

“Fan into Flame the Gift of God”

SERMON TEXT: 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Rev. Basil Christi October 2, 2016.

Dearly beloved of God, whom the Holy Spirit has called to faith through the Gospel:

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

In our epistle lesson for today, St. Paul advised and urged St. Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God,” so as to “guard the good deposit that was entrusted to [him].” In this short pericope, this brief passage from Scripture, faith is spoken of in both a subjective and an objective sense. St. Paul speaks of faith in the subjective sense when he tells of St. Timothy’s faith— a sincere faith like that of his mother and grandmother, who raised him in the Faith. St. Paul speaks of faith in an objective sense when he tells of the testimony of our Lord— that is, of Him “who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel”— the object of St. Paul’s faith, St. Timothy’s faith, and, indeed, of every Christian’s faith (if they are to be rightly called “Christian”). The “gift of God” that St. Timothy was told to “fan into flame” was that faith— *his* trust — in the promises of God which were made manifest through the Gospel, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The “good deposit” that St. Timothy was told by St. Paul to “guard”— that same deposit that St. Paul trusted God would guard until the Last Day, the Day of Judgement— was “the testimony about our Lord” which both St. Paul and St. Timothy would preach and teach throughout their days of service to God, in the service of God’s people. In truth, we too have this same “deposit” and the very same “gift of God”

through the service of St. Paul, St. Timothy, and all of the saints who've faithfully served and continue to serve us to this day, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we too are admonished, by the same Spirit who inspired our sacred text, to "fan into flame the gift of God," and to "guard the good deposit that was entrusted to [us]."

Now, before we turn to the subjective sense of faith, that is, our *own* faith (that gift from God, which He has enkindled in us and encourages us to "fan into flames"), we must first consider the "good deposit", that is, the object of our faith (*what* we trust). Regarding the object of our faith, the "good deposit" which has been entrusted to us and in which we place our trust, St. Paul says to St. Timothy, "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me." St. Paul points St. Timothy to "the pattern of the sound words," namely, what he, as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God", preached and taught in accord with "the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus." St. Jude, in his epistle, spoke of this as "the Faith which was once delivered unto the saints." So, when we speak of the object (or the content) of our faith, we are, in essence, speaking of the testimony of those sacred texts and traditions that have been given to serve as the Church's sole authority. As God's people, we are to trust God's revelation rather than our own speculation on matters of faith. God's Word alone reveals that it is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, that we are justified. As Christians, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the object of our faith; our trust is in God's promise to pardon us on account of the person and work of His Christ for us. We hear His Word. We believe His Word. We are to guard and keep His Word because it guards and keeps us. It is that

“good deposit” which we have been given to trust until that day when faith gives way to its fulfillment, as we work our way from this world into that of the world to come.

Sadly, far too many have failed to “guard the good deposit entrusted to [them].” In fact, a recent followup survey conducted by LifeWay Research and Ligonier Ministries, as reported by Christianity Today, cites some disturbing doctrinal trends among so-called Christian Evangelicals: “Three out of four evangelicals by belief (74%, more than the previous year’s 56%) believe that ‘an individual must contribute his or her own effort for personal salvation’”; “Seven out of 10 said [Jesus] was the first and greatest being created by God (71%), an enormous jump over the 19 percent of self-identified evangelicals who agreed that Jesus was ‘the first creature created by God’ last year”; “About the same number of evangelicals as the previous year (56%) said that ‘the Holy Spirit is a divine force but not a personal being’”; and, “Two out of five believe that ‘worshipping alone or with family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church’ (42%)”. The results of this survey, which consisted of forty-seven theological statements being presented to a sampling of three thousand adults, clearly demonstrates that many so-called American “Evangelicals” are in desperate need of revisiting the content of the εὐαγγέλιον, the Gospel. Clearly they need to regularly revisit sound catechetical instruction. Ultimately, faith, or trust, is only as good as the object that is being trusted. What we believe matters. The “good deposit” that consists of the content of our Christian Faith needs to be guarded because it speaks about the person and work of God’s Christ— it tells us what we need to know about Him whom we are to trust as the object of our faith, in accord with God’s Word. It also tells us about ourselves. Through

the Law we see our sin; through the Gospel we see our Saviour. Again, our faith is only as good as the object of our faith. This is why we must “guard the good deposit entrusted to [us]” by those whom God has sent to us, from the beginning, to bring us His Word.

