A Letter to a Son

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. David Jordan-Haas
2 Timothy 1:1-7

June 18th 2017,
“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.” – 2 Timothy 1:1-2.

Great GO-TO verses for Father’s Day! What I just read is the start of a letter (an epistle) from a “father” to a “son.” Though Timothy is not Paul’s son by blood, Timothy is very much Paul’s son by faith. More than a friend, more than a trusted traveling companion for over 15 years, Timothy is like a son to Paul, and Paul, like a father to Timothy (1 Corinthians 4:17, Philippians 2:20,22).

This second letter to Timothy contains Paul’s final words to him, to us. It’s a year or so after Paul’s first letter to Timothy; Paul is on his way to Ephesus, where he’s arrested, taken back to Rome, and thrown in jail. This is the time of Emperor Nero’s cruel persecution of Christians. Paul’s in jail, his friends have deserted him, he’s feeling alone and betrayed. Most of all, Paul is facing the very real prospect that soon he will be put to death (2:9, 4:19).

This second letter to Timothy, it’s a kind of “last-will-and-testament” moment for Paul. Knowing this, a question for us rises to the surface: Fathers (Mothers, Uncles/Aunts, Grandparents), what would be your final words to your child/family if you knew it would be your last? What faith-legacy are you leaving for your children, your community, church?
In 2 Timothy 1:3-4, Paul writes: “I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you [Timothy] constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.” Notice how really personal Paul’s letter is; even in prison Paul is not wasting a moment of his life, reaching out to Timothy and the church he loves.

In verse 5, Paul states: “I am reminded of your sincere faith [Timothy], a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” Do you know the saying, “behind every good man is an even greater woman”? This is a beautiful example: Timothy’s mom, Eunice, a Jew, is married to a Greek gentile man; then she converted to Christianity! Thank God for Eunice and Lois, for passing on to Timothy their strong faith-legacy in Christ! Thank God for the people in our lives who’ve brought Jesus Christ to us, and for their legacy of faith touching our lives.

Now, into the “meat” of our Go-To verses: Paul passing on the Gospel-torch to Timothy. Verses 6-7 state: “For this reason, [Timothy] I remind you to rekindle [fan into flame] the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands”; and, here is the focus for us this morning, “for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

A little time on this “spirit of cowardice.” New Testament scholar Gordon Fee argues that these words “cowardice” or “timidity” are way too weak a translation here. Paul here is
really referring to a spirit of “fear,” even “terror” induced by an extremely difficult, stressful situation. It’s night; a child is sound asleep. Raindrops begin to fall, lots of raindrops, rapid-fire raindrops now pelting the windows. Lightning is flashing, the wind is whipping, howling through the trees, as its limbs are banging against the house; thunder’s exploding as if right inside her window! A child is jarred awake from her sleep amidst a raging storm. Fear has taken its hold as she races to her mother and father’s bedside. Out of breath, shaking, she’s desperate for the safety and protection of her parent’s arms. The child needs assurance that everything will be all right (Fee, p.227).

A child’s fears? Timothy’s fears? What might they be? As a child, Timothy most likely witnessed violent acts against Christians while growing up in Lystra, in the region of Galatia. Paul himself was stoned nearly to death there in Lystra, for preaching Christ (Acts 14:19; 2 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Timothy 3:11). With Paul in jail facing an uncertain future, Timothy fears the crushing loss of not having Paul with him.

Fear is often the greatest challenge of our lives, isn’t it? We fear our own inadequacy. We fear someone speaking unfavorably about us. We fear being plagued by an illness. We fear financial insecurity. We fear the unknown in our lives. We fear the uncertainties of a dark world around us. And fear saps our strength, it paralyzes us; fear disrupts our relationships, and our decision-making. Someone once said, “The more we fear, the less we live.” Just write down this GO-TO Verse and look it up later: 1 Peter 5:6-11.
Paul’s next words provide a remedy. “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, of love, and of self-discipline.” Let’s look at these three gifts, one at a time. Power, Love, and Self-Discipline.

First, God gives us a spirit of Power. Power is bold confidence in contrast to timidity, cowardice. Power, the Jesus way, is having the strength of character to be bold at imitating Christ in your thoughts and actions, relationships and responsibilities. Jesus-power is better understood as humble “quiet strength”.

