

“A Sincere Faith – Authentic or Ashamed”

2 Timothy 1:1-14

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One of my fondest memories growing up was having pen pals in school. It was always such a fun and exciting opportunity to get know someone who I might otherwise may never have the opportunity to know. There was always great anticipation as my classmates and I waited to hear back from our respective pen pals. More often than not, the letters remained rather basic and fairly brief. We shared simple information about our lives – our families, our interests, what we were doing in school. Yet, while these letters may have remained simple in nature, there really is something so profound, so meaningful about sitting down with pen and paper and physically writing to someone. There really is something so intimate about writing or receiving a handwritten letter. Whether it be a brief thank you note, a quick hello, or an in-depth update on life, taking the time to write to someone is, in many ways, a profoundly spiritual gesture, each letter offering insight into our innermost being.

Such is the context that we find ourselves today. Two friends – Paul and Timothy – biblical pen pals corresponding as a means of maintaining the deep bond they established as friends and colleagues in ministry. For those of us who might forget, Paul and Timothy aren't just simple pen pals. They have a friendship with deep roots. “Timothy traveled extensively with Paul (1 Cor. 4:17; Rom. 16:21), was important in the apostle's work at Corinth and Philippi, and apparently co-authored 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and Colossians.”¹

The specific letter we find ourselves reading today is Paul's second letter to Timothy. To be sure, this is a letter that carries profound weight. Second Timothy is one of three letters – First Timothy and Titus being the other two letters – known as the “Pastorals Epistles” or, more simply, the “Pastorals” as these letters are “from a pastor to a pastor; Paul the shepherd gives guidance to his “sons” Timothy and Titus.”²

In Second Timothy we encounter Paul at what might be his most vulnerable piece of writing. Paul is writing to his dear friend – his “beloved child” – Timothy. While Paul is undeniably concerned about the current and future state of the church, offering exhortations regarding church

¹ Bonnie B. Thurston, “The Domestication of Paul: The Pastoral Epistles” in *Chalice Introduction to the New Testament*. (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004), 240.

² Ibid.

organization, polity, and leadership, there is, as we heard in our reading for today, a sense of personal and intimate urgency in Paul's voice. But, can we blame him? As we look further in the letter we come to find that Paul is writing to Timothy with the knowledge of his impending death. As he concludes his letter, he writes, "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."³

Speaking on the particular context of this letter, one commentator aptly notes, "This letter has a special clarity, serenity, and finality. Paul well knew that in all likelihood he was communicating his last words to an old friend, a traveling companion in mission for two decades. The circumstances of radical human limitation (helplessness, imprisonment, death) intensify natural human affections. This letter, so far as we know, was Paul's last communication to a beloved friend and co-worker."⁴

After the past week, a week in which we too have been inundated with "circumstances of radical human limitation," I wonder with what kind of clarity, serenity, and finality might find ourselves writing with? If we could pen a letter to the world, what would we say? What might our collective letter look like in our modern context? More personally, if you were to right a letter, what might you say?

I know what my letter might look like.

It would begin:

Dear Friends,

I'm tired.

I'm tired of black and brown bodies being left lifeless on the streets.

I'm tired of police and law enforcement being condemned and convicted.

I'm tired of political rhetoric being used to divide, demonize, and dehumanize.

Yet, it would end in this way:

But Friends,

I am hopeful.

I am hopeful that the dialogue will continue, that we might continue to challenge and dismantle systems of injustice, discrimination, and oppression.

³ 2 Timothy 4:6-7

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, "First and Second Timothy and Titus" in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1989), 7-8.

I am hopeful that we will continue to challenge ourselves and those around us to speak with graceful tongues and listen with compassionate ears, responding in both humility and love.

I am hopeful that we will continue to work to affirm the humanity of all individuals.

I am hopeful.

Friends, we're tired, but we're hopeful. Thus, in our fatigue filled hope, we turn our attention to the table. It is at this table where we come to receive nourishment, where our fatigue is formed into hopeful action of justice, love, and peace.

Today, as we sit together as a worldwide family at the table, we acknowledge and recognize that this meal is a "celebration of the reconciliation of people with God and with one another, in which [we] joyfully eat and drink together at the table."⁵ Yet, as we find our hope replenished at the table, we don't just sit stagnant in our chairs. We "go out from the Lord's Table with courage and hope for the service to which [Christ] has called [us]⁶, anxious, willing, and excited to enter the world to "work for justice in and outside of the church."⁷

Thus, as we pen our letters to the world, may they be penned with a spirit of love. And, as Paul and Timothy remind us in Philippians, may this love "overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help [us] to determine what is best" such that we respond in sincere and authentic ways, unashamed to "raise our collective voice not just to proclaim the good news of God's grace but to call out injustice, to call out the forces that threaten to tear us apart."⁸

Thanks be to God for a courageous spirit of love. Amen.

⁵ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. 2002. *The Confession of 1967: Inclusive Language Text*. Inclusive language version. Louisville, Ky.: Congregational Ministries Publishing, a Division of the General Assembly Council, Congregational Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Presbyterian advocacy group issues challenge to 'raise our collective voice,'

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/presbyterian-advocacy-group-issues-challenge-raise-collective-voice/>

⁸ Ibid.