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October 2, 2016

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Growing up, we each had chores so that we might contribute toward the family's well-being and learn responsibility. One of mine, not my favorite, was to keep the fire going when my dad set up the grill for a cookout. After the charcoal was lit, it was my job to keep fanning the embers so they'd glow with heat until all the food was cooked. All that required was constancy, a steady hand, a good stiff fan (one from the local funeral parlor served the purpose well), and knowing how to shift the embers and add new coals when needed. Depending on the amount of food and the number of people, fanning duty might take one to two hours. However, if we wanted marshmallows or s'mores for dessert, it might take a little longer.

Because of this small aspect of my history, Paul's words to Timothy (second reading) about stirring into a flame the gift of God he had received always resound in my soul.

Faith is the motif in each of today's sacred texts. The seldom-referenced prophet Habakkuk had grown frustrated with the lack of faith evidenced in his people's behavior and responsiveness to God. He was assured, however, that God hears prayers and never disappoints; he also learned that while rash people have no integrity, the just, because of their faith, shall live.

When the disciples en route to Jerusalem with Jesus learned more of the challenges of discipleship, they feared they did not have the faith to meet those challenges. To that end, they begged, "Increase our faith." Faith is not quantifiable in terms of pounds or kilos. Nevertheless, it is the power that inspires us, helps us to persevere, enables us to struggle and not lose heart, and keeps us ever mindful of God's abiding presence.

Jesus' images of the mustard seed and the mulberry tree graphically illustrate the power of faith to move the unmovable and accomplish what appears to be impossible. Jesus' parable about the servant seems to say that faith is not a reward for those who have reached the higher echelons; rather, faith is the requisite for every disciple. When we believe, when we have faith, we are merely doing our job as disciples and should seek no reward. We are to keep on keeping the faith.

That brings us full circle back to Paul and the wisdom he shared with his younger friend and colleague Timothy. Paul's advice takes on increased significance if we know that he was in prison at the time and was intent upon helping Timothy as much as possible before he was silenced forever. Little did Paul know that his words and his wisdom would continue to teach believers for centuries. We who hear his voice today are reminded that our faith is God's gift to be tended, stirred and fed like a flame over which we have been put in charge. As stewards of this flame, we will know fear, but we cannot be cowardly, ashamed or weak, nor can we shrink from the suffering and struggles inherent in believing. Paul urged Timothy — and he urges each of us — to take his words as the norm by which we live and guard the rich trust of the faith. We do this with the help of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us all.

We are more than duly equipped for life in this world. How do we remain so? How do we fan into a flame God's gift of faith that has been kindled within us? One of the Lucan post-resurrection narratives comes to mind. When Jesus met two of his disciples on their way to Emmaus, he stayed with them. He cited and interpreted every passage of scripture that referred to him. He took bread, pronounced the blessing, broke the bread and began to share it with them. Their eyes were opened; the flame of faith within them was set afire. They testified, "Were not our hearts burning inside us as he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

These same resources, the bread of the sacred word and the living bread of

Eucharist, remain available to each of us. These are the means whereby our faith is stirred and fanned into a flame. For that reason, we return again and again to Jesus' table, where we are fed, where faith burns, so that others may also see and believe.

HABAKKUK 1:2-3; 2:2-4

Little is known of Habakkuk's personal life, and what can be known of his circumstances has been deduced from other sources, but there is no uncertainty about the prophet's faith in God. With bold strokes, he used his 58 verses to explore a question with which humankind has wrestled for millennia: Why is it that the evil prosper while the just do not?

Habakkuk couched his argument in question/answer style, with Habakkuk 1:2-3 representing the prophet's questioning complaint and Habakkuk 2:2-4 portraying God's response. Some scholars suggest that the prophet's complaint appears to reflect the political and religious circumstances of the late seventh and early sixth century B.C.E. Having plundered the northern kingdom (721 B.C.E.), Assyrian forces marched upon Judah and gained control there until they were defeated by the Babylonians in 612 B.C.E.

Others are of the mind that the prophet's anger was being vented at the corruption that reared its ugly head after the death of Josiah. When Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.E.) acceded to the throne, he scuttled Josiah's reforms, even allowing the deplorable practices from Manasseh's reign to resume (see Jeremiah 22:13-19). Habakkuk regarded the Babylonians (called Chaldeans in 1:6) as God's instruments through whom God chastised the wickedness of the Judeans and put an end to "violence, ruin, destruction and misery" (1:2-3).

