In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon about rekindling the gift of God within you. My opening text is from our Epistle Reading, and so this is from St. Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy, Chapter One. The apostle greets Timothy with friendly words recalling his grandmother and mother:

5I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. (2 Timothy 1:5, RSV)

Saint Paul’s overall concern in this letter is to encourage and strengthen Timothy for the work that lies ahead of the young man. Paul himself is an old man by now. In fact, this is the letter with his famous verse about “fighting the good fight.” St. Paul seems to understand that his life is nearing its end:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: (2 Timothy 4:7, KJV)

Time has marched on for Paul, carrying him along toward heaven. But before he goes, it is an urgent matter for the man that young Timothy should continue to proclaim the true faith of the church. He is counting on Timothy to carry on after him, and he wants Timothy to remain true. Listen again to Paul’s appeal to the young man. We read this in this morning’s reading from Second Timothy:

13Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; 14guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. (2 Timothy 1:13, RSV)

Young Timothy is not being asked to create the content of the gospel, but rather to faithfully pass on what he has received from the apostles. Whatever eloquence he has should be directed toward true, sometimes even winsome, proclaiming of the inherited faith. Innovation is not the thing, but rather faithfulness. Still, it takes discipline and sometimes it takes courage to pass on the faith of the church. Will Timothy be up to the task. St. Paul prays so.
A few Sundays back, during the summertime, we read a kind of lament from the Old Testament about the uncertainty of our legacy. In Ecclesiastes Chapter 2, we read these downhearted but realistic words:

18 I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; 19 and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:18, RSV)

Now, the legacy that concerns Paul is not his material estate. It is not the sort of thing that lawyers and courts need worry about. No, the matter on Paul’s heart is the faith of the church. Ever since Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul has been Christ’s man, trying with all his considerable gifts to build up the Church for the sake of Jesus. Time is running out for Paul and soon he must lay down his life’s work. He wants young Timothy to pick it up and to carry on as a faithful minister of God.

The old man reminds Timothy that he, Timothy, already has faith. His faith was passed on to him by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Later in this sermon I mean to lift up the cry of the disciples of Jesus about faith. In our Gospel Lesson we read of the appeal of the disciples to Jesus:

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5, RSV)

The answer of Jesus to the disciples seems to be that if they have any faith at all — even faith so tiny as a mustard seed — well, that is enough. Such a one is young Timothy. He already has faith. He shares faith with his grandmother and mother. Now what St. Paul wants is that Timothy should rekindle his faith. If the embers are growing cool, give them some kindling, put some dry straw on them and gently blow on them and get that fire burning again. Or if it has never yet burned brightly, kindle it and nurse it along till it does grow warm, even hot for the Lord. “Rekindle the gift of God that is within you,” Paul says to young Timothy. You need not be timid. You need not be out of control. You can do this thing:

6 Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; 7 for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.

Thank God for the grandmothers of this world! It is a noteworthy feature of our modern world how many grandmothers are the ones holding everything together for the children and grandchildren. Fathers are
abandoning their families. Sometimes mothers do likewise. Thank God for the grandmothers who are willing to pick up the pieces and to give the children and grandchildren a chance in this world.

And many a grandmother and many a mother have done this good thing too: they have passed on the old faith of the church to their little ones. They took the kids to church and to Sunday School and to Vacation Bible School. They let the children grow up among brother and sister Christians in the church. The pastors were good ones, I hope. They lived lives worthy of their divine calling, I hope. But even if the pastors were quite average and ordinary, grandmother and mother were there. They prayed for their little ones. Oh! The children might never know the number of prayers that have been launched up to heaven on their behalf. They might never know until they themselves find themselves praying for the little ones in their care.

Before we turn to this matter of rekindling the gift of God within you, let’s take another glance at the disciples in this morning’s Gospel Lesson. They make what I think is a brilliant request of Jesus:

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5, RSV)

They have just heard one of the most frightening sayings of our Lord. It concerns the little ones. Just a couple verses before this morning’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus has said this:

1And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come! 2It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. (Luke 17:1-2, RSV)

That sounds pretty awful to me — to have a millstone hung round the neck and to be cast into the sea. Better not cause the little ones to sin — that’s what I conclude.

