**2 Timothy 1:1-14.** 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,  
1:2 To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.  
1:3 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.  
1:4 Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.  
1:5 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.  
1:6 For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands;  
1:7 for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.  
1:8 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,  
1:9 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,  
1:10 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.  
1:11 For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher,  
1:12 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.  
1:13 Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.  
1:14 Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

“Onward, Christian Dreamers”

The Rev. Lisa Durkee

October 2, 2022

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

My usual entrée into sermon writing is the biblical text assigned by the lectionary, which sifts through the rubble in my mind as it works to latch onto something current. For this week, I began quite some time ago, with a smile instead of a verse of scripture. You see, Michael McVaugh had offered to transcribe from Jonathan Fisher’s unique shorthand a sermon in response to the same lectionary text. I first smiled to think of choosing to subject you to a sermon of a typical length in the late 18th century. You know, I *could* preach for 45 minutes to an hour, but our worship together is not all about the sermon and scripture. This is true even though our connection to the Protestant tradition in the Congregational Churches of the United Church of Christ made a point of their centrality for as far back as Martin Luther and John Calvin. This morning is cause for celebration of a lot of things, though. Yes, we celebrate our 250th anniversary as a church here in Blue Hill, just under half the age of Protestant churches altogether. We also celebrate what is known as World Communion Sunday, in which we pay attention to our unity as Christians around the world, no matter our denominational separations. So, I smiled to consider how long a Fisher sermon might be in response to the entire text from Second Timothy given that his exposition of a single line became well over a page of text. Again, don’t worry! That is not my inclination.

What was striking to me about Fisher’s reflections in this sermon, in his notebook numbered 493, were some of the assumptions he made of his congregation’s reliance on him. Also of note on our own historic occasion is that Fisher wrote this on the 5th anniversary of his time with the Bluehill Congregation. He was a man in his late twenties when he addressed the congregation as pastor, in a time when the call in ministry to exhort your congregation to righteous living was a central part of one’s ministry. I can’t help but wonder whether this strong exhortation is sometimes lacking in my own sermons. Certainly, the Apostle Paul had plenty to say to the early churches around Greece, Turkey and in Rome. As Jonathan Fisher celebrated five years of ordained ministry with the church and recalls the ways he has steered them in their faith, I look back this month on fifteen years of ordained ministry—and 250 years of our church’s ministry—and wonder how closely tied to the word of God we all may be. The “sound words” of which we hear in Second Timothy were what Fisher prayed to have delivered from scripture during his early time with his congregation and what I pray I also might offer. First, though, before just a few of my own thoughts, I thought I would share directly from Fisher, thanks to our friend Michael, choir member and docent at Fisher House extraordinaire. From July of 1801, in response to the 13th verse of the 1st chapter of 2nd Timothy:

“Five years have elapsed since my settlement in the ministry in this place. During this whole time I trust it has been my unfeigned desire to deliver to you, my hearers, a form of sound words; to preach to you truth and impart truth as it is found in the word of God. With respect to this, however, I have to acknowledge that much of the time my desire to dispense the truth has been much less fervent and engaged than it ought to have been. Also through inexp[erience] and dearness of un[derstanding?] I have not at all times declared the truth with that clearness of distinction which afterward I should have wished. For a time I had not that clear view of the distinction between the character of the saint and of the sinner that is desirable. But I trust the Lord has enlightened me more and more in this respect; and it has pleased him, I trust, to make the reformation which took place among us before January two years ago, a school of important spiritual instruction to me. Then a ... God graciously granted me as, I hope, to be a spiritual father to some who are[?] **(2**) precious ... in this place and permitted me to gather some upon whom I had bestowed compar[atively] no labor, some who were the fruit of the pious labors of others. Since that time, I acknowledge that with much weakness and want of sleep, yet I hope with a godly sense, I have labored to build up saints and to awaken and alarm such. What I have particularly in view in this discourse is to remind you, my dear hearers, of some of those truths which in times past I have been laboring to instill into your minds, that you may be led to serious reflection whether I have delivered to you a form of sound words, and whether it has been your serious care to hold fast that form; it is import<ant> that we be not forgetful hearers but doers of the word, and serious reflection serves many times to impress that word more deeply upon our minds and bring it into your greater fullness.”

