June 20/21, 2026, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, 2 Timothy 4:1-8, Keep the Faith

The sun was blazing hot, and the humidity accentuated the oppressive heat wave. Already at 6:00am in the morning, it felt like 80 degrees. It would've been an ok day to be on the fairway mower, limiting any excessive exercise. But, that wasn't my job for the day. The bunkers at Brookshire Golf Club in Williamston, MI needed fresh raking and edging. It was the most grueling manual labor job for a grounds crewman at a golf course.

This job was bad enough on a normal day. But, this day when heat indexes would be approaching 100? Forget it. But, the job had to be done. With the sun beating down from above, morale and energy quickly dipped to dangerous levels as bunker after bunker were raked and then edged. Picking up heavy clumps of sod that were edged became very difficult. Mental fatigue set in as sand and tiny rocks whipped against my legs while I weed-whacked around each bunker. And, then, just as I would get into some sort of groove, golfers approached, forcing me to retreat to some shade while I waited for them to be a good distance away so I could keep working. You know how difficult it is to get back out there for a difficult job after even the slightest bit of reprieve.

11:30am rolled around. The half-hour lunch break had arrived. The bunkers were about half finished. Part of our compensation was extremely discounted lunches inside the air-conditioned club house. And, oh, how refreshing that was on a day like this. But, the half-hour ended too quickly. My body was sore and exhausted. How was I ever going to finish the labor?

On the way back out into the heat, my boss uttered the same phrase he had been "motivating" us with all summer: "Keep the faith." I'll admit, that did not motivate me. But, it always gave me pause because I wondered what he meant by saying that. I won't get into specifics, but I can guarantee you he didn't have 2 Timothy 4:7 in mind where Paul says, "I have kept the faith." My best guess to what he meant is how the world uses that phrase to this day. "Keep going. Push through adversity to accomplish the goal at hand. You got this."

While the story I told is absolutely true, I may have been a bit dramatic to get us to think what adversity really looks like, especially as Christians. And, then, when we consider the spiritual adversity in our lives, what do we do about it? How do we respond when it comes? Doing such a labor-intensive job on such a hot day wasn't fun. But, I wouldn't call it adversity especially considering everything else that happens around the world. Perhaps, that's also why "keep the faith" wasn't really an effective motivation. I really wasn't going through anything that troublesome. A simple, "keep up the good work" would've been enough.

However, we do need more when it comes to our lives as Christians. A simple pat on the back from our gracious God won't get us through. And, so, this wonderful statement of Paul as part of his powerful encouragement to Timothy takes on a deeper meaning. **"I have kept the faith."** The Holy Spirit will use our sermon theme's imperative so that we, too, can say nearing our final days on earth, "I have kept the faith." And, God will use us to help others say the same.

But, what does "keep the faith" mean? Yes, the world has watered down this powerful statement into a simple plea to keep pushing through. But, it really comes down to what we are unwilling to let go of no matter what. How important was faith in God's promise and fulfillment of a Savior? Just consider all three of our readings today. It wasn't just important to these individuals for their own salvation, but for the faith of those to whom they preached!

Jeremiah was beaten and put in stocks, thrown into an abandoned cistern where he sank in the mud, watched as the scroll which had God's words on it was burned, and suffered various trials and imprisonments all because he proclaimed God's truth to himself and the people of Judah. All that suffering could have ended had he said, "Enough is enough" and let go of the faith and clung instead to the comforts of this world. Instead, he kept the faith.

The Apostle Paul endured lashings and stoning and imprisonment for the same reasons as Jeremiah. And, being Paul's associate, Timothy endured the same treatment. How did they handle such persecution? They held even more tightly to the faith that is anchored in Christ.

They lived out exactly what Jesus preached in our Gospel. **"You will be hated by everyone because of me."** The quick solution to be free of such persecution and spiritual adversity in this life would be to let go of the faith! But, they kept it, too. Why? **"The one who stands firm to the end will be saved."** The saving faith that trusts in Jesus for eternal salvation which is the ultimate deliverance and freedom from persecution and all spiritual adversity is that worth it. To keep the faith is to hold onto it no matter what.