Notice that God instructed the prophet to "write down the vision clearly upon the tablets." This conveyed the quality of permanence and affirmed the fact that God's word had the power to effect what it stated. Such an assurance was intended to stir into a flame those whose faith was weak or fading.

In its literal rendering, the text of Habakkuk 2:2 reads: "so that he who runs may read." This is further indication of the importance of God's response. The prophet was to inscribe the message in such bold letters that even someone passing by on the run could see it clearly and read it at a glance. If Habakkuk followed God's instructions to the letter, then his may have been one of the first billboards in the ancient world.

In response to people's lack of patience with God and with their circumstances, God assured them, "The vision still has its time, presses on the fulfillment and will not disappoint" (2:3). We might compare the inevitability of the vision to the image in Francis Thompson's poem "Hound of Heaven." God's word will not disappoint; like a hound whose "swift inexorable feet" never cease to seek out its purpose, so God's word will become a reality. All we need to do is to wait in hope and have faith (2:3). Faith (in Hebrew, *'emunah*, the root from which our "Amen" is derived) is the posture of the persons who believe and entrust their present and future to God, whose word is sure.

2 TIMOTHY 1:6-8, 13-14

Having learned well from his mentor Paul, Timothy understood what it meant to live by faith. At the end of the first and the beginning of the second century C.E., persecution had become an integral aspect of the church's existence. Many had already given their lives for the sake of their faith, and those who survived experienced their "share of hardships for the Gospel" (2 Timothy 1:8). The author of 2 Timothy (writing as Paul) knew those hardships and the temptation to fall short of the Gospel's demands, so he exhorted Timothy and the church at Ephesus to remember the powerful graces they received in Christ and to stir God's gifts into flame. To that end, they were to make the words and works of Jesus real and obvious in their lives and thereby help to strengthen others in their faith and commitment to Christ.

Scholars remind us that this periscope reflects a situation when the apostolic message had been consolidated into a pattern of words, a fixed tradition. This fixing of tradition (or the deposit of the faith) was a necessary measure following the deaths of the apostolic eyewitnesses and the expansion of the church beyond Jerusalem into all of the then-known world.

Timothy and all who succeeded the apostles as leaders in the church were not simply to preserve tradition ("guard this rich trust," v. 14) intact and unchanged. Through their service to God's people, they were to bear living witness to the teaching they had received — to unwrap the gift of God and make it relevant for future generations of believers. However, as Timothy and his church had already realized, tradition is not preserved in a vacuum. Forces from within and from outside the community threatened its growth and development. Where would Timothy find the strength to ward off these forces and protect the church?

Timothy could draw from the grace of his baptism, but not only that. He also could rely on two other resources. Through the graces afforded him at his ordination, when Paul imposed his hands on the young man (2 Timothy 1:6), Timothy was empowered for his ministry. As Paul had earlier noted, Timothy's faith was sincere. He had learned to know and appreciate the faith through his grandmother Lois and then from his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5). "So, Timothy is the recipient of the gifts of the Spirit and instruction in faith by two complementary means. One is through his family ... the second is through ordination, through the transmission of the apostolic tradition" (Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1989).

In addition to these graces, Timothy was also assured of the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling within him. That same Spirit continues to dwell with and within every believer; thus, each of us is prepared for whatever service God may call us to render each day.

LUKE 17:5-10

This Gospel may be better understood when viewed within its larger literary context. In Luke 17:1-10, the evangelist gathered four sets of sayings and a parable, all loosely linked together under the umbrella of discipleship. The first two sets of sayings dealt with giving scandal to others (v. 1-2) and the necessity of mutual correction and the constant willingness to forgive (v. 3-4). Upon hearing that these stringent demands were the very minimum expected of them, the disciples said to Jesus, "Increase our faith" (v. 5). It is at this point in the interchange that today's Gospel begins.

Jesus' response to his apostles is typically Semitic. Using vivid and extreme language, Jesus explained that even the minutest amount of faith can have amazing consequences. The black mulberry tree had quite an extensive root system, and the effort needed to uproot such a tree could be described as herculean. Moreover, the idea of transplanting a tree into the sea merely added to the difficulty. Nevertheless, through faith in God, even the seemingly impossible becomes possible.

Understood in his literary context, the Lucan Jesus was teaching his apostles that through faith, they could learn to avoid scandal. Similarly, through faith, they could cultivate the willingness to help others see the error of their ways and accept correction for their own sins when others point them out. By faith, they could also

learn to forgive fully, freely and without limit.

