

## **"The Use of Excessive Force"**

II Timothy 1:1-7; Luke 17:1-6

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 17, 2015 – 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

You can't pick up a newspaper, or turn on the TV, without hearing of another case of possible police misconduct. This isn't new, of course, and goes back to the arrest of Rodney King in the 1990's and well before that. Every decade seems to have its share of cases.

Most of these allegations seem to hinge on whether officials used excessive force to arrest individuals, especially those of some identifiable minority. The question then is "Were these officers simply doing their sworn duty or abusing their position to cover an act of bias?"

It's important to remember in the emotionalism of these times that not every accusation is a crime, but neither is it a matter to be taken lightly. A thorough professional review should be made in all cases. Sometimes juries have supported the charges; other times they have thrown them out. Today's problem of excessive force has received widespread attention, and perhaps because of it, we are all more aware of the fine line that divides legitimate and proper action from unnecessary and unjustified conduct.

Force, of whatever kind, is an action which has measurable consequences. And in this sense, both of our scriptures for today lift up thoughts along this line. They each speak of a power that is real, a power that causes things to happen.

Our Epistle reading today is taken from the letter of Paul to a Christian worker by the name of Timothy. The letters offer guidance in the problems of church administration and warn against false teaching. They also give encouragement in facing the challenges that each day brings and remind this younger colleague of strength that is available to assist him.

Timothy was from Lystra in Asia Minor and was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother. As we learn Timothy has been influenced strongly by both his mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois. Both of these women have become Christians and their example has helped to shape Timothy. Paul mentions him in several other letters as a trusted companion and fellow worker for Christ.

Second Timothy pictures this young man as having responsibility for a group of churches. He must be concerned about disruptive influences that assail the congregation from the outside and also from wrong understandings that some are spreading within. Paul calls upon Timothy to lead not only as one who brings the truth, but also through the example of his life.

"I am grateful to God," Paul writes, "as I remember you always in my prayers. I remember the sincere faith that you have, the kind of faith that your grandmother and mother also had. For this reason I remind you to rekindle and keep alive the gift that God gave to you when I ordained you. For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead God's Spirit fills us with power and love and self-control."

You'd think that Timothy wouldn't have to be reminded of things so basic as this, but he is human just like the rest of us. Sometimes we have to be told again because life has a way of pressing in and squeezing the inspiration out of us. We tend to forget the power in us already to meet the challenges of daily living and to move ahead. It's not just Timothy who needs to have his memory jogged.

Once there was a boy, a sensitive boy, who came home from school one day and crawled under the kitchen table where his mother was preparing supper. When she looked under the cloth she could see that he was crying and, like any good parent, she asked what was wrong. The boy sobbed that he couldn't understand his schoolwork and that he wasn't as smart as the other children in his room.

His mother gently encouraged him out from under the table. She brought him up to her lap, then reminded him of the confidence she had in him. She reiterated many things she had taught him before, then said without equivocation, "You can learn your lessons just as well as anybody can." She had told him that before, but she was going to make absolutely certain that he heard her on that day. She could see that the boy had lost his ability to believe in himself and she was determined to re-instill it in her son.

Apparently the reassurance did some good, for he tackled his schoolwork with a new dedication. He began to really feel that he could be successful. Actually his mother just got him back in touch with the potential that God had already given him. He was able to stay up with his classmates and in fact ended up doing quite well. He went on to college and proved himself there, too.

From a boy fearful and uncertain in his own abilities, he began to discover the strength that was there all along, From barely passing in school to highly-praised scholar, this boy rose in life to become president of Princeton University. From his fear of failure to making full use of his capacity, his exceptional abilities were affirmed even further in 1916 when the American people elected him to our highest office. Now what would have happened if Woodrow Wilson's mother had let her son cry himself into giving up? He needed to be reminded of something basic and important, but which could have been lost so easily.

Paul called it the "gift of God that is within you." Jesus goes on to be even more specific. "The apostles said to the Lord, 'Make our faith greater.' Jesus answered, 'If you had faith even the size of this tiny mustard seed, you could say to this tree, "Pull yourself up by the roots and plant yourself in the sea!" and it would obey you.'"

The disciples asked Jesus to help increase their faith and he reminds them God has given them the capacity to be filled with faith, but they have yet to realize their potential. It's clear from the way Christ used this word that he didn't regard faith primarily as a set of beliefs or a doctrine. Faith is less a truth held in the mind and more a fire in the heart. It is a powerful spiritual force that permeates all of life.

So should someone ask you "Do you have faith?" the question really begs more than simply saying, "Yes, I believe in God." Jesus would say that to have faith is to experience the Spirit of God at work within you. It moves you because it in itself is in motion. It is not static but active. It doesn't let you sit on dogma, but takes you to your neighbor in need and offers her

your support. It draws you from self-indulgence to self-immersion for the benefit of the world. It cause you to not merely speak peace, but live peace in everything you do.

Paul urges Timothy to have faith by recognizing it as a potent force flowing through three generations: from grandmother to mother to son. That kind of faith is a spirit of intensive power. It doesn't give up easily. It doesn't get discouraged.

Faith of this kind doesn't depend on eloquence on the part of the believer or academic credentials. You see, It is not your doing, but something done for you. "Increase our faith," the disciples asked Jesus. He might also have replied, "Start by tearing down your resistance and it will build itself up inside of you. Your first step is realizing faith is not something you create, but rather what God offers to you as a gift."

It's unlikely that any of us will be in a situation where we will brought up on charges of using excessive force toward another. I would be disappointed and saddened if that were the case. But I wouldn't feel at all bad when any of us show *impressive* force to another, because that is the very nature of our call as Christians.

When faith is a movement deep inside us, it takes our uniqueness as persons and brings us into full realization of ourselves. And when we live our faith, we can't but witness to what we believe. Faith is a force that springs from God. It carries us over the rough spots. It prompts us to venture into the unknown and then directs us. Faith is not something we do, other than to get out of the way. Faith is a gift from the Lord

To have faith then is to have a heart impassioned with God's love. And with that power, that force, that capacity even mountains can be moved. Look inside yourself, and you will find what you seek is already there.