

Letters From a Mentor—Part 1:
 “Be Yourself”
 OT 24C-19
 9.15.19
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 1 Timothy 1: 12-17
 Luke 15: 1-10

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We know there are some significant differences between mainline Protestants, like Presbyterians, and Evangelical Christians. While there are a lot of similarities between our traditions, it can sometimes seem like we read from different Bibles. To this point, I’ve heard it explained, “Evangelicals focus too much time on the Epistles (Paul’s letters to area churches), while Protestants spend too much time in the Gospels.”

Now... that’s painting our two traditions with far too big a brush. Evangelicals do not ignore the Gospels. They certainly take Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to heart. But I do agree that the Evangelical tradition tends to read the Epistles differently than we do. It’s part of the reason why Evangelicals tend to hold to the religious and social and purity codes Paul mentions in his letters.

I’d also surmise I probably preach at least 3 or 4 times more on Gospel lessons than I do on Paul’s letters. But that doesn’t mean we ignore the letters Paul wrote to the fledging Christian communities. We, too, take these books very seriously... and will continue to do so.

But I do admit there’s one section of Paul’s letters that we haven’t explored since my arrival 30 months ago, that is. It’s a section made up of three tiny little letters that Paul wrote not to church communities, but to specific disciples he was mentoring.

Tradition has labeled these three letters as the “Pastorals,” as Paul purportedly wrote letters to offer pastoral advice... to give specific guidance to up and coming leaders in the church community. But I need to add... I say Paul *purportedly* wrote these letters because scholarship is divided over whether these letters actually came from the Apostle Paul or not.

In my opinion, scholarship makes a stronger case against Paul as the authentic author. But that’s not a debate we seek to settle here.

Rather, today... we set forth on a four-week exploration of these letters... because in them we find important advice on how to live into faith more fully and freely. Here we find tidbits of wisdom from one Christian disciple to another, as he shares lessons learned and insights gained in the pursuit of living faith more fully and spreading God’s kingdom more broadly.

That was, after all, the prominent mission of those first followers of Jesus, right? We need to remember, when these letters were written, Christianity was still a fledgling movement. The church community was just a baby compared to the giant Roman Empire and the Hebrew tradition. So in order to make sure this new movement didn’t simply survive, but could spread and grow into a movement that could change lives by the way it confronts the status quo and

challenges assumptions and seeks to reorient the way people see and live in the world... well that meant this fledging Christian movement needed strong, passionate disciples who could touch hearts and change minds and convict people that the Good News of Jesus Christ really is worth reorienting your life around.

So it makes sense that the Paul was not only focused on forming new church communities... but also on mentoring the up and coming leaders who might one day carry on the ministry and mission he, himself, had modeled so faithfully.

Now... by way of general introductions, we know some things about the recipient of the letter we read this morning. Timothy. We know Timothy had accompanied Paul on quite a few of his travels up to this point. We also know Timothy had played an intimate role in helping establish Christian communities in places like Philippi and Thessalonica. So Timothy is not a newbie to all of this.

But the circumstances of *this* letter reveal that Paul brought Timothy with him to Ephesus... and then left him there, intending Timothy to help guide the Ephesians in the way of discipleship while Paul continued with his travels.

Yet as any good mentor knows... when you set your mentee free to do the work you equipped them to do... you don't just abandon them altogether. You continue to check in. You continue to build them up. You continue to guide them, even from afar.

Which is what Paul does in this letter.

The letter begins with Paul thanking God for his relationship with Timothy, and then reminding Timothy of the mission God had given him among the Ephesians. It's a significant mission... a challenging mission... teaching and leading folks into the Good News of Jesus Christ.

So Paul sought to remind Timothy he was up for the calling.

But he doesn't say so explicitly. Paul doesn't begin the letter by offering a lesson... or offering a how-to manual, step-by-step process. Nor does Paul follow in the line of Jesus and share confounding, seemingly open-ended parables that Timothy must interpret and apply for himself.

Rather, Paul's first line of mentoring comes in the form of testimony. Self-revelation. Paul essentially forces Timothy to take off the rose-colored glasses through which mentees tend to look at their mentors... so that Timothy would see Paul as he really was. Flawed... sinful... broken. He wanted Timothy to see his wounds, his scars, his pains, as well as his hopes, his joys, his peace.

He tells him, "You know, Timothy, for most of my life, I had it backwards. For most of my life, I was a hard-headed, foul-mouthed, hate-filled man. I was broken, Timothy. I was as sinful as sinful gets. And yet, even though I was persecuting Jesus' followers, God still forgave me. Even though I was trying to stand in the way of God's kingdom, God still redeemed me. And not just that, Timothy... even though I was the furthest person from deserving God's blessings, God still found a way to bless me and use me for God's purposes."