It’s a power given to us to cope with devastating news or daily difficult circumstances. It’s a power to remain hopeful amidst deep hurt. It’s a power to keep faith amidst a heart-wrenching disappointment. A spirit of Power is the Christian “who could pass the breaking-point and not break” (Barclay, 2 Timothy Commentary, p.144). I want to be this kind of Christ-follower, by His Grace!

Arguably the best Go-To verse on this very spirit of Power is spoken by Jesus Himself, spoken directly to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in [your] weakness.” OR, “My grace is enough for you: for where there is weakness in you, my power is shown all the more completely” (JB Phillips’ paraphrase) (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Second, God gives us a spirit of Love. Paul emphasizes this kind of Love, Agape Love, over 70 times in his 13
epistles! It’s that *no-strings-attached* kind of love. It’s *other-centered* love, the kind of love spoken at weddings, when a husband and wife give themselves to one another. It’s an *all-embracing* kind of love, of a dad/mom for a child. It’s that sacrificial kind of love Jesus urges his disciples to emulate, that of “laying down one’s life for a friend” (John 15:13).

Many of you were here in NoVa, the metro DC area, when American Airlines Flight #77 crashed into the western side of the Pentagon at 9:37 that Tuesday morning. On September 11, 2001, Connie and I were serving a church in southern Connecticut, just 45 minutes from Manhattan, when the Twin Towers fell. Three members of our church died that day. They worked for the investment firm Cantor Fitzgerald, up on the 101st-105th floors of the North Tower, Tower 1, of the World Trade Center, just 4-5 floors below the explosive fiery impact of American Airlines Flight #11 at 8:46 that crystal-clear, blue-sky morning.

I still can’t grasp the profound witness that day of such deep love in the face of such extreme hatred. Thirty-seven NY Transit and Port Authority officers, 23 NYPD, 343 firefighters sacrificed for Love that day. They kept going back into the fire of the burning towers. They kept going back into the fire to *rescue and save*; again and again, they kept going back into the crumbling towers above them. Jesus’ love on the Cross, to “lay down one’s life for a friend,” for us. The Spirit of Love. Where/how can you and I, in our everyday, ordinary
going-to-work, walking-around lives, be “laying it down” for love?

Third, God gives us a spirit of Self-Discipline. A better rendition of this Greek word, *sophronismos*, might be something like, “sober good sense,” or “sound-mindedness.” A couple of weeks ago, I was meeting with a church member. We were talking about the art of “living out our faith” in everyday life. She shared with me a line she uses when she’s facing a particularly challenging day or moment. “God can move mountains,” she said, “but sometimes you have to help out by bringing a shovel!” That is sound good sense.

It’s Paul’s last letter. Staring death in the face has a way of waking up your senses and sensibilities. There is clarity, a freedom that comes. Paul is focused in the present moment, on the one hand, and on the other, Paul is at peace with what his future holds, heavenward. Paul wants Timothy to live in this same disciplined way, to face these very present challenges while trusting in the future outcome.

With affection and love, Paul is urging Timothy, he’s urging the Church, Paul is urging us to use the gifts God has given each one of us to face life’s circumstances. Not a spirit of timidity, but these three gifts, the spirit of *Power*, and of *Love*, and of *Self-Discipline*.

My father died a year and a half ago. My memories of him, with him are a God-send. Perhaps for you, too, missing a loved one today? Strangely, I find hope, comfort, and
strength remembering the smell of my Dad’s pipe tobacco (Kentucky Club), or his Old Spice cologne, the feeling of his coarse beard when I’d kiss him on the cheek. My Dad was a preacher of the Gospel and a professor of both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. I remember him best for his best words to me and to others, spoken out of deep love for the church he loved and college he served. Here are a few of his words – from a Dad to his son, to you:

• Make your time here on earth worthy of God’s Kingdom in Heaven.
• When you decide to point your finger at someone in judgment, remember there are three of your fingers always pointing back at you!
• Stick with love; hate is too great a burden to bear.
• Be an Easter Sunday person to someone going through a Good Friday day.

What would be your final words to your child, if you knew it would be your last? What faith-legacy are you leaving for your children, your community, your church?

LET US PRAY:
Good God, by your grace, I pray boldly that we would not be afraid, not feel unworthy, not be timid in wanting something more meaningful and more significant for our lives. With your Spirit of Power, of Love, of Self-Discipline at work and alive in us, make us willing and available to You and for others, through Christ, in Christ, for Christ, because of Christ. AMEN.