

Proper 22C  
Luke 17, 2 Timothy 1

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### Centered Life Series #4

This is the fourth and final sermon in a series in which Pastor Chris and I are introducing the concept of living a “centered life”. Not a balanced life. Not a perfect life. A centered life. A life in which we see our vocation as Christians not limited to the time we are gathered here for worship or when we are doing specifically church-related things, but as permeating all of our activities seven days a week. A life in which our use of time and money is consistent with the values we profess as people named and claimed by God in baptism. A centered life.

The term “centered life” is perhaps new to us, but the concept underlying the term comes from Jesus himself. “Whoever would be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” That’s a centered life in a nutshell.

But people wanted more detailed instructions, so they asked Jesus, how should we live? What shall we do? He responded, “The first and great commandment is this, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.’ And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

That’s what a centered life is. Nothing new. Same old stuff with a new label. But new labels are important, because sometimes they help us understand something in a new and fresh way. Our hope is that talking about leading a “centered life” will open your minds and hearts to a fresh understanding of Christian discipleship.

Being intentional about living a Christian lifestyle 24/7 can sound pretty intimidating. We may not feel like we’re especially spiritual or religious. We may be well aware that our temperament and way of dealing with others would not always be characterized as Christ-like. We may not even be especially motivated to try to live a centered life. We may be quite content living centered on ourselves.

What we need is a word of encouragement, and that is exactly what our scripture lessons this morning provide – a word of encouragement. Timothy was likely just a boy when his mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois, heard the stories about Jesus and became part of the Christian community. They raised Timothy in the Christian faith and Timothy later traveled with Paul on some of his missionary journeys. Now Timothy is leader of a Christian community himself. You might say that he is a pastor of a local congregation. And as sometimes happens in congregations, there is division and turmoil. Word must have reached Paul that Timothy was discouraged with the situation, perhaps even entertaining doubts about his ability as a leader. So Paul writes a letter of encouragement.

In our gospel lesson, the disciples had listened to Jesus give yet another lesson in what he expected of those who follow him. He was talking about this “centered life” stuff again. This time the lesson is about forgiveness. Jesus tells the disciples that if someone sins against them seven times a day and turns around and asks for forgiveness each time, they must forgive. Jesus doesn’t say they should forgive or that he highly recommends that they forgive. He says they “must” forgive. Every time.

The disciples’ response is one of despair. “Seven times? You expect us to forgive someone seven times – in the same day? And we don’t have any choice? If we’re your disciples we ‘must’ forgive? How can we possibly do that? That’s beyond our capabilities. You’re going to have to increase our faith if we are going to have any chance of meeting those expectations.”

Jesus' response might sound to us like some kind of put down. He says, "If you had the least bit of faith, just 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." To my ears, it sounds like Jesus is saying, "If you just try a little harder, you can find it within yourselves to be forgiving. You've just gotta work at it." It's kind of like a football coach exhorting his team at halftime saying, "I don't see any fire in your eyes. I don't see any passion. You've gotta want it more than them. You can do it. You just gotta work at it."

I don't pretend to be a Greek scholar, but it turns out that this interpretation is not at all what Jesus is saying. There are two kinds of "if" clauses in Greek. One is called "contrary to fact" and the other is called "according to fact". A statement that begins "If I were president of the country" is contrary to fact because I'm obviously not the president. But a statement that begins "If I were a pastor" is according to fact, because that's what I am.

The Greek grammar clearly indicates that Jesus' response to the disciples here is "according to fact". He is not saying, "if you had faith (and you obviously don't)". He is saying, "if you had faith (and you obviously do!)". Jesus is giving the disciples a word of encouragement. "Being a forgiving person is as hard as moving a mulberry tree by voice commands, but you can do it because you have faith and I know you have faith because I gave it to you."

Ah! That's the key. Faith is not something we manufacture within ourselves. Faith is a gift given to us by God. Forgiving others is possible for us because God makes it possible. Loving our enemies is possible for us because God makes it possible. Serving our neighbor is possible because God makes it possible. Living a centered life is possible because God makes it possible.

Now I want to go back to Paul's letter to Timothy again. I said that Paul wrote the letter to give a word of encouragement to Timothy. But just like Jesus' word to the disciples, Paul does not tell Timothy that things will get better if he just works harder or smarter, or tries the right conflict resolution techniques. Instead he says, "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 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." Paul encourages Timothy by simply reminding him that God has already given him everything he needs to deal with the current situation.

Each of us was given the gift of faith in baptism. In fact, in baptism we received everything God has to give – forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

"Really!" you might say. "If that's true, that God gives everyone faith in baptism, then why is it so apparent that some people have more faith than others, and some seemingly have no faith at all?"

I'll respond by having you compare me with my son, Ben. For those of you who don't know Ben, he's 6'7", 300 pounds, and he's a weightlifter. He has backsquatted over 500 pounds. He handles two 45 pound weights like they are Frisbees while I struggle to carry one with both hands. Despite this disparity, it is a fact that Ben and I have exactly the same number of muscles in our body. He is stronger than I am not because he has more muscles, but because he has the discipline to exercise his muscles and make them stronger.

I think that is what faith is like. God gives the gift of faith equally to all, but we don't all use it equally. The more we use the gift of faith, the stronger it becomes. Like Jesus encouraged the disciples and Paul encouraged Timothy, this Centered Life initiative that our congregation is embarking on is an opportunity for us to encourage one another to exercise our faith on a daily basis.

There is no place more fitting than St. Barnabas for a group of people to encourage one another in living a Centered Life. That's because "Barnabas" is a nickname that was given to a man named Joseph, and Barnabas means "son of encouragement". (Acts 4:36) Barnabas was an appropriate nickname, for in Acts 14 it says that while Paul and Barnabas traveled through the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, they "strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith." Barnabas was living up to his name.

We who bear the name of Barnabas are called on to follow his example by encouraging one another to live a Centered Life as disciples of Jesus Christ.

As I said at the beginning, this is the end of the sermon series on Centered Life, but if you visualize the Centered Life initiative at St. Barnabas as a book, the end of the sermon series isn't the end of the book. It is only the end of the introduction. We are only just beginning to read this book. It's a travelogue, really, a travelogue about a group of people in suburban Minneapolis who go on a journey of faith together, agreeing to encourage one another along the way as they each discern what a Centered Life looks like in their lives. It's going to be interesting to see where their journey of discipleship takes them in the months and years to come.