It's an authentic revelation Paul gives to Timothy, demonstrating that faith is not about perfection. Nor is discipleship about living into some false ideal.

Paul seems to be saying... the only way to share faith... is by being yourself. Your authentic self.

Not some made-up, gimmicky version of yourself.

Not some image you hope to live into.

Not some façade-filled persona by which you try to impress people or keep people from ever seeing the real you.

No. Paul wanted Timothy to see... faithfulness leaves no room for phoniness. So be yourself.

Now... I realize that may sound a bit obvious. I mean... how can a disciple be someone she's not?

But there's a reason Facebook is called *Fakebook*, right? There's a reason why our social media profiles are overflowing with images people want to convey, rather than the reality of their lives they're afraid to let people see. If you buy into these false images presented all over the place, you might actually believe that everybody else has their act together... that nobody else cries themselves to sleep... or suffers panic attacks... or stays up at night worrying about how to make ends meet... or has a broken relationship they can't seem to mend... or a house that's a complete mess because there's not enough time in a day... or an illness they don't want others to see... and the list goes on.

Make no mistake. People work hard—very hard—to project images that only reveal the best parts of themselves while hiding all the parts they don't want others to see—the broken parts.

This struggle is all-too present in the Church, too, isn't it? Let's be honest. How many people in these pews know of our pains, as well as our joys? How readily do we share our shames as well as our pride?

There's a reason the world around the church looks at many worshipping communities with an eyebrow raised... wondering why church folks tend to dress up for worship, as if there are people we're trying to impress.

Others look at the church with anger because the main thing they associate with Christianity is judgement and exclusivism... as Christians have been all-too-known to point the finger at other people's sin and brokenness while pretending like their own somehow doesn't count.

I mean, we say we believe in God's grace... we say God redeems all of us... and yet we're reluctant to reveal those parts of our lives that are in such dire need of healing and wholeness.

And I get it. Personally speaking, it's much easier for me to pray over another person's pain than to ask for prayers over my own. It's much easier for me to accept the brokenness of another than to sit down and face my own brokenness... let alone reveal those places of brokenness to others.

After all, who wants to expose their wounds?

So when the world out there sees a church filled with folks who act like they have their acts completely together... they're suspicious. They don't buy it.

Nor should they. Because who, really, has their act completely together? I don't. And neither do you.

But the good news is that God already knows our brokenness, and offers grace specifically for those parts of us most in need of it.

It's why Jesus spent so much of his time not with the religious folks of his day who acted like they didn't need any help... but with those who knew they were broken... and were thus much more open and receptive to the love and grace he came to reveal.

We see this playing out in our lesson Gospel lesson this morning. There, religious leaders see Jesus eating with those they'd consider the scum of society... and they just have to know, "What gives, Jesus? Why would a man so wise and powerful as you spend your time with this riffraff?"

Jesus responds with well-known parables about those who search for something precious they've lost... and then celebrate upon finding it.

And the way this is often interpreted is that God rejoices when people repent from doing wrong. And, I suspect, there's some truth in that.

But the much deeper and richer truth of these parables, I believe, is found in a deeper understanding of repent. A word that doesn't really mean saying you're sorry and straightening up.

The word "repent" actually means... "to turn." "To change." To see the world... to see yourself differently than you used to.

So for a child of God to repent... for someone who is lost to repent means to turn... to look at life and yourself differently and thus uncover once again, or perhaps for the first time, who they really are.

To repent, then, is to turn and see the image of God within yourself. To no longer pursue something you're not... but to embrace your identity as the child of God you always were and always will be.

And when that happens... when we see how God loves us and claims us as we are... when we uncover the truth we see at the baptismal font, as we will witness in a few moments... that nothing we do can separate us from God's love and grace... the lost get found.

And life changes.

Images and facades and gimmicks... they're no longer needed... no longer useful.

For none of them—not one of them—will change the ultimate truth that matters most in this world.

The world out there... they need this truth as desperately as we do.

This world out there... our greater community... they are yearning for authentic expressions of faith. They are yearning for a place—an *authentic community*—in which they can

ask real questions... express real doubt... reveal deep pain. They're yearning for a place they are invited to come, broken as they are... and not be judged... not have their expressions glossed over... but find, amid their expressions... *a sacred community held together by a grace that means we never, ever need to pretend we aren't loved and claimed exactly as we are.*

So be yourself, Paul tells Timothy. Be yourself, he reminds you and me. Be real about your brokenness, your flaws, your scars, your hopes, your dreams—because God's grace can't be seen amid our curated images and false facades. No... the only thing our false images do is hide the grace God within us that we're called to share.

So let's get real. Let's be our truest selves so God's grace can shine through the cracks of our brokenness... showing the world around us that grace means we are loved and precious just as we are. Amen.