

Of Whom I Am Chief

For the next several weeks, our journey through the shorter letters of Paul will be centered in three letters that are often considered together for reasons of their structure and their message. These three books in our New Testament are known as the “Pastoral Letters” and they are the First and Second Letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus. They are called the Pastoral Letters because they contain advice from the Apostle to younger pastors, young men whom he had trained and who had traveled with him for shorter or longer periods of time. They are found grouped together with the Letter to Philemon at the end of Paul’s Epistles in the New Testament because of their similarity, their relatively short length and because, unlike the majority of the Pauline corpus, they are addressed to individuals rather than churches. They may have been slower to come into general usage by the early Church because of the greater specificity of their writing, being as they are instructions that could be seen as more specifically for pastors than for the laity. On the other hand, there is much in them that could be addressed to any Christian and, since we Baptists are firm believers in the priesthood of all believers, we may find that Paul’s instructions to his young colleagues are more useful to us than if we were part of a hierarchical denomination.

We are also likely to find, however, that these three letters present more challenges than some of Paul’s other writings insofar as how we can interpret them for the life of Good Shepherd Baptist Church in Lynnwood, Washington, in the Year of Our Lord 2010. Many preachers with much more sense than I steer a wide berth around all but a few passages from these letters. But, you know me. Problem passages in the Scriptures attract me like a red flag does a bull, which may be another way of saying that I am bull-headed. I do believe, though, as Rev. Dr. Scalise and others have posited, that even when we find passages to be problematic, we have a calling to try to understand them as having been useful in the life of the Church over the centuries and to determine how they can continue to be useful in our current context. Charlie, I hope that’s a decent definition of canonical hermeneutics.

There are also passages in these three books which are far more personal and moving than one might expect in little books of instruction from an old pastor to a younger. Some have been treasured by Christians over the nearly two millennia since their writing and some, today’s passage in particular, have been long-time favorites of mine. So in our survey of these Pastoral Epistles, we’ll find some passages with which we’ll have to struggle, some that seem easily applicable to our own situation, and some that lift our hearts with the Good News that is in them. I’m looking forward to the journey and I hope you are, too!

The first of these little instruction manuals is the First Epistle to Timothy. Unlike any number of other names in the Pauline correspondence, Timothy should sound familiar to us. It is a name that, unlike Epaphras, Onesimus, Barnabas, Silas or Titus, has remained in common usage throughout the Christian Era and for good reason. In addition to being named by Luke in Acts as one of Paul’s most constant companions in ministry, Timothy is mentioned or addressed in every one of the letters from Paul in our New Testament except for Galatians, Ephesians and Titus. In addition to his narrative presence in the Bible, Timothy may have had a hand in the writing and dissemination of the New Testament. It has been suggested that in some or all of Paul’s letters in which Timothy’s name appears either in the salutation or in the closing, the young man served as Paul’s secretary or amanuensis (if you want the 25 cent seminary word), writing the letter down as Paul dictated. Also, if ancient tradition is correct and Timothy was the immediate successor to

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Onesimus as bishop of Ephesus, he, too, would have been in an influential position and with enough resources to see to it that Paul's letters were disseminated across the Christian world of the time.

This, however, is all speculation. What do we know about Timothy? Luke gives us most of the details in The Acts of the Apostles. Timothy was from the city of Lystra in what is now south central Turkey, the son of a pagan father and a Jewish mother. Young Timothy, his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois were likely all converts to Christianity during Paul's first visit to Lystra, a fact to which Paul alludes in his Second Letter to Timothy. When Paul came through Lystra again, he took Timothy with him to join the missionary band, first having him circumcised, which is ironic considering Paul's harsh words for other teachers who insisted on circumcision. I'll have more to say about that situation in upcoming weeks. From that point on, he was one of Paul's regular traveling companions. As the young man gained experience, Paul sent him as an emissary to the churches in Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica and Ephesus, where he is at the time of the writing of I Timothy. If, as generally supposed, II Timothy is Paul's last letter before his death, he wants Timothy to be with him at the end. Paul clearly felt a strong bond with his student and colleague. He refers to him as "my son, whom I love," "my true son in the faith," and "my beloved child." Again, with such sterling character references, it's not surprising that Timothy's name has continued to be popular.

