

**Letters From A Mentor—Part 4 of 4:
“Persistence”**

OT 27C-19
2 Timothy 1: 1-14
Luke 17: 5-10
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Letters from a Mentor—Part 4 of 4
“Persistence”

We reach the end of our current sermon series this morning, having been exploring letters that are purportedly from the Apostle Paul to a disciple he’d been mentoring named Timothy. While there isn’t scholarly consensus whether 1 Timothy is really from Paul, scholarship is fairly united in the assertion that Paul did not write 2 Timothy. Nonetheless, its value persists through words of encouragement, words of insight, words of wisdom from one disciple to another on what it means to live faith—and thus life—as fully as possible.

Which, we must remember, wasn’t easy. *Especially* back then. The giant Roman empire in which those first Christian communities lived didn’t take kindly to new movements. What’s more, the Christians who came from the Jewish tradition had to deal with former Hebrew friends and family members who felt they had betrayed the faith of their ancestors... all in order to follow in the footsteps of a guy who ended up hanging on a cross, for crying out loud.

Suffice it to say, harassment was a regular occurrence for those early Christians, while their leaders—leaders like Paul and Timothy—often found themselves persecuted for their faith. It’s why Paul was imprisoned for two years in Caesarea, before being shipped to Rome where he spent another two years under house arrest.

Society didn’t know what to do with these new Christians. They viewed them with suspicion and derision. These Christians were just so different from anything else the world had seen before. I mean, here were entire communities of people who gave their money away to whoever needed it most. They spent themselves caring for people the rest of the world discarded, like the widowed and the orphaned.

And get this. These Christian folk didn’t fight back. When you mocked them, they didn’t mock you back. When you hit them, they just turned the other cheek.

It made them such easy prey.

So this letter we call 2 Timothy was written to offers disciples words of encouragement... words of confidence, words of promise that... while people may judge you for doing so... there is no shame in living your life in faith.

There is no shame in living simply so others may simply live.

There is no shame in caring for people society says you shouldn’t.

There is no shame in forgiving the one who wronged you.

There is no shame in speaking truth to power.

“So persist,” the author says. “The life of faith is the way of life in all its fullness—fullness for you, and ultimately fullness for all. So persist.”

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Now, amid *our* society, you and I don't face harassment or persecution for our faith. But there's no denying that the way of Jesus Christ is still incredibly counter-cultural. Regardless of your political or economic perspective, there is no denying that the Gospel of Jesus Christ stands in direct contrast with the ideals this world proclaims. Which might make you wonder ... *is it worth it?* Is a life of faith worth the sacrifices it can require? Or, maybe you've wondered the inverse question—*if you just had more faith, the sacrifices wouldn't be quite so hard?*

That's what the disciples were wondering in our Gospel lesson today. As we pick up in Luke 17, the disciples had already bought in to the way of Jesus, right? But by this point in their journey, things were starting to get overwhelming. In fact, just in the preceding four verses, Jesus told them they'd be better off drowning than causing someone new to the faith to stumble in the faith... and then he told them that they have to forgive even those who kept on sinning against. Even those sinned against them seven times a day but still repented. Even then, Jesus said, disciples must forgive.

So by this point, it's not hard to imagine the 12 reaching that place of emotional exhaustion, saying, "Come on, Jesus. You say this like it's no big deal... but this is tough stuff. Don't get us wrong, we believe you that this is the way of the Kingdom. We believe you when you say that this kind of living can change the world. We really do. But we're just not sure we have the gifts for it. We're not sure we have enough faith!"

Have you ever wondered that? Doubted that you had *enough* faith? Wondered if your faith was strong enough? Wondered what life would look like "If only I had more faith!"?

- If I had more faith I could move mountains?
- If I had more faith I could understand God's intentions so much more clearly?
- If I had more faith I could heal my loved one?
- If I had more faith I could overcome my addiction?
- If I had more faith I'd be a better parent?
- If I had more faith I wouldn't succumb to temptation so much...
- If I had more faith I could make a bigger difference.
- If I had more faith...

I think it's something we've all wondered. I know I have. We picture faith as something that can be quantified. Measured out. Like... you put your faith on a scale and then I'll put mine on, and we'll see who has more.

But Jesus tells this disciples, "Guys, it doesn't work like that. You don't need more faith. Heck, faith the size of the tiniest little seed is sufficient. Even this much faith is enough," he tells them, "because it's not the size of your faith that changes things... it's how you use the faith you already have!"

