**The Best Witness**

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Do you know this guy Paul? Who wrote this letter to his friend Timothy?

Paul was one of the earliest Christians, although his conversion and ministry all took place after Jesus had already died and risen.

Paul is responsible for the eruption of Christianity and it’s rapid spread beyond Galilee and into major urban areas of the Roman Empire. It was Paul who first articulated Christ’s teaching in a way that was respectable to well educated urbanites.

In comparison to Jesus’ simple parables about rural life, and one-liner teachings,

Paul trafficked in long discourses. And clear arguments. With Philosophically sophisticated verbiage. All in the best rhetorical style of the day.

Paul would travel from city to city. Teaching and preaching. And planting small Christian communities, of a dozen folks or so, and then he would move on to the next area.

But Paul was not quite content to simply leave these communities be. Nor, I think, did they want to be left to their own devices. And so Paul was a prolific writer of letters.

These letters that he wrote to the early Church’s were so foundational in the formation of Early Christian communities that many of them are preserved in our scriptures.

The Letter to the Romans, and the Ephesians, 2 letters each to the Corinthians and the Thessalonians, and one each for the Galatians, Philippians, and Colossians.

These letters are full of suggestions about how to live together in Christian community, they contain Paul’s judgements and rulings regarding certain controversies that have arisen, he rebukes certain troublemakers, and celebrates great successes.

He teaches, and clarifies, and reiterates the core tenants of the faith.

And he offers his gratitude, prayers, and encouragement.

Yet in our reading from this morning, which comes from the very beginning of one of Paul’s letters, there is a departure from his ordinary pattern.

He is writing not to a whole community, not to one of his churches.

But to an individual.

A young man named Timothy.

He begins by identifying who the letter is from, and who it is too, in the format that was common in ancient letter writing.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.*

And then he continues:

*I am grateful to God when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. 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.*

Isn’t that beautiful?

Paul recalls Timothy’s tears at their last parting. And promises him that he prayers for him night and day.

And he names his grandmother, and his mother, trusting that their spirit lives now in their son, Timothy.

I would love to get a letter like that. Wouldn’t you?

I must confess, I have given Paul a bit of hard time from this pulpit before. And he is often regarded as the Bible’s resident curmudgeon. And he is certainly guilty of a certain amount of arrogance.

But this letter. Penned from a Roman prison. Is quite striking in its beauty and intimacy.

It is rather remarkable that Paul would take time to write to this young man. Not a leader, but simply a young man, who he calls “my child in the faith.”

What is even more remarkable is that when the canon of Biblical texts was being assembled by bishops and early church leaders, they saw fit to include this personal letter, from Paul to Timothy.

Now it would make sense to include the letters to the various churches, because in them Paul lays out widely applicable teachings about common problems. How to resolve disputes, how to worship, how to chose leaders, the sort of things that are certainly helpful to know.

But why include this brief letter of affection and support from Paul to Timothy?

I think that it is in part simply because, one of the best ways to learn what it means to be a good and faithful Christian is not through teachings, or discourses, or guidebooks about common problems, but simply by witnessing ordinary goodness, and ordinary love.

I can tell you that growing up in the church, I was not persuaded that God’s love was real by my Sunday School teacher’s lessons. I was persuaded that God’s love was real by the love I felt from those same teachers.

I was not persuaded to follow Jesus by any sermon. I was persuaded to follow Jesus when I watched the adults in my Congregation follow Jesus into shelters, and prisons, and halfway around the world, to be in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

And no class I took in Seminary convinced me that the Holy Spirit was stirring in my life. But every time we sing together, I know it to be true.

Christine Pohl, who wrote for church leaders called *Living into Community: Cultivating the Practices that Sustain Us* summed this up very eloquently when she wrote, “The best witness to the truth of the gospel is the quality of our life together. There is a lot at stake in how we live in community. The character of our shared life as a congregation has the power to draw people to the kingdom, or push them away. How we live together is the most persuasive sermon we’ll ever get to preach.”

 The best witness to the truth of the gospel is how we live.

I want to dig deep into history to give you a dramatic example.

Despite all of Paul’s efforts, the teachings, the letters, the churches, Christianity was still an extremely marginal and fledgling religious movement at his death. It likely would not have registered as much of a blip on the map of religious movements in the world at the time. Just a few weirdos in a few scattered cities.

What many historians believe first got the movement wider attention was the Antonine plague which happened in 165-180 AD.

Now it isn't that Christians were somehow immune. They died along with everyone else.

But what got people’s attention was this. The only people, in any city, who were caring for the sick and dying, were Christians.

While most people were fleeing the cities in terror, and abandoning their dying family members in fear.

Christians stayed behind. At great risk. To offer care. And comfort. And love.

It was that selfless care, and fearless love that many believe first caused people to take the movement seriously.

It wasn't a speech. Or a compelling leader. Or a nice building.

It was the sermon that those earliest ancestors of ours preached by the very way they lived. With a love that conquered fear and called them to care for the most vulnerable people in society.

The best witness to the truth of the gospel is how we live. How we love. By the way that we respond to the crisis of our day that dealing out death to the vulnerable.

That’s an example on a wide scale.

But it is true on a personal scale to. By the simple love that we show to one another. The way we treat each other in this community, and in our families, and in our town.

Simple love. Kindness. Encouragement. And gratitude.

Like Paul had for Timothy. As he took the time to share as a model for all of us.

Near the end of this mornings passage Paul says this:

Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

My friends, that good treasure has been entrusted to us too.

It is the legacy of a witness, of a movement that for now over 2,000 years has shown up to care for those that the world abandons, that has found ways to live in love despite all the bumps and bruises along the way, that has joined together with tenderness, and affection, to challenge a hard-hearted and cynical world with a vision of how life could be.

Now I could talk about that every week. And I might.

But the better Sermon will be how we all live.