

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 5, 2025 (Proper 22, Year C)
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

What do you do when you need a little encouragement? When your strength or your spirit is depleted, and you're facing a big challenge – how do you kick up your energy a notch?

Back in June of 2000, a couple of video board operators for the Los Angeles Angels baseball team decided that their club needed some extra motivation. They were playing the San Francisco Giants and they were behind. So the guys in the booth put up a video clip on the stadium's giant screen – a clip from the movie "Ace Ventura: Pet Detective." It featured a few seconds of Ace's monkey, jumping up and down, and screeching, and acting, well . . . like a MONKEY. And superimposed over the clip were the words, "Rally Monkey." The fans went WILD for the rally monkey, and they cheered, and shouted and acted like monkeys THEMSELVES, and got the energy in the STADIUM back up.

And guess what? The Angels came from behind to WIN the game. And ever since then, the Angels have been famous for their Rally Monkey, their unofficial mascot, who gets the fans excited and cheering for the team.

What's true in sports is often true in life also. Jesus' disciples were feeling overwhelmed, so DISCOURAGED that they made a request of him. No, it wasn't that he give them a rally monkey. It was FAR more IMPORTANT. "Increase our faith!" they said.

Have you ever SAID something like that? I know I have. "God, help me understand." "God, give me the strength to get THROUGH this."

Many in our community have had a rough time the last couple weeks and months. There's been surgeries, there's been diagnoses of cancer, there's been terrible accidents. Beloved family members and friends have passed away. It's been difficult. It's at times like these that we need our FAITH to get us through. And SOMETIMES, these struggles cause us to QUESTION our FAITH.

Today, we heard the beginning of a LETTER – a letter to a person who seems to be having the SAME problem. St. Paul is writing to encourage a young leader in the early Christian church named Timothy. Timothy seems to be having some kind of crisis of faith. We don't know what happened to him, but SOMETHING happened that CHALLENGED his faith.

Now in Paul's letters, it's always important where he begins. And HERE he begins by REMINDING Timothy of his faith and his heritage. "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I'm sure, lives in you." I can't think of any OTHER place in Paul's letters where he calls a person's FAMILY by name like that. He's saying, "If you want to know if the promises of your faith are true, just remember where it CAME from, the people who GAVE you your faith. In them you could SEE faith, see what it MEANS to a person's life."

You know, there's no such thing as a "self-made Christian." Each of us owes a debt of gratitude to those who have gone before us, and LED us in ways that made Christ REAL for us. They're with us whenever we sing a hymn, or read from scripture, or even pray. They've given us the WORDS, and told us the stories, and taught us the tunes that we use to PRAISE God and GROW in our faith.

I've shared MY STORY with you before, how I came to be a Christian. It wasn't until I was in 10th grade. It was the influence of the youth group at Salem Lutheran in Mahtowa that saved me. They were my friends. They didn't push their beliefs on me; they just INVITED me to come to youth group with them, no strings attached. I didn't give them much reason. I didn't even BELIEVE in God,

but they invited me anyway. I didn't give them much reason to CARE about me, but they LOVED me anyway. That's just what Christians do. And without saying anything, that CHANGED me.

But that's just PART of my story. I'm reminded of the people that ENCOURAGED me over the years. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for all those saints who put up with me and my questions, and told me the stories of Jesus, who taught me in religion classes in college and in seminary, who guided me when I was confused, and put their arm around me when I wanted to give up.

I shared my story with you. I'd like us to take a moment to do that with each other. I'm going to give you a couple minutes, and I want you to turn to your neighbor and tell them a little of YOUR STORY. Tell them about someone that influenced your faith, or taught you, or encouraged you, or built you up. Take around a minute for each of you. I'll let you know when to switch with your partner.

Thank you for sharing your story. Thank you for doing something UNUSUAL for the sermon.

I hope that in doing that you were reminded of the people who brought YOU here today, the saints who nurtured you in your faith, and to whom you OWE your faith in Christ. Remembering those people, as Paul says, "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you."

It's time for a come-back. "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you."

This is what Jesus is pointing to in our Gospel today. You ALREADY HAVE ALL the faith you need. It's already WITHIN you.

Have you ever done a GOOD thing, the RIGHT thing in a situation, and been asked, "Why did you DO that? It would have been EASIER to do it ANOTHER way. It might have been to your ADVANTAGE to do it the OTHER way."? We often answer, "Well, that's just how I was RAISED. That's how my PARENTS taught me to TREAT people. That's what my GRANDPARENTS taught me to DO. It's part of my family values. It's just what we do."

This is part of our SPIRITUAL family values too. We are all children of God, so it's in our SPIRITUAL DNA to LOVE, and to SERVE our neighbor. I have never met a person who came away from a service opportunity wishing they had NOT DONE it. They may have gone INTO it grumbling about having other things to do with their time, but they ALWAYS come AWAY from it JOYFUL. It's JOYFUL, because it's WHO WE ARE. It's just what we do. And it brings us joy to LIVE OUT our faith, to BE WHO we are.

Whenever you are struggling with your faith, every generation before you speaks these words from St. Paul. They speak right to your spirit. "I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day the treasure I have entrusted to him. 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." "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you."

It's already within you. Remember who you are. Forget that rally monkey. It's time for YOU to make a COME-BACK. Amen.