Now for a little more speculation. Paul clearly states in the opening of I Timothy that he has left Timothy in Ephesus while he himself traveled to Macedonia. This does not agree with the description which Luke gives in Acts regarding Paul's first journey to Macedonia, in which Paul and all of his companions leave together from Troas. It would seem that another journey is meant and many scholars have speculated that this journey took place following Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. They suggest that the imprisonment at the end of Acts was only the first of two, that Paul was freed to travel, perhaps to Spain among other destinations, and that only later did Paul return to Rome to another jail and, ultimately, a death sentence. I mention this because it gives us a strong possible scenario for the writing of the Pastorals. Paul, the old campaigner, in prison in Rome and seeing the end drawing near, is concerned with helping his younger colleagues to set up stable working situations in their churches. No longer certain that Jesus' return is imminent, Paul is thinking of what life may be like in a Christian community that has settled in for the long haul. We will also touch on this idea more in the weeks to come.

Paul's initial words to Timothy in this first book of the Pastoral Epistles are a reminder of his current mission in Ephesus. We know from Acts that Paul had spent over two years in that city, building up the Christian community begun by Priscilla and Aquila and furthered by Apollos. Apparently in the absence of these dynamic leaders, at least some of the teaching in the Ephesian church has gone off the rails. Instead of proclaiming the Good News taught by Paul, teachers are focusing on minutiae and linking the Gospel of Jesus to other mythic systems. As a result, a focus on love for God and humankind has been lost and the people are falling back into the selfishness and wickedness which they had previously abjured. Although Paul certainly has a few tart words for the backsliders and foolish teachers alike, he does not mount the kind of scathing attack on them he might have done as a young man. Instead, in order to help Timothy focus on the heart of the Gospel, Paul reminds his younger friend of the remarkable conversion and ministry which he, Paul, had experienced.

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It is one of those remarkably personal and passionate passages that I mentioned earlier which gives the lie to the reputation of the Pastoral Epistles as a remote set of generic instructions for church discipline. In a paragraph reminiscent of his heart-felt cry in Romans 7, Paul displays for his friend his deep gratitude for the intervention of Jesus in his life, his ongoing pain at what he had been before his experience on the Damascus Road, and his praise for God who is both beyond all human comprehension and the dearest lover of each individual human life. It is yet another example of the teaching that I first heard years ago – to understand the writings of Paul, you must remember that he never got over that miraculous encounter with the Living Christ on the Road to Damascus. All of his teaching, all of his theology, comes back to his realization on that day that Jesus is Lord and that he, Paul, in his zeal for the Law, had persecuted the One he had sworn to serve.

There are few people who have experienced a conversion as dramatic and profound as that of Saul, the Pharisee of Tarsus, who became Paul, the Apostle of Christ to the Gentiles. I suppose that John Newton, the slave ship captain who became a crusader against slavery and the author of the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” might come close. None of us, I am sure, have participated in the religiously motivated murder of an innocent man, as Saul did in the case of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. And yet, all of us, I suspect can look back over our lives at things we are not proud of and say, along with Paul, “I am thankful to Christ Jesus our Lord... The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am foremost” (or, in the words of the King James Version in which I first learned this verse, “of whom I am chief”). Indeed, if we do not recognize the depths of selfishness and brokenness in our lives without Christ, then we cannot understand the depths of mercy and grace in the love of God for us shown in the Christ event.

I can honestly say that I’ve never had any trouble recognizing myself as a sinner and feeling, from time to time, that in that category, I am chief. I am reminded of a portion of a speech in what I consider to be the world’s greatest play – Shakespeare’s magnificent tragedy, “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.” In the first scene of Act III, Hamlet frightens the loyal Ophelia by his rantings, part of his “wise madness.” Speaking of himself, he says, “I am myself indifferent honest; / but yet I could accuse me of such things that it / were better my mother had not borne me: I am very / proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at / my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, / imagination to give them shape, or time to act them / in. What should such fellows as I do crawling / between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, / all...” As for myself, well, I do try to be more than “indifferent honest,” but I am sometimes insensitive about my honesty. My temper, God help me, is still a problem, as we all know and for which I feel I must again apologize, not only to Marty and Lea who got the brunt of it last week but to all of you who’ve put up with it in various forms. I am sometimes arrogant and often selfish. I’ve got other faults, too, which I won’t rehearse in detail, but while none of them include the kind of violence of which Paul knew himself to be guilty, I certainly empathize with Paul’s dismay.

Perhaps a sensation of failing most common to all of us is the sense that not only are we not living up to God’s standards, we’re not living up to our own. This is the point of the passage in Romans 7 which I mentioned earlier. Paul writes, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I

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do not want is what I do... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" It's a common enough feeling to have been the topic of a rock song a few years ago – U2's "Acrobat," in which Bono sings, "I must be an acrobat, to talk like this and act like that."

