

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. 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. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But 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 what 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, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea', and it would obey you.

"Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and

drink'? Do you thank the servant for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Sermon: Crumb Cake Theology Redux

Twenty years ago members of your Pastoral Search Committee led by John Owen drove over to the Reformed Church in Fishkill New York to meet with me for the first time. I was working as Director of Development at the Reformed Church seminary in New Jersey, and part of my job was building relationships with local churches. However, my motives on that morning were decidedly mixed, since I was looking to leave the seminary and get back to being a Pastor. It was a communion Sunday and the sermon, Insights from Crumb Cake Theology, gave me a chance to both talk about my Reformed church experience growing up and to set a tone for what I hoped would be my new opportunity in New Milford. So I'm going to return to the theme of that sermon, but first I want to take heed of what I think are words of warning appropriate to today.

Most of you know my father played football in the early years of the NFL. In 1930, playing for the Giants, he set a record for the longest run from scrimmage – 91 yards against the Green Bay Packers. So, when my father celebrated his 91st birthday the Giants sent a video team here to interview him and did a pre-game feature about his record and his birthday. I have watched this many times and can quote the comment that closed it out. Asked about the current state of the game my father said: I like the game but there are certain things about it that have changed so much: All this hurrah, hurrah stuff – clapping hands and grabbing one another – for doing something you're supposed to do – well, I don't go for that so much.

His observations came back to me when I read the lectionary lesson for this morning. Jesus says: Do you thank the servant for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

I understand that the minister is often the face of the church to the community, but it would be a mistake to give me credit for most of what goes on here. I'm very fortunate to have found a congregation that seems such a good match for my understanding of ministry.

Although I've learned a lot in the 40 years since my ordination, essentially I am still trying to put into practice the lessons I was taught by my parents, pastors, church school teachers and youth leaders back in Sunnyside Queens. It was there that Crumb Cake Theology got its start.

Like the practice here, our church in Sunnyside had communion on the first Sunday of each month. But unlike this church, those were the only Sundays when we had a coffee hour after worship. And at those coffee hours the church often served crumb cakes from the local bakery.

The cakes came on large sheet trays – soft, mouthwatering tasty cakes covered with mountains of scrumptious crumbs - . the crowning glory of the cake, the crumb de la crumb. Each crumb probably took a month off your life.

And if we had helped set up the tables and put out the chairs and served the coffee, our reward would be the privilege of cleaning up. I say privilege because part of cleaning up involved standing over the kitchen sink with the bakery trays held over our heads as we poured the left over crumbs over our face and down, down our throats, butter, sugar, and all. Sometimes a few crumbs went into your shirt pocket for a snack later.

As a method of evangelism, this was probably unequalled in its effectiveness in the long history of the church. Maybe we didn't grasp all the theologically sophisticated lessons we were supposed to learn, but we learned to serve one another and in our church the children always looked forward to communion.

I'm not sure if the theologically sophisticated aspects of communion have served the church or the cause of Christ so well. I've been at weddings and funerals where everybody is gathered as one big family, but when the time for communion arrives we're suddenly separated back into our disparate groups. Disputes over how Christ is present in the Eucharist have created dividing lines between Catholics, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and various other branches of our one Christian faith.

But the lesson of Crumb Cake theology, the lesson I learned about how Christ is present in the sacrament and about how the church should be present in the world, transcends these disputes and divisions. Crumb Cake Theology teaches that Christ is present in the act of serving one another.

We serve one another in communion. It may seem simply a practical measure to get the plates in and out of the pews, but it can be taken as a model of what church life is all about. Jesus washed the disciples' feet and told them he was setting an example: How blessed you will be if you understand this and put it into practice.

We serve one another in communion. Christ is present in that service. For one moment we become Christ to our neighbor in the pew, and they are Christ to us.

The people sitting next to us and around us are not incidental or accidental to our faith: they are the proving ground of our belief, the visible corollary of our relationship with God. For the second commandment is like the first: Love your neighbor as yourself. A new commandment I give to you: Love one another as I have loved you. Serve one another as I have served you.

One of the great things I could see in the life of this church, and it was here way before I ever arrived, was a tradition of service to the community. In his 32 years as your minister Russ Ayre worked with you to create programs and build organizations that people recognize and rely on, perhaps without ever knowing the role this church played.

When the town called a meeting to address the lack of local shelter for the homeless, there was agreement that the churches could open their doors and work together for a solution. But who would go first? Most of the clergy said they had to check with their governing boards. But I had the luxury of knowing this congregation would want to serve in this way and I could say we'll be first.

I also had the impetus of Don and Nan Tutson being at the meeting and looking over at me as if to say – stand up and get this started. I can't name all the names, but engine of this congregation has always been committed Christians who ask "How can we serve?"

So I appreciate being congratulated for the 40 year anniversary of my ordination and 20 years in this pulpit, but all this hurrah, hurrah stuff – for doing what you're supposed to do – it's been a team effort. Thank you for letting me serve and now, pass the cake.