The Good Fight of Faith

Winter Quarter: Faith in Action
Unit 3: Self-Controlled, Upright and Godly Faith

Sunday school lesson for the week of February 25, 2018
By Helen and Rev. Sam Rogers

Scripture Lesson: I Timothy 6: 11-21

The final lesson of the quarter is from Paul’s letter to his beloved son-in-the-faith—Timothy. We are aware many scholars deny the Pauline authorship of the two letters addressed to Timothy, but we are assuming they were written by Paul, because of their very personal nature and hard-won advice from an old soldier of Christ to a young warrior. If Paul did write them, they were written from prison in Rome to Timothy in Ephesus, where the Church was under attack from both Roman and Jewish influences. If by Paul, these two letters are among the last Paul ever wrote.

All quarter our lessons have centered on faith: first, how the early church expressed its faith as it spread; secondly, how Daniel and his three friends were strengthened by their faith in exile and persecution; and finally, how our faith is demonstrated through both actions and words.

The role of Timothy as Paul’s “trouble-shooter” is intriguing. They first met in Lystra on Paul’s Second Missionary Journey. Paul recognized something special in Timothy from the start. Part of it was his family background of a Jewish mother and Greek father. Eunice, his mother, and Lois, his grandmother, had become Christians. (II Timothy 1:5 and Acts 16:1-3) After being circumcised he joined Paul and Silas on the rest of the journey. Paul sent him to Corinth: “This is why I sent Timothy to you; he is my loved and trusted child in the Lord…” (I Corinthians 4:17) Again, he was sent to Thessalonica “to find out about their faithfulness.” (I Thessalonians 3: 2ff)

The instruction Paul gives to Timothy is encompassed in love. Teaching without love is only dogma, and love without a firm basis in faith is pure sentiment. The two go together, and Paul was very aware of the combination. As always in Paul’s letters, much of his instruction was specific for the situation in Ephesus.

The structure of the lesson’s scripture is important. We like what Gary Demorest suggests: 11-16 is Paul’s conclusion to this letter, as punctuated by the “AMEN.” Paul then adds two postscripts regarding wealth and doctrinal disputes interfering with active discipleship.

Either fight or flight is the human reaction to danger. Paul encourages Timothy to do both in different circumstances. Paul says “flee” from false teaching and the love of money. On the other hand, he is to “pursue” righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Like his listing of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians, Paul loves to string together a list of Christian virtues to be cultivated. Such virtues take time to grow and develop, but one must know the goal. Paul makes clear to Timothy where he is to go.
Timothy is around 30 years old. As such, he would be instructing older members of the church. He can only accomplish his work if he has demonstrated his maturity in the faith. Earlier Paul has said, “Let no one despise your youth!” Spiritual maturity does not depend on age, but openness to complete trust in God. The list of attributes given by Paul describes his benchmark.

Our theme verse is I Timothy 6:12: “Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

The word “fight” is not the military word but the root of our word “agonize.” Paul knows first-hand the Christian life is a constant struggle. The event of Timothy’s confession (profession) of faith had taken place in Lystra, where he grew up. With the influence of his mother and grandmother, he had made an early profession of his faith. His example was important to the spread of the faith, not only in Lystra, but in the surrounding area of Asia Minor.

Paul wanted Timothy to see the importance of a long-range view of faithful discipleship, first as an example to the Ephesians, but also to all the churches who had come to know him as a companion of Paul. Discouragement is an everyday enemy of our faith. As the poet said, “The world is too much with us…” Life now and life eternally is at stake. Paul is facing his death, but Timothy still has several decades of service and needs to “keep on keeping on.” Timothy has a fight ahead, and it is worth the effort.

Paul concludes with a doxology of praise: “God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of Kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal, and who lives in unapproachable light, Whom no one has seen or can see. To Him be honor and might forever. Amen.”

The following verses are two postscripts to the letter. The first deals with wealth. Paul realizes money seems to be a problem for followers of Jesus—and it still is! Earlier in this chapter Paul had written: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” (6:10 NIV) The danger, as Paul describes it, is an arrogance that becomes a threat to the relationship of faith to God. Wealth becomes an idol. For the Christian, riches are expressed in good works—using money for the blessing of others. Generosity is a virtue the wealthy must cultivate, along with an attitude of sharing, not entitlement. As we have learned, money is not the evil—but the love of money!

His second postscript also deals with a subject mentioned earlier in 6:3 ff. Controversy about theology can become a barrier to the proper expression of discipleship. Here is another of Paul’s lists, albeit negative. Envy, quarrels, malicious talk, evil suspicions, and constant friction are infesting the church at Ephesus.

As this lesson is being written, the South Georgia Conference is asked to pray for “The Commission on a Way Forward”—the group tasked by the General Conference to find a way to guide the United Methodist Church through the treacherous waters threatening to split the church over sexual orientation. To us the lesson is obvious. All the negative forces named by Paul have been at work. There is an answer—God’s amazing and undeserved grace born from God’s infinite love. If the Church errs, let the error be on the side of love and not law. As Paul said to
Timothy, “Fight the good fight and take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” Or, as Sam loves to say: “In the grip of grace.” With God’s grace and love, we can do it!

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