In the parable that continued their formation, the featured servant was actually doing double duty. He had worked all day as a field servant and then returned home to take up extra duties as a domestic servant. Even with that heavy load, the servant was doing no more than what was expected of him. Therefore, he should not expect a reward or even an expression of gratitude. No doubt Jesus' disciples understood the implications of Jesus' parable. Even if their words and works never posed a scandal for others ... even if they always forgave others, they were doing no more than their duty as his disciples. In fulfilling those minimum requirements, they were not guaranteed salvation. No amount of service, however well performed, could merit the gift that is God's prerogative alone to give. Therefore, even perfect human actions should not give rise to pride or boasting or back-patting. Rather, true disciples humbly admit that they are "unprofitable" servants (some texts read "useless").

A difficult word, "useless," or *achreios* in Greek, implied that nothing was gained by those to whom nothing was owed. No human being, no matter how much they do, can make a claim on God, as in: "You owe me because I have done such-and-such." Even perfect observance of the law does not merit salvation or satisfy the requirements of authentic discipleship. For those who kept a mental ledger of their good deeds, Jesus' words must have been deflating. Nevertheless, while affirming the insufficiency of human words, this Gospel emphasizes the necessity of faith. By means of this great gift of God, we are able to appropriate the joys of salvation.

Keep on stirring and fanning that flame.

Planning: 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Lawrence Mick

We have six Sundays left before the U.S. general election, a crucial one for the future of the country and the whole planet. Competing politicians offer very different visions of what the future should be.

The word of God offers us a vision of a proper future, too, one that rarely gets the attention of the media or the general public. The challenge for Christians is to figure

out how to vote in light of the divine vision of reality rather than basing our vote on ideology or mere self-interest.

Parish leaders have a responsibility to help parishioners face this challenge. The task is not to tell people which candidates to support but to help them discern the issues and the Christian perspective on them.

This is dangerous territory, especially in our current highly polarized political climate. But it is irresponsible to just ignore the challenge. Preachers and planners need the spirit the author urges Timothy to embrace: “For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control.”

It takes power or strength to risk tackling contentious issues. It takes love of the assembly and of all God’s people and creation to address such issues in a clear but gentle way. And it takes self-control to do so without slipping into explicit or implicit endorsement of particular candidates.

The principle is clear: We do not endorse candidates but we must address the issues. And the issues are many. This Sunday is designated as Respect Life Sunday in the United States. Most people think this is just about the abortion issue, but there are many other pro-life issues to consider: end-of-life care, medical ethics, people with disabilities, medical care for the poor, and perhaps the most important pro-life issue: global climate change.

Planners and preachers need a broad perspective on the moral issues at stake in election seasons. Two basic resources can be useful guides. One is the periodic statement from the U.S. bishops titled *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. It should be available online at www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/index.cfm.

The other resource to reflect the teaching of Pope Francis on current issues: *A Revolution of Tenderness: A 2016 Election Pope Francis Voter Guide*, can be downloaded from <https://popefrancis16.com/2016/03/17/about>.

Beyond the homily, planners should include such issues in the intercessions and might offer handouts on various topics over the next several weeks. Be careful to word petitions and handouts in ways that are not partisan but call parishioners to learn about and pray for the values of the Gospel as they apply to contemporary life.

Prayers: 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

How long, O Lord? Is this not a question most of us have asked countless times? It's a question we ask when we're weary or questioning how to keep the faith when we have lost the vision. Even the apostles who were with Jesus pleaded for increased faith. Jesus responded that real faith takes the form of service.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you demonstrated a faith-filled life: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught that faith the size of a mustard seed is enough: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you told us that faith is expressed in service to others: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider: My friends, we are people seeking to deepen our faith, and so we pray for one another.

Minister: For the church: that it may be an authentic faith community in service to others ... we pray,

- For those who have lost faith in diplomacy and negotiation as a pathway to peace, and for peacemakers throughout the world ... we pray,
- For those who have lost faith in institutions and society's systems; and for institutions that truly serve the needs of all ... we pray,
- For outcomes in our coming national election that will promote and serve the common good and unify our divided country ... we pray,
- For those who struggle with faith or have placed their faith in what is unreliable ... we pray,
- For those who support the weary, the discouraged, the doubtful: for counselors, confessors, social workers and spiritual guides ... we pray,
- For all who are in any kind of need and for those we have committed to serve ... we pray,

- For the sick, the dying and those who grieve; and for those who have died ...
(*names*) ... we pray,

Presider: God who speaks to our hearts, hear us when we pray for sustained or deepened faith. Help us to remember that even the apostles needed assurance, and give us the strength to serve and encourage others when our own faith is weak. We pray in the name of Jesus, who showed us the power of faith. Amen.

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