

“What It Means To Have Faith”
2 Timothy 1:1–14
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
October 5, 2025

The reading from Lamentations describes the consequences of a people being unfaithful to God. The once proud city weeps bitter tears at its utter desolation. In the reading from Luke, the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, and he replies, “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.” In the reading from 2 Timothy, the Apostle Paul gives thanks for Timothy and praises the faith of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, but Paul also seems to question the faith of Timothy who needs to rekindle his gift.

Faith, faith, faith – it sounds like the repetition in a George Michael song, though with a different focus. You gotta have faith, faith, faith... Faith is extremely important, these texts tell us, along with the whole of scripture, it is central to life and essential for the unity of the Church universal, something worth remembering on World Communion Sunday. But it is challenging, genuine faith is challenging.

Why? Because faith is about more than cognitive assent, believing certain things about Jesus, as many evangelicals contend. And it is about more than blind trust in something better. While it includes believing certain things, genuine faith is more about a relationship with the Holy, trusting in God and the ways of God’s realm, believing *in* Jesus and his way of life, the way of the cross. Jesus calls people not simply to believe certain things about him but to follow him.

This much seems clear, and perhaps at the beginning of our journey, it is a smooth and rewarding path, but somewhere along the way, it becomes challenging for all of us. Genuine faith is challenging. The way of the cross is challenging.

Consider the experience of Timothy. Many scholars have come to question whether this letter was written by Paul, but it is presented as his, and

the message is not dependent upon authorship. A mentor in faith, we'll call him Paul, is writing a mentee, and while the former seems to be affirming his protégé, there is more going on here.

Paul says he remembers Timothy constantly in his prayers and longs to see him so that he may be filled with joy. He notes the great faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother. Acts 16:1 says Timothy is the son of a Jewish woman who is a believer and a father who is Greek. It always seems to be the mother who is responsible for faith! Anyway, Timothy comes from a good family, faith runs deep among his people, at least the women, and Paul is clearly fond of the man.

But Paul is concerned about Timothy's faith in this moment. It must have been tested or challenged by something. Why else would Paul urge him to rekindle the gift that God has given him through the laying on of hands? Why else would Paul talk about God giving us a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline, and not a spirit of cowardice? Has Timothy lost his nerve, become fearful about something? Why else would Paul implore him not to be ashamed of Paul, his witness, and his suffering? Paul says he is not ashamed of the one in whom he has put his trust. And why would Paul encourage Timothy to hold on to sound teaching about Jesus, unless he was tempted to do otherwise?

As is often the case in scripture, we don't know exactly how Timothy is tempted, but we can make some educated guesses. Paul refers to not being ashamed. Mediterranean social hierarchies are based on the dynamics of glory and shame. It may lie at the heart of the gospel that Christ's death on a cross is a transformative act of redemptive love, true power revealed in weakness, and thus Paul's suffering is a sign that he is a faithful follower of Jesus, but all this seems weak and shameful to those outside the church. Perhaps Timothy is hearing criticism of Paul. How could he be a strong leader if he ends up in prison? Where is the glory in that? What does Timothy want for his legacy — glory or shame?

Genuine faith is about walking in the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, setting aside ego and laying down life for others, but this is a countercultural message in Paul's time and ours.

Paul is resolute in this path. He has no fear of those who imprison or criticize him. He knows the one in whom he has put his trust, and he is sure

that Christ will guard until “that day” what he has entrusted to him. He trusts the God who was in Christ no matter what happens. He has a spirit of power and love and self-discipline, and he urges Timothy to embrace this same spirit because this is what it means to have faith.

Alexei Navalny is someone in our time who exuded such faith. As revealed in a posthumous memoir of resistance to Putin entitled *Patriot*, Navalny was a man who had a passionate love for his country, his wife, and their children, and these loves were inspired by his faith (review by David, S. Robinson, *The Christian Century*, October 2025, pp. 82-83). “The gist of my political strategy,” he writes, “is that I am not afraid of people and I am open to dialogue with everyone.” He opposed Putin’s “neo-imperialistic nationalism” and told a Russian court the war in Ukraine is “immoral, fratricidal, criminal.”

So, like Paul, he did not fear anyone, those who disagreed with him, those who imprisoned him, those who killed him. He kept a sense of humor, even in prison, saying to those who complained of being discouraged in the fight for freedom, “Seriously? Come on, cheer up. If you’re alive and well and out there, you’re doing all right. Finish your pumpkin latte and go do something to bring Russia closer to freedom.”

The capacity for humor is a sign of courage. But not only did Navalny not fear anyone, his courage, like Paul’s, was grounded in faith. Being a Christian makes it easier to live your life, he said, and to engage in opposition politics. People ridiculed him because of his faith. Nevertheless, he said:

My job is to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness and leave it to good old Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else. They won’t let me down and will sort out all my headaches. As they say in prison here: they will take my punches for me.

That sounds a lot like Paul. Navalny died for his beliefs, as did Paul, as did Jesus, but that didn’t mean they were wrong or defeated. Any claims about glory and shame must be understood in light of the resurrection.

So, what is the message for us? Is Christian faith a calling to die? Well, we all die, it's the only thing we all have in common, and from the perspective of our faith, in baptism, we die to sin and death, everything that holds us back, such that we are no longer held captive to fear.

I'm not sure we have to go looking for an early end, but I do think we need to be less focused on self-preservation and more attuned to our calling. And we need to evaluate our lives and faith less on the basis of cultural standards of success and glory, and more in regard to whether we are living the way God would have us to live. In the ways that matter most, there is no safer place to be than in the center of God's will, and there is no more glorious path than the way of sacrificial love.

Remaining faithful, therefore, involves more than still believing in God despite the challenges we face and the voices that call us in another direction, though belief matters. But our calling is to have faith in Jesus and his way of humble compassion, even if people think we are crazy.

I had a colleague in Richmond, Virginia who felt a calling to start a church in a housing project. It would have traditional programs of worship and education, fellowship and missions, but it would also implement an array of holistic ministries to address the people living in the project – food and clothing ministries, rental assistance, job training, childcare for single parents and working couples, community safety patrols, whatever was needed for people to live full lives.

It sounded noble, but most people thought he was crazy. It was too much to take on; how would it be funded? The small percentage of success stories would move away and never come back. It wouldn't work! Well, thirty years later, the church is still there, changing lives, providing hope, because the pastor wasn't afraid to fail, because he has a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. He is following the way of Jesus, not seeking to build a church with more people, bigger buildings, and a bigger budget, but reaching out to people in love, trusting in the One who called him.

And here's the thing, even if the church wasn't still there, even if he hadn't had a measure of success, in the very act of serving others he was proving faithful. Such is our calling.