

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“In All Times and In All Places”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, October 20, 2019

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’

Will you pray with me? Holy God indeed you offer us your word the stories of our faith and teachings. With those words, we are challenged and encouraged. We are taught and we hear the truth and we wrestle. So be with us now as I share the words you have spoken through me today as together we wrestle with your call for us. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

So the reading this morning that I just shared is from I Timothy. And there is a II Timothy and a Letter to Titus. And these are often referred to as the pastoral letters. They have a different feel than Paul's other letters, such as Romans and Corinthians. But in order to understand what those differences might be, it's helpful to have some background. There are different theories as to who wrote these letters. Some consider them written by someone else other than Paul, who wanted credibility, so he used Paul's name. They conclude that these letters were written after Paul's lifetime and that some of the vocabulary is different than that of Paul's other letters. But some argued, why shouldn't Paul change over time? After all, he'd once been a persecutor of those of the faith and then he became a follower. He had changed. Why shouldn't his style of writing?

As I read the background materials, I have found that the argument for the authorship of these books has come full circle. Now more scholars think that they were written by Paul himself and I find myself agreeing. Because, as you walk through these letters of support and encouragement, they really are written by someone who knew and cared deeply about both Timothy and Titus. They were about profound relationships that could only be known by someone who was close to them like Paul. It's also important to understand that the world around them is shifting. The early church was spreading from Asia to Europe as Paul, Timothy, and others spread the good news. But also, persecution was prevalent. More than a few believers were killed in the name of the faith. The faith community did not worship in the way we do today. We come together in a separate building. But out of necessity of keeping a low profile and because they were no longer welcome in synagogues, they met in people's homes. The flip side, though, is that as the faith was spreading the expectations of the quick second coming were under examination. Living out the faith in the meantime had arrived, and they were trying to sort out, "Jesus didn't come back as soon as we thought, so what do we do?" How do we keep the faith both literally as well as share the faith especially when they had been so sure Jesus would have returned by now?

So they start to develop a longer-term focus in worship and study and service along with creating stable leadership in the midst of these in-between times. But on the other hand, doctrine considered heretical was gaining ground too. There was the growth of agnosticism. Those who taught that Jesus was only divine and not human. There were arguments and tensions over whether or not they needed to keep the dietary laws of the Jewish tradition because there were a number of gentiles who had no experience of it. And there are those who were teaching that they were the Messiah--a number were in those days. Paul wants Timothy and Titus to hold fast to that which is good and true.

As I said earlier, the pastoral letters have a different feel. Unlike Paul's other letters written to people in a city and about his travels, these letters share much more personal things. It is in II Timothy that Timothy learns that Paul is in prison once again. In addition, it appears that Paul is sensing that these are the closing seasons of his life and he wants to leave Timothy a legacy. With these things in mind, I think the tone of the message is touching. Paul writes words of advice and hope. And as I read them, I found myself thinking of the words of King David talking to his son Solomon as he is dying, offering words of challenge and encouragement. David wrote, "I am going the way of all the Earth, so be strong. Show yourself to be a man. Do what the Lord God tells you. Walk in God's ways. Keep all God's laws and God's words by what is written in the law of Moses. Then, you will do well in all that you do and in every place you go."

I think Paul's words are like David's words. Words of encouragement for the future when he's not around. Paul really does speak to Timothy as if he considers him a son. He wants him to keep focused on the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures. Hold fast to the teachings of Moses, the prophets and the psalms. They are at the root of our faith. He wants them to remember that the scriptures are important words to teach them, to support them. They are words of wisdom and truth. In addition, because in those days others are teaching things that he believes undermines the faith. He wants them in the midst of this time, even though they're being persecuted, and even though they're being faced with the challenges of a culture that's very different, to plan and work together toward the future.

Indeed with Timothy, things are different. Timothy is not the first person in his family to follow Jesus. Unlike many others, he has had the experience of being steeped in the faith in his family life. In fact, the letter itself opens with the tender words of affirmation. Paul writes, for the faith "that first lived in your grandmother Eunice then in your mother Lois, and now, I am sure, lives in you." Paul realizes that Timothy has a wonderful legacy that should be carried on. This is not one of those situations where we hear that people who were close to one another become estranged because of changes in faith. This family has connections and shared tradition and the wisdom of generations for Timothy was a child and a grandchild of Jewish women who had become followers of Jesus, and a father who was Greek. Paul performed the rite of circumcision with Timothy when he was a young man and he ordained him to serve in a pastoral role.