And the next verses are hard too. After warning his disciples against causing these little ones to sin, Jesus then speaks of endless forgiveness. The words go this way:

3Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; 4and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, “I repent,” you must forgive him. (Luke 17:3-4, RSV)

It is as if the disciples consider the millstone and they consider the sevenfold forgiveness in the same day, and they sum it all up in their souls with this cry:
“Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5, RSV)

I think it is a wise prayer.

And Jesus answers them with encouraging words. He teaches them that even a little bit of faith is enough. Why? Well, I think the answer goes this way: To have even a little bit of faith in Jesus means that you now live in a new world. You live in a world in which Jesus matters. If Jesus does not mean two cents to someone, how could we say that that person has faith in Jesus? But if a person is baptized and Jesus matters to that person, then that person is commencing the path that the saints have trod. If a person faces temptation or sickness or poverty and finds himself or herself including Jesus in the calculations, then that person has faith. The needful thing is to rekindle that faith. Let it burn more brightly. Let it encompass more and more of life. And if it begins to burn so brightly that you find yourself drawn to the Holy Ministry of Word and Sacrament, then let Pastor Carol and me know. The church always needs faithful new pastors. That would be great!

Notice what St. Paul does not say to Timothy. He does not say, “Wait until the Holy Spirit rekindles your faith.” Rather, the apostle says something more simple, more active: “Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” It is as if St. Paul says to his young colleague:

Timothy, do this. This is important. How am I going to go to the Lord in peace if your faith is lukewarm? What is going to happen to the church if everyone has a timid and lukewarm faith? So rekindle the gift of God within you. Do it. Strive for it. Do not rest content with a mediocre faith.

Now it is true that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, no one can rekindle faith. But that does not mean that we should sit around and wait for the Holy Spirit to do this good work, but rather that we should hasten to the places where the Holy Spirit is ready to speak to us. That is, we should hasten to church and we should hasten to the Bible. You are already doing that, for here you sit in church and I am trying to preach on the Bible. So far, so good.

But isn't there something more being asked of Timothy when he is asked to rekindle his faith? Isn't he being asked to take the faith he already has and make it bigger, make it more important?

I am referring to our human abilities in two opposite directions: to discount important matters or to enlarge them in our souls. God seems to have made us this way: that we can bury our heads in the sand and discount important matters, or we can embrace those important matters and try to let them reign in our thinking and in our conduct. I think that rekindling the gift of God within us means that we let Jesus reign with increasing earnestness in
our lives. We can do this, or we can decline to do this. Let’s do it! Or at least let’s try to do it! If Timothy does not at least try, St. Paul might as well have saved his breath.

Again, St. Paul’s overall concern in this Second Letter to Timothy is for the solid transmission of the faith of the church to future generations. He wants Timothy to play his part in this, especially considering that Timothy is a young pastor. So, St. Paul appeals to Timothy to rekindle the gift of God within him.

You and I might not be the handpicked successors of St. Paul, as Timothy was, but still, good work for Jesus lies before us. The appeal, then, to rekindle faith is a good one for us too. If you are a grandmother, for example, trying to pick up the pieces of a family that has fallen apart, well, you have some important and weighty work ahead of you. Try to rekindle your faith. Fall down on your knees even more often and ask for God’s help in the name of Jesus. Bear with your family after the manner of Jesus. Practice his patience, forgiveness, and labors on behalf of others. Come to church for your spiritual nourishment, for your surely need God’s help.

And if you are a young person heading off to college or entering your career here in the city, tend to the faith within you. Try to nurture it, to rekindle it, to make it big in your life.

If you are the head of a company with thousands of employees depending on you, or if you are a sidewalk sweater trying to make things more pleasant for the passersby, in big matters and in more humble ones, rekindle your faith. My friend Pastor Jonathan Jenkins mentioned to me that there is a saying of Martin Luther about every Christian having the words engraved on their tools, “Love your neighbor.” Think on these things — on the things that matter to Jesus. Fan you faith. Let the true King of kings and Lord of lords reign more and more in your lives. I mean, Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.