As I consider the examples today from Scripture of those who kept the faith despite the persecution they faced, it leads me to be both thankful but also a little ashamed. I'm thankful that I haven't had to go through the same fiery ordeals as those from the Bible. But, I'm also ashamed because when I endure the simplest verbal persecution like "I can't believe your church is against this or that," I feel like I've been thrown in an abandoned cistern. Do we really know what it's like to be tested and persecuted the way Jeremiah and Paul and Timothy and the Reformers of old were? I'd argue that we don't.

And, it's not that we are in an age of milder persecution. It doesn't take long to find stories of severe persecution of Christians around the world. Put to death because of their faith, sometimes by their own family members. Loss of property because the government takes it away. The constant fear of death or imprisonment. Have we faced that as American Christians? Be thankful, to an extent, that we haven't. At the same time, be ready for different types of temptations to let go of the true faith.

"The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." Sound familiar? We may not have the same physical persecution and threats here in our country compared to Christians around the world, but don't ever let your guard down. The devil works in different ways to tempt you to loosen your grip on the faith.

Certainly, the most important part of your faith in Jesus is that he is your only Savior from sin and has done it all for you! But, the faith is also following all the teachings of God in his Word. The false messages that contradict this faith are all around you, and you may not always know it! False doctrines and content that dishonor God are found in the songs you listen to, on the shows and movies you watch, and on the screens you scroll through. Little by little, these false messages of the devil, which so many in the world hold on to, infiltrate your life, threatening to loosen your grip on what's actually true and wise and saving.

How do you keep the faith in such situations? Well, what's more important to you? What do you keep most closely to your heart and attention? Do we make excuses for why we can keep on listening to those songs and watching those things which are not God-pleasing instead of just dropping them so I can learn even more about the truth which God has preserved for me? That truth guards me for eternity. Everything else threatens to draw me away. Keep the faith by filling your life with the truth and the sound doctrine that only exists in the eternal Word. Guard your heart from the subtle temptations and lies of the devil who has sent his false teachers out into the world through so many platforms.

And, as you do that for yourself, you will help others keep the faith as well. Paul's main encouragement to Timothy in this section is for Timothy to carry out the ministry of saving other souls by helping them keep the faith. This is your ministry, too, no matter who you are. Help others keep the faith.

As you prepare yourself to do that, you're always ready to help others. As Paul puts it, **"in season and out of season."** Whether you are working up the courage to talk to a family member or friend about your faith, or when a stranger asks you questions you're not expecting in a random situation, you are prepared to share your faith. While that's something we all need to keep working on rather than shying from our faith because we're worried about awkward situations or possible verbal persecution, I'd like to focus on a different part of Paul's encouragement today as we help others keep the faith.

He says, **"correct, rebuke, and encourage," --** and we get that part, that's the ongoing things we need to work on – but then he adds, **"with great patience and careful instruction."** How many times have you said about unbelievers, "I just don't get how they don't understand it or believe it?" I'm not sure I can count the times in my own life. Is that being patient with careful instruction? We might even say that about those who are already Christians and still learning. Shame on us for such an attitude as we help others keep the faith.

God has been patient with all of us as we keep on growing in the Word and learning new things. That's how we want to be with others. Or think of when you learned something for the first time at work from a colleague, at school from a teacher, or at home from your grandkids when it came to technology. When you forgot that new thing the next time, did they respond, "I can't believe you don't know this!" Or, did they patiently and carefully keep on instructing you?

Keeping the faith here on earth is a marathon, not a sprint. It's a 12-round match not a 15 second knockout. It takes time to learn. We're all always growing in sanctification. Even Christians whom God kept in the faith from birth until death at 90 were always learning. How much more true is it, then, for the current unbeliever who doesn't have faith in Jesus to hold on to? Help them with patience and careful instruction. Through that, see how God will keep on loosening their grip on the false teachings of the world and then grip so tightly onto the truth for salvation.

Keep the faith. It's so much more than just a saying that promotes perseverance. It's an ongoing powerful encouragement from God that he will accomplish in you as we make use of his Word and Sacraments during moments of spiritual adversity. No matter physical or verbal persecution, no matter the little, subtle lies of the devil, no matter what, the saving faith is the most important thing God has given you. Don't let go. Keep holding on to it. God knows what you're going through. And, he knows he'll deliver you through it ultimately in heaven. That's why he helps you to keep the faith in your own life and in the life of others. Amen.