Michael included with his transcription brief editorial notes, indicating that what follows in Fisher’s sermon was a bit of a summary of many points he had made in previous sermons, focused on scriptures that Fisher believed were the sound words he had been given to interpret for them. What a task! The young man who is credited with gifts in many of the arts, in skilled crafts and in writing, was charged to distinguish between the sinner and the saint, and to help to mold the former into the latter. In my own fifteen years of ministry, I am sure I can wonder as Fisher did whether “I have labored to build up saints and to awaken and alarm such.” Would you continue to receive me here in this pulpit if I did preach such that I would “awaken and alarm?” Rather, I think I would say that I question whether “ . . . For a time I had not that clear view of the distinction between the character of the saint and of the sinner that is desirable.” In 2022, we know that the town does not require church membership. We celebrate our freedom to believe or not, as we are moved; to attend worship here or elsewhere, as we desire—or don’t. I, too, celebrate this freedom, believing it to be God given. I also wonder whether our societal move away from community gathering and accountability has much to do with our hearing the cries of the sinners sometimes more loudly than the cries of the saints.

We celebrate 250 years of ministry today, even as we look toward our next five—and ***two hundred fifty-five.*** What might this ministry, this Body of Christ look like as we approach our living in response to the love of God as we know it from scripture? With thanks to Michael, I would like to share with you, more briefly, the topics of the earlier sermons to which Fisher refers as he responded to 2 Tim. 1:13.

Point 1. I have labored to install into your minds some instruction respecting the being and perfection of God, . . . 2. The ever ... Trinity. 3. Of the sovereignty and decrees of God. Romans 9:16: *It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy*. Job 14:5: *His days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass*. [398] 4. The execution of the divine decree. 1. In the work of creation . . of the words of God in Genesis. *——* The creation of man— 2. In the texts of ... the covenant with Adam and the fall of our first parents. . . . In connection with [the subject of the fall of Adam and Eve] I have endeavored to bring into view the perfection of the divine law. . . . This I have brought very fully to view in explaining the epistle to the Romans.

*——* *—*In connection with the purity of the law of God the depravity of man has been brought into view. Psalm 68:3: *The wicked are estranged from the womb, they go astray as soon as they be born speaking lies.* – Matthew 12:30: *He that is not with me is against me*. [342/343] Acts 7:51: *Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost*. [402] This ... comes into view in explaining the first chapter of Romans. *——* In connection with the depravity of man I have endeavored to set out in lively ... the danger to which he is exposed—In doing that I have repeatedly **(4)** called you are to the brink of the pit, and bid you look down ... the dark ... of hell—from which ... are these.”

I have not included all the scriptures to which Fisher refers as he recalls his earlier sermons. I am guessing that the mention of depravity, of the pits of hell and of, well, instruction in what it means to be good and right in God’s eyes, is the gist of what you have understood to be early church preaching. It is also the part of the church that appears to have been jettisoned by some branches of the Christian church today. The Prosperity Gospel that promises earthly abundance in exchange for testimonies of faith is an easy sell, while a call to serve others and to live simply that others may simply live is a difficult row to hoe. Maybe we are sometimes on that bandwagon of jettisoning some of what is essential in scripture, even when we want to believe we are the liberal and therefore the correct, if not the “right” side of Christianity. But what does it mean to be good, and what are we to do in order to inherit the kin-dom of God? Here for not yet two years among you, I might paraphrase Fisher: “With respect to [our being good], however, I have to acknowledge that much of the time my desire to dispense the truth has been much less fervent and engaged than it ought to have been.”

Hmm . . . what might my—and what might our *dispensing of the truth* look like in the years ahead? What does God call us to be and to do in response to our faith? How may we continually ask this of ourselves in such a fervent way that we begin to encourage God’s reign on earth as in heaven? Well, we might recall again the message on which we reflected last week from Micah: we are to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. So, we may pray to know what justice and mercy look like in the years ahead. We have already begun to speak of them, but we may—we must—do more in the area of racial justice, of climate justice, and of economic justice. Jesus calls us to care for those on the margins of our society, even as he did. We have to be unafraid to name those who have been exploited by decisions made in the area of racial injustice, and climate injustice and economic injustice, and then we have to be more courageous in the ways we serve to bring about this justice and greater equality for all. Our worship, in support of those ministries, must also be to remember our humility, to praise our God and God’s son, our savior, brother, teacher Jesus, as we know God through the Holy Spirit, present among us even today. God does call us to be good, and we still know goodness to be in keeping God’s commandments—the first ten as given to Moses, and as interpreted by Jesus in the name of love. We are to love, and we are not to judge, but to love even our enemies. And I—well, as long as I am your pastor and in my own life beyond, I pray I may grow brave to urge you toward service, toward goodness, toward honesty, kindness, humility, generosity and grace.

I titled this morning’s sermon remembering the old hymn whose bellicose offering I would change from Onward Christian Soldier to Onward Christian Dreamers. Of what do we dream for this church? In our next 250 years, we may exhort *each other* to goodness, from sinning to saintliness, believing in God’s mercy and attempting to show it to others in our every word and every deed. May it be ever so.