

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I studied piano and organ all through grade school, high school and college. I was blessed with many wonderful teachers, but the one who cleaned up my playing the most was Elizabeth Rounds from Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville. I took lessons from her in the early 1970s while I studied at Conception Seminary College. Even after I was ordained a priest, I kept going back to Maryville from time to time to play for her whatever I was practicing. She continued to advise me on how to improve my playing. Then, about ten years after I became a priest, she got an aggressive form of cancer. When we knew she was dying, I visited her in the hospital. The cancer bulged from her throat. As a priest, I should have spoken words of compassion, but I said something else to her. I said, "I'm angry at you. I don't want you to die." She accepted my anger. She understood it, and she helped me get over it. I should have ministered to her, but she ministered to me. She died in April of 1990, and I still miss her. She was a mentor to me in music, life and death, all the way to her grave.

Perhaps St. Timothy had similar feelings about St. Paul. According to today's second reading, Paul had personally imposed hands on Timothy and appointed him a leader in the community, probably at Ephesus. Timothy was young and timid, but he had worked with Paul and later received two letters of encouragement from him. You can imagine how Timothy felt. He was in charge. Paul was dying in prison. Timothy had self-doubts about his abilities. Paul clearly loved Timothy, but he was unable to be in the same place with him, and Paul was running out of time before he died. In the excerpt we hear today, Paul says, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control." Paul knows that serving God is not easy, but God helps people do it. He tells Timothy to "bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God." Most importantly, at the beginning of this passage Paul tells Timothy "to stir into flame the gift of God that you have."

Timothy had fears as any of us do. When students begin a new academic year, new courses may look difficult, and they wonder if they will be able to accomplish the work. When married life becomes hard, people wonder if they can carry on their responsibilities without the support they were expecting from their spouse or children. When we are tempted to commit sins of sex, greed, or pornography, we wonder if we have the strength to overcome them. When someone who has mentored us dies, we wonder if we can remain strong.

Paul's Second Letter to Timothy stresses two points, one about God and one about us. First, Paul says that God provides strength. If you ever feel that you are far away from God or that your faith has weakened, remember that God remains strong, and that God always provides strength for the weary. Second, Paul says that our responsibility is to stir into flames the gift we have. It is one thing to have strength, but it is something else to use it. If you've ever been disappointed that someone else did not share the same enthusiasm you feel for something you love to do, you know how God must sometimes feel about us. Often we have all that we need to lead a better life except for one thing: desire. Desire for doing good will stir into flame the gifts we have, and no matter the situation, we will feel the strength that comes from God.