But blessedly for Paul, for Bono, for me, and for all of us, the core of the Gospel is not endless guilt and regret but forgiveness and release. As Paul writes, "the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." In his commentary on the Pastoral Epistles for the Word Biblical Commentary series, William Mounce of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, a historically Baptist institution, writes, "On the one hand, we have the bleak picture of sin in vv 8-11, and it is this picture with which Paul identifies himself... On the other hand, we have Paul's salvation by God's mercy, grace, faith, and love, a salvation so marvelous that Paul breaks into praise, calling for honor and glory to be bestowed upon God for what (God) has done. This is the Gospel."

It should be an encouragement to us all to accept the forgiveness of God for which we yearn. If God could forgive Paul, God will be faithful and just to forgive any of us who seek forgiveness. And once we accept forgiveness from God, we must also learn to accept forgiveness from ourselves. It is certainly not the will of our loving, forgiving God that we should dwell on and even punish ourselves for things for which God has forgiven us long ago. Not too long ago, a friend of mine told me that she had confessed to a counselor that she held herself accountable for problems in one of her grown children's lives because of mistakes she had made as a parent when the child was young. The counselor wisely reminded my friend that none of us are so powerful that our small mistakes can irreparably alter another's life. We must learn to accept that we are sinners, yes, but that we are forgiven sinners. It is a world of difference. We cannot allow our regrets from the past to paralyze us like the penitent figure in the Botticelli painting on the front of this morning's bulletin. If we feel that high, strong walls of our own making are cutting us off from God's love, then we must remember that the doors to God's grace, the veil separating humankind from the Holy of Holies, was torn in two by Jesus. Nothing, including anything that we have done, can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

When we consider how we have been forgiven, even if we are among the foremost of sinners, then it also should become easier to forgive others. Indeed, we are called by Jesus to be forgivers of our brothers and sisters, to follow his example of forgiveness even in the face of the most brutal affront to ourselves. "Father, forgive them," he said, "for they know not what they do." If the United States is indeed the Christian nation that we keep hearing it is, shouldn't we be better at forgiveness? Shouldn't we have eschewed the waging of war in two countries on the premise that some finite group of their citizens had somehow aided and abetted those who performed such dreadful acts of terrorism and murder nine years ago? Shouldn't we be welcoming with open arms those who would practice their religion peacefully, especially in the shadow of the site of the greatest of those acts? Shouldn't we be working for the healing of the nations and the extension of the Beloved Community?

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If, as William Mounce writes, “the primary theme of this (passage) is the true nature of the Gospel as seen in Paul’s conversion,” then it is likewise true, as Mounce writes, that “the second theme is that of encouragement to Timothy, who should be strengthened when he realizes that the God who strengthened Paul is the same God who appointed Timothy to ministry.” Or, as Burton Scott Easton put it, “If Christ could change Paul, the greatest of sinners, into an Apostle, there is no limit to his transforming power. So let no one say that their duties as a Christian are beyond their abilities.” As those whom Peter called, “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,” we may not be called to do the same work that Paul or even Timothy did, but we are called to be the salt and the light of the world, showing forth what God has made of us so that the whole world sees and gives glory to God, changing the flavor of the community around us for the better. God has tasks for each of us in the Beloved Community and we are strengthened by Christ Jesus our Lord for those tasks.

I have one last illustration from the arts this morning to help us connect with Paul’s thought in this passage and it is one I have mentioned before. One of my favorite movies, and one that had a deep impact on me, is Robert Duvall’s film, “The Apostle.” In it, a Pentecostal preacher loses his church, his wife and his children and becomes a fugitive, all because he loses his struggle against his appetites for infidelity, alcohol and violence. But despite his brokenness and despair (or perhaps because of them), he turns to the only friend he has left, to Jesus. And God uses this sinful, broken man to restart a rural church, to change people’s lives for the better, and to participate in the holy work of saving sinners. If such a one can be used by God to bring healing to this world, what about us? Is there any reason, any reason at all, that each one of us should not be reaching out in forgiveness, reaching out in love, reaching out in the telling of the Gospel that proclaims that forgiveness and that love to all?

This morning, my friends, we have sought the forgiveness of God with the words of David in Psalm 51, written after he was convicted by the prophet Nathan of his sin with Bathsheba. We have heard the Good News of forgiveness, available to us all. We have sung and will sing again our praise to the God who forgives. But let us not forget to carry forgiveness out into the world, for our world is in sore need of forgiveness. It is the best way to sing the wondrous story – to sing it so the world can hear it in our words and see it in our lives. And now, to the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.