



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 19 Proper 24 (C)**

#### **Telling the Story**

**[RCL] Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8**

In the tradition of oral storytelling, there is a notion that when a story is written down, it ceases to be the living, changing thing that was passed down from one storyteller to the next. In oral tradition, the story is alive in the imagination of the teller—inflected by who the teller is and adapted for its hearers. The story is told as it can only be by that teller, in that setting. When the story is set down in writing, it loses that malleability.

This is not so different from how we pass along our faith tradition. It is like an ember, passed from one to the next, and each person adds their own breath to stoke it, keep it alive, and pass it on. One could not live deeply into this incarnate faith without seeing it embodied in others and practicing it in community. Stories of those who have gone before us inspire us; the encouragement of those around us keeps us going.

In the first chapter of 2 Timothy, the teacher writes to his beloved student, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” He then reminds Timothy, “rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” 2 Timothy is written by a teacher nearing the end of his life and imparting wisdom and encouragement for the journey to the next generation. His words are the treasure he wants his student to remember and to continue sharing because this treasure has sustained him. Hold fast to the good teaching you have received, he reminds Timothy; let it give you strength in times of suffering. Share this good news with others—they need it, too. In other words, keep alive this ember, stoke it up so that it may sustain you and be passed along.

While our holy scripture may have been written down and canonized centuries ago, it is certainly no lifeless thing. As our passage from 2 Timothy today reminds us, “All scripture is inspired by God.” The literal translation from the Greek is more like, “All scripture is God-breathed.” It is living, endlessly relevant, and able to speak to us in every era. To have the breath of God is to have life, like the earthen forms of Adam and Eve in Genesis. And while scripture has been misused by humans in every generation, the Holy Spirit keeps showing up, guiding us, and speaking to us.

The story of God’s unwavering love is no less true now than it was at the beginning of creation. The enlivening breath of God is no less active. Scripture and storytelling shape our vision to recognize and discern God’s invitation and movement in the world. It can help us to look around and say, “How is the Holy Spirit moving here? Does this feel like the life-giving breath of God?”

As 2 Timothy reminds us, the time will not always be favorable or receptive to the life-giving breath of God, but being immersed in scripture and interpreting it in our communities will help us recognize the call of the Holy Spirit to be part of helping scripture come alive for others.

When we are persistent in prayer and in our pursuit of justice, we add to the embodiment of the story of the widow continually knocking on the judge's door. When we welcome with wide-open arms those who have wandered away, we give more life to the story of the Prodigal Son and his loving father. When we forgive, advocate for others, or rejoice in God's goodness, we become part of the stories Jesus tells about what the kingdom of God is like. We embody the slow, steady work of the love of God—a tradition that is not the flashiest in any generation but one that is always needed. Knowing that love, reminding one another, and living into it is our treasure. It is the ember we have received from our mothers and grandmothers and teachers in the faith to which we are called to bring ourselves and then share with others.

2 Timothy urges, "Proclaim the message... do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully." There is an invitation here for every single one of us. Our stories are part of the broader story God is telling, and each of us is invited to call attention to the love that shapes the arc of that story. Each of us adds our own inflection, our own context to the story: here is what the ancient message of God's unwavering love looks like right here, right now, in this place and time.

What stories of God's love stoke the ember of faith within you? What goodness have you seen that deserves to be told? How might you embody the faith that has been passed down to you, as only you can? How might this community tell the story of how the Holy Spirit is showing up here, breathing new life and stirring us into ministry beyond ourselves?

Each of us is a storyteller in this tradition, carrying the witness of the saints who have gone before us and passing on wisdom, encouragement, and a love that sustains to the next generation. So, "Proclaim the message... do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully." Embody the good news of God's love that we have received so that others may see and know it, too. Persist in telling the stories that help us recognize and discern the life-giving breath of God moving through generations and all creation. Kindle the gift of God that is within you, already equipping you for this work. Amen.

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