

## **“A Word When Needed”**

II Timothy 1:1-7; II Timothy 1:8-14

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 10, 2016 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - Rev. Ronald Botts

There’s something about being human that make us want to take on new challenges in life. Sometimes those efforts make sense; sometimes they don’t. From time to time friends may scratch their heads and wonder what’s gotten into us.

It was that way for one middle-aged man who decided to enter his first marathon. He had been running every morning for several years, but he knew that this challenge was going to require the utmost of his willpower and endurance. Even increasing his training didn’t really test his ability to go the distance in competition. Still, he was determined to try.

Well, everything seemed to go right as this novice began the marathon and the first ten miles were fine. As time wore on, however, he began to be passed more and more. His strength was waning and he was losing ground. His confidence was slipping away as well. He was happily surprised, then, when he started to move up on another runner.

As he got closer he realized that it was his friend, Tom, a veteran of numerous marathons and usually a high finisher. Only later did he find out that Tom had dropped back intentionally because he was worried about him.

“How are you doing, Ed?” his friend called out. He needn’t have asked, though, for he could see that the other fellow was just about ready to quit. Ed was on the brink of both physical and emotional exhaustion. He didn’t have much more left in him.

It must have been just about then that Tom made a decision to forego his own placement in the race in order to stay with Ed and give him the encouragement he needed to keep going. You might say it was a true gift of companionship.

The harder it was to continue, the more Tom’s words of reassurance helped to keep Ed moving. With just a few miles to the finish line, however, Ed seemed almost done in. His friend shouted over one final bit of advice: “Ed, the body can do more than the mind thinks it can.” Trusting Tom’s words and experience, Ed managed to make it all the way to the end and accomplish his goal. He didn’t win, but he finished.

While it had still been Ed’s race to run, Tom’s presence and knowledge helped him find a strength he didn’t even know he had. Without this friend with him, he probably would have dropped out long before the finish.

That’s the same kind of coaching role the apostle Paul plays in our New Testament reading this morning. The letter to his young co-worker, Timothy, encourages him to carry through with the work to which he has been called.

In the book of Acts we learn that Timothy was from Lystra in Asia Minor, the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother. Eunice became a Christian and, through her, Timothy was

introduced to the faith. Elsewhere in Acts, Timothy is mentioned as a companion to Paul in his travels.

Second Timothy is a personal letter between an experienced worker and younger colleague. It pictures Timothy as responsible for a group of churches. Part of his work was to preserve those congregations from destructive influences without and from divisions within. Endurance would certainly be a critical quality for such a leader, for the task wasn't easy. So Timothy is urged to rekindle the gifts of God within him and to stay with the task.

Near the end of the letter Paul says, "You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering.... But as for you, continue in what you have learned, knowing from whom you learned it."

This is heartening counsel for Timothy. It was a way of keeping him going when he might be tempted to give up. His job was difficult. Paul's confidence in Timothy, though, is very evident in this letter.

We, too, need people to whom we can turn for encouragement and direction. Perhaps it's a spouse or partner. Perhaps it's friends or family or the church community. There are times when we simply don't know what to do. We can use some fresh insight. In other situations we may just need confirmation that what we've done, or plan to do, is the right course. With the hard decisions in life, and even some of the smaller ones, we often realize how much we need others. It seems we naturally long to talk things out with those we trust.

For a moment, let's reverse the situation. How helpful are we when others come to us? Perhaps the first requirement of a friend is simply to be a good listener. When people have problems, they need support more than anything else. They need warm words, comforting words, the assurance that someone who cares is with them. They may not be looking to you to resolve the problem, just someone they trust with whom to share it.

There are those occasions—on the other hand—where advice is really appreciated. A person can be so much in the middle of something that he or she just cannot see any other alternatives. In the muck of a difficulty, a person may need the clearer perspective that another may bring. Suggesting some ideas for moving ahead may be just what's needed. An offer to pray with a friend, or for them, is always right and appropriate.

Encouraging words are what Paul offered to Timothy. He gave his protégé what he had learned in his experience. He shared with him the understanding of faith that he had come to know. He pushed him to go on even when the going became difficult. He reminded him of the strength that God provides for us at such times as these.

And that is our assurance, too. Whether we're the person who brings the problem or the friend who hears it out, there is always a **third** presence. God continually cares for us. God is always with us. God wants the best for us. We don't need to feel alone because we aren't alone. Sometimes God uses others to convey this.

Back in the 1960's Bart Starr was a quarterback for the Green Bay Packers under legendary coach Vince Lombardi. Those were good years for the Packers and for Starr, still the teams

didn't win all their games. They had their moments, too, when they looked like anything but champions.

One year Bart made a deal with his young son to encourage good grades: for every "A" Bart Jr. brought home, his dad would give him ten cents (that was a time when a dime bought a little more). This incentive seemed to work well and quite a bit of dad's loose change went to paying off this effort.

One Sunday the Packers had a particularly bad game and Starr, as quarterback, didn't do well at all. It was a long plane ride back to Green Bay, but as he arrived home and entered his bedroom, Starr found this handwritten note from his son: "Dear Dad, I thought you played a great game. Love, Bart." Taped to the note were two shiny dimes.

There are times in each of our lives when we can use some encouragement, and perhaps a little advice as well. So we should ask for it when it's needed, give it when it's requested. And at all times, and in all situations, remember that God provides us with a reserve of strength and determination. That, more than anything, carries us along when we want to simply sit down and quit.

Friends, there's no way to avoid difficult days. They will come along whether we want them or not. So trying times are not a matter of "if" but an acknowledgment of "when."

To cope with our challenges we may first have to turn to a friend to get our bearings. A problem that's shared has a way of being a little less frightening and debilitating. Dealing successfully with our trials, though, most often comes from being reminded of where we get our true power and resolve and then letting God take us through even those hardest of times.

And if that's what we need to hear, remember that's also the same message we need to bring to others.