Indeed, there are a lot of things we can learn from this letter. Paul's letter reveals that women were in leadership roles early on. Scholar Thomas Oden, in his work, says even the passage about women being quiet in church has a very different context. Women are intensely involved in leading and serving from the beginning. In addition, the issue of helping those in need is growing. The return of Jesus has not occurred as quickly as they thought and people are in need all around them. **1.** How do they know who really needs help? How do they help them into the future? I think Paul sees Timothy as an important bridge, someone who not only learned from him, Paul, but from his mother and grandmother. And now, in turn, he is sharing the faith with others. Paul wants Timothy to carry on that legacy in the years to come.

And I think it's true for us. Many of us grew up in a faith. In our lives, we have those who taught us and challenged us, encouraged us and shared with us the story of faith. Others of us came to the faith later in our lives because of someone who shared about God or Jesus in ways that opened us up to faith. So being bridges, those who share the faith and have the faith sharing with us is an important part of life and faith. Being a part of a community that truly welcomes and encourages others can be an important part of someone's sense of belonging and well-being.

I know from my own children, the mentors they had in confirmation class and Sunday school are relationships that still mean something to them. And over the years, I've seen those who've grown up in this church who are now adults and parents themselves who find joy in reconnecting with others at Work Camp reunions or Christmas Eve services. Their experiences are part of the legacy of faith they learned, both here in this building and in their mission work far away from here.

I concur too about Paul's emphasis on the word, the histories, and stories, the people and words of comfort of faith offer, teaching and wisdom in the midst of a world of challenge and change. Paul had a concern that some were teaching unsound doctrine. But

I would remind us, and I think he would agree, that the Living Word does mean at times we come to see things in a new way. The rejection of slavery, the growth of the role of women in the church are among them. And for those who have been rejected by some places of faith because of whom they love, the gift of being invited to be welcomed in this place has great healing power.

Those who shared with us the faith over the years, taught us about faith, about caring for others, about how to treat others, about the reminder that God is with us in all times and in all places. In these days, with the challenges of culture and change, our faith calls us to honor truth, and mercy, and compassion, and to do the right thing because our faith teaches us to treat others, even those different from us, as our neighbors.

Paul's words to Timothy are encouragement, support, and love, about living out faith with integrity, and to be those who live the faith and share the faith as an example for others. So if you were Paul or Timothy, who would you be writing to or writing about? Who were your mentors? Who shaped your life and your faith? Was it a grandmother or a teacher, a friend, a spouse? As I wrote this this week, I found myself thinking of the memorial service for Anne O'Connell and about how she was a mentor for me, someone who challenged and encouraged me in the faith, not by her answers, but with her questions, the things that concerned her. Justice for everyone. Why is there evil in a world created by a God who seeks good? She taught about being aware that we have blessings in our lives and that we are supposed to do something to be those who do *mitzvah*, good deeds, with what we have. I find myself thinking not only of the witnesses like Anne who I knew personally, but those who we have never met. Someone like Elijah Cummings, who shared the faith walking with Martin Luther King, and many times on his own, as someone who was a beacon of justice and equality for all. For someone who knew how to disagree without losing a friendship.

Paul reminds us of the tenderness of sharing and engaging the faith in others, that from those who have taught us, we are in turn to teach others. So today, consider those who shaped you and led you in the journey of faith and give thanks for them. But also consider this...Who will you be a legacy for? Who will you share the faith with in the days to come? A little brother with a new baby brother? A grandparent with a growing grandchild? A friend who knows of another who has felt unwelcome in a place of worship and needs a new home to feel welcome and loved? May we be open to the Spirit's work, learning from others as well as sharing with others, now and in the days to come so that we may, as Paul says, "Carry out our ministry fully." Amen.

1 The Book of Acts, by Thomas Oden, part of the Interpretation Bible Study Commentary Series.