As we come to hear God’s Word, His Gospel, preached in its purity, and as we gather to receive His Holy Sacraments, rightly administered in the midst of His people, we “guard the good deposit entrusted to [us].” As we confess the content of our Faith through the use of the Church’s ecumenical creeds, we “guard the good deposit.” As we make use of the means of grace available to the Church, through the Office of the Holy Ministry, it is “by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us” that “we guard the good deposit entrusted to [us].” Rallying around God’s Word and God’s Sacraments, as God’s people, is not for the purpose of lighting a fire under us, but for the sake of that fire within us: the faith enkindled by the Holy Spirit through the means that God has ordained to keep and sustain us in the one true Faith. The faith that “comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” *is* “the gift of God”, the Holy Spirit’s flame being fanned every time we come together to receive God’s grace by the means through which He communicates the forgiveness of sins to His community of the faithful, the Church. It is in such a community that the proverb, “iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another,” is realized for the sake of faith. It is in such a community that the proverb, “a three-stranded cord is not easily broken,” is realized for the sake of faith. St. Timothy not only had the support of St. Paul, but also the support of the saints he served. Furthermore, lest we forget, the faithfulness of St. Timothy’s mother and grandmother played no small part in the formation of his faith. Contrary to the two out of five who in the survey believe

that “worshipping alone or with family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church” (which, of course, is contrary to the Commandment to keep God’s Sabbath holy), the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, recognizing the importance of gathering around God’s Word as a community, writes, “Let us not neglect meeting together, as some have made a habit, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

There is an oft repeated story that, even if you may be familiar with it already, still bears repeating as it illustrates this particular point about “fanning the flame”:

A certain member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going— justifying his decision by saying to himself, “I can worship in my own house, alone, just as well as I can at church.” After a few weeks had passed, the pastor decided to visit him. On a cold and rainy day, the pastor arrived at the man’s house. The man’s house, being heated by a fireplace, was nice and warm. The man, recognizing the reason for his pastor’s visit, welcomed him in and led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace, and then remained silent out of a sense of guilt. The pastor made himself at home by the fire, but said nothing. In the midst of the silence, he contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After a few minutes had passed, the pastor took the fireplace tongs and carefully picked up a brightly burning ember, placing it to one side of the hearth, all by itself. He then sat back in his chair, still silent. The man watched all of this in quiet contemplation. They continued to sit in silence as they watched the lone ember’s hot, red colour turn into different shades of grey as it slowly cooled. Its flame soon began to flicker and ever diminish until there was but one last momentary glow before its fire was no more. Soon after, it was cold and dead. Not a word had been spoken since their initial greeting. The pastor slowly stood up from his chair, picked up the cold, dead ember with his hand and then placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As the pastor walked toward the door to leave, the man, after a protracted pause, said, “Thank you. I’ll be at the church this Sunday.”

Dearly beloved of God, *your* faith is a gift that is graciously given to you by God Himself. “For by grace you have been saved through faith,” writes St. Paul, “And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” St. Peter writes about this faith as follows: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who *by God’s power are being guarded through faith* for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Yes, your faith is a gift from God that is guarded by God. The means by which this faith is created and sustained, by which you can “fan into flame the gift of God”, is by regularly returning to God’s Word and Sacraments, the very means by which He graciously delivers to you His promise to you. It is in the midst of God’s people, gathered together in His name, that the Holy Spirit gives and guards the “good deposit” that we’ve been given by way of the Gospel. It is when we come together in His name that our faith in the promise of forgiveness is strengthened by Him who now dwells within us, sealing us unto the Last Day. So, let us thereby continue to abide in His Word with confidence as we meet Him where He has promised to meet us, for He is able to faithfully guard what has been entrusted to us, unto the ages of ages. Amen.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.