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He explains it amid a parable that's admittedly hard to read in the 21st century. It's about slaves and masters. Scholars suggest it's likely intended to be about indentured servants and masters but still... this is tough stuff.

In the parable Jesus says you don't heap praise on a servant for simply doing their daily job. The servant simply does what's expected, day in and day out.

So it is with faith. Jesus says this is what faithfulness looks like. Doing what is expected. Nothing huge or unexpected like moving mountains or uprooting trees... but doing the everyday things disciples are called to endeavor... the kind of things nobody gives you accolades for and yet, still, they're meaningful, they're important... and they make a difference.

It's the kind of everyday-yet-faithful things *you* do, I know, as you seek to live a life of faithfulness. Things you don't do in search of praise or reward, but things you do... because it was a life of faith entails.

For example, I know:

- There's someone here today who teaches, and who took extra time out of their day to help a struggling student.
- There's a parent here today who held their child as they cried—unable to take their pain away, and yet still, they let their child know they were heard and loved, just the same.
- There's also a parent here who made a meal for their family when they was way too exhausted to do so.
- There's someone here who delivered a meal to a family going through a tough time.
- There's someone here who left a note on a co-worker's desk just to brighten their day.
- There's someone here who checked in on elderly neighbor to make sure they were doing alright.
- There's someone here who went to see their disabled relative, giving them love and care.
- And there's someone here who drove a pal to an appointment, because she couldn't drive herself.
- There's someone here who took a friend out to dinner because they knew that friend was stressed and hurting.
- There's someone here who agreed to go to couple's counseling because they know their marriage is worth the effort.
- There's someone here who gave more money than they originally planned to a cause they believe in.
- Just like there are people here who practiced and practiced to bring the beauty and expression of song into our midst this morning.
- There are people who prepared lesson plans and children's church to nurture our children in the ways of faith.
- There are people here who may not have jumped out of bed raring to come to church this morning, but still, they came to praise and thank God amid community, and to explore God's word.
- Just as there are people here who have intentionally embraced a stranger in order to let them know they're loved.

Friends, Jesus says that this... this is what faithfulness looks like. Granted, it doesn't get huge accolades or press releases like, say, Greta Thunberg before the United Nations... but still.. these are just some of the ways you and I make a difference—a very real difference every single day by the way we strive to live out our faith.

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By the way, have you heard of Greta Thunberg? She's just 16 years old, but she's already the world's most famous climate activist. In fact, she just spoke truth to power at the United Nations last month, where she made profoundly clear that to ensure her generation across the globe has a healthy world in which to live, we must—must—act *now* to stop the escalation of climate change. She told the world's most powerful people that we—here and now, today—have an ethical obligation to ensure our grandchildren inherit a creation that can sustain them.

And I believe she's right. We do have to do more. And thankfully, her voice is making a difference. Because she's getting noticed... noticed around the world.

But this didn't just happen out of thin air for Greta. It's not like Greta got to where she is today by simply being smarter, louder, or somehow more faithful than anyone else.

No. Greta got to where she is on the back of persistence. She's able to make the difference she makes because she's been doing the little things... day by day... week by week... month by month.

She says she was 8 when she first learned the dangers of climate change. After growing depressed about it, she decided to start doing what she could to fight it. So Greta challenged her parents to help her lower family's carbon footprint. It took her time to convince them, but they eventually became vegan and gave up flying, "which in part meant her mother had to give up her international career as an opera singer."¹

Then, in 2018, Greta took it a step further. She started skipping school every Friday in order to stand outside the Swedish Parliament with signs calling on politicians to do more—significantly more—to reduce their nation's energy consumption and emissions.

It was there that she was photographed by media... and through the power of social media her mission began to spread across the world until an international movement of school students began taking time off from class to participate in demonstrations calling for action to prevent further climate change.

And though her fame has spread, Greta's persistence has not wavered. She's remained steadfast with her message and her mission. It's why she's had her picture on the cover of Time magazine, identified as a great "next generation leader"... NOT because she's more faithful or able than others... Rather, she was and is... persistent. Persistent in her mission. Persistent in her values. Persistent in the way in which she chooses to live her life.

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Friends, these kind of tremendous, world-changing acts of faithfulness don't take place out of thin air, nor are they the result of those who simply have more faith than others. Rather, the things that make a difference... the faithfulness that changes lives and even the world... it is built on the back of persistence. It is built on the everyday, seemingly mundane ways you and I live out our faith, as we seek to make a difference in the lives of those around us. As Jesus makes clear, it's not the size of one's faith that changes things; it's how persistently we use the faith we already have! Amen.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greta_Thunberg