothy 1:5)

* "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands." (2 Timothy 1:6)

* “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 1:13)

* “Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” (2 Timothy 1:14)

And then there is the Lord’s Table spread before us, with the invitation — “We do this in obedience to his command and in remembrance of him.” But the Lord’s Supper is not just a memorial meal when we simply remember the past life of a great man. Instead, our remembering is part of the fertile soil in which our present faith and actions are rooted so they may continue to grow and thrive.

Remember what the choir just sang:

* Yes, there is the sense of remembering the past: “In remembrance of me, eat this bread. In remembrance of me, drink this wine.”

* But there is also the sense of God’s future: “In remembrance of me, pray for the time when God’s own will is done.”

* In the meantime, our “remembering” is to be active: “heal the sick, feed the poor, open the door and let your brother in.”

* Yes, there is the sense of remembering what Jesus did for us in the past: “Take, eat, and be comforted, drink, and remember, too, that this is my body and precious blood, shed for you.”

* But the meaning of what Jesus did for us so many years ago in the past calls us to act on our faith in the present: “In remembrance of me, search for truth, always love, don’t look above, but in your heart for God.”

How does your faith from the past sustain you today and give you hope for the future? Who tilled the soil of your heart and spirit so the seed of God’s Word could take root and yield fruit — thirtyfold, sixtyfold, even a hundredfold? Who told you for the first time, “Jesus loves you”? Who taught you the stories of the Bible? Who welcomed you at church, called you by name, and made you feel welcome? Who listened to your questions, led you with their wisdom, and took your faith seriously? Even more than that, who lived in such a way that you knew that Christ was alive in their hearts?

Timothy was blessed to have such mentors and Christian witnesses in his life. In his letter of support and exhortation, Paul remembered grandma Lois’ faith, as well as the faith of Timothy’s mother Eunice. Paul recognized in Timothy’s life and ministry the fruit that came from the seeds that were planted in Timothy’s young life.

One of the blessings of our September trip to New Orleans for my mother’s graveside service was being with cousins from Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Vermont. We were all reminded of the strong family ties that bind the Gladden, Strahan, and Gilbert families, especially now that we have only one uncle left living. As we told stories and laughed about our childhood escapades together and caught up with each other’s adult lives, we all felt appreciation for the families that nurtured us in so many ways.

In my remarks at my mother’s graveside, I talked about how my family moved frequently when I was growing up. We moved to Atlanta when I was twelve and that was the sixth city we had lived in throughout the

South. Here's what I shared: "I really don't know if this happened more than once, but I do remember Daddy coming home one night and telling us, 'We need to talk after supper.' As we walked into the living room, David and Susan and I looked at each other and said, 'I wonder where we're moving this time!' But I also remember that one of the first things Mama and Daddy did when we got to Shreveport and Tupelo and Birmingham and Nashville and Atlanta was to find a Presbyterian church to attend. And, as Susan said when we were all together in Georgia, they became part of the community of faith, and they made sure the three of us were also involved. The ethos of our family and house reflected who mama and daddy were and what they believed and held to be important. They both demonstrated those values of faith, hope, and love as they went about their daily lives. For that I am most grateful. "

But Timothy's faith formation didn't stop at his grandmother's and mother's knees. Paul played a significant role in Timothy's life, so much so that he called him "my beloved child." Paul also had an influence on Timothy's calling and ministry, probably even in his ordination, through the laying on of his hands. Paul offered himself as a mentor, a witness, an example for Timothy, and his advice from the first century A.D. is good advice to all of us: "Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us." (2 Timothy 1:13-14)

Over the years, many of you have shared your "roll call of faith" with me — people who taught you Sunday School, led Vacation Bible School, taught you the catechism, called you by name when you were a child, held you accountable in your behavior, stood by you in your darkest times, worked the soil of your hearts, planted the seeds of faith and God's Word. These are the folks who heard God's call in their lives and lived out and shared their faith. For it is always God who provides the growth and the fruit — as Paul wrote, "relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace." (2 Timothy 1:8-9)

Years from now (or even today), whose list on you on? Do you demonstrate the faith, hope, and love you have received from God as you go about your daily lives? How do you encourage others in their faith? How do you help God's seed grow in the lives of others?

The apostle Paul knew Timothy's faith would need to be strengthened and bolstered from time to time. He gave thanks for the foundation that had been laid for Timothy's faith, but he also reminded the young man "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." (2 Timothy 1:6-7)

As I was reading for this sermon, I came across some thoughts by Rev. Laura Everett about rekindling the gift of God that is within you. She writes: "In her 1995 book *The Fire in these Ashes*, the Benedictine Roman Catholic nun Joan Chittister tells the story of the Irish custom of starting the first fire in a new home from the already heated coals of fires from other homes of family or community members. The fire must come

from somewhere, but in each new home, it blazes anew. Speaking of our religious practices, Chittister writes, ‘We are not the first generation for whom this is the content of our lives, but unless we do it with all our hearts, another generation may not get the opportunity to do the same, to warm themselves at the same fire, to heat the world with the coals of their lives.’”

Rev. Everett continues, “The life of faith is a constant process of kindling and rekindling the fire. The life of faith is not a Duraflame all prepackaged and contained. The life of faith is not a 12 hour video loop of the Yule Log. The life of faith blazes and dies back to embers, leaving ashes that can still give off enough heat to light the kindling anew. It’s a constant process of rekindling, of gathering up the brokenness of our lives and asking the Holy Spirit to ignite us again. There is still heat in these embers, Church. A rekindled fire is possible, if we bring the tinder of our lives before God. May it be so.”²

Brothers and sisters, come to the table today. Come and remember what our Lord Jesus Christ did for us, who abolished death and brought life. Come and have your faith and the gift of God rekindled. Come to the table so that the soil of your heart can be worked and tilled and turned over and made ready for the seed to take root. Come to the table and remember, so you may live in the present and look ahead to the future with faith, hope, and love.

Let us pray: Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, help us remember what we have been taught. Help us live in such a way that all you know and see us may see your light shining through us. Amen.

NOTES

¹Eyder Peralta, “In Zimbabwe, Doctors Are Taking To The Streets To Strike Over Diminishing Pay,” Wednesday, October 2, 2019, NPR at www.capradio.org.

²Rev. Laura Everett, “Brokenness as Kindling: A Sermon on 2 Timothy 1:1-14,” October 6, 2013 at www.reverett.com.