

“RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT”

Romans 1:16-17; II Timothy 1:3-14

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Something's wrong with Timothy. His mentor, Paul, has been praying for him night and day. I'm sure that Paul means for this news to be encouraging and there are times when another's prayer is reassuring... but how often do we pray for people when their lives are going well? Once in a while, someone will go to the hospital for a little procedure, maybe even spend a few days; but fails to inform the pastor. This is one of the hazards of pastoral ministry: if you're present, then people think that something's really wrong. Have you ever had people mention that they're praying for you when everything's going well? It makes you wonder what people are thinking.

Something's wrong with Timothy. Right after mentioning the prayers, Paul goes on to reminisce about the sorrow when they parted ways, about the faith of his grandmother and mother and how he's "sure" that this faith continues to "live in" Timothy. What would your mother say? What would your grandmother say about the faith that I know is there, but doesn't seem so visible right this moment?

Something's wrong with Timothy. Paul wants him to "rekindle the gift" bestowed upon him by God for leadership within the community of faith. And he goes on to remind him not to be afraid or ashamed because of his faith.

We don't know what's bothering Timothy, or what's bothering Paul about Timothy; but scholars are pretty consistent in raising three issues. In the first place, even though he has a tradition of faith among the maternal line of his family, his father is most likely Roman. He is a man of divided loyalties. Through his father he has access to all the rights and privileges of Roman citizenship, whereas those belonging to the Christian faith are generally out of favor with the authorities. Should he identify too closely with Christians, he may end up precisely where Paul is: in prison.

Paul, probably correctly, surmises that the other two dangers that Timothy faces are fear and shame. These three issues (divided loyalty, fear, and shame) continue to challenge the commitment of Christians today. Lewis Donelson puts it this way: "The question is whether Timothy will remain faithful to his calling in spite of the suffering and shameful aspects of the Christian life" (p.135). He goes on to translate this into the contemporary Christian situation. He asks: "Do we trust the yet unfulfilled promises of the gospel, when so much evidence in our lives seems to contradict them?" (p.139).

There may be no more serious ethical dilemma facing Christians today than the question about our ultimate commitments. We have become so good at chopping our lives into little compartments that we hardly give any thought to the contradictions that exist between these worlds that we move between.

In church we talk about loving our neighbor. In politics we talk about securing our borders. In sports we celebrate the winners. In parenting, we look to protect our children from strangers.

In church, we value grace, mercy, and forgiveness. In the world of work, we reward those who sacrifice marriage, family, and health for the success of the company. In our social settings, we ostracize and punish those whose views differ from our own or who simply don't "fit in."

In church, we acknowledge that the earth "belongs to the Lord." We offer thanks for its beauty, while industry mars the landscape in search of greater profits, while recreational vehicles disturb the peace of the natural setting, and while the habits of everyday life send poisons into the land, water, and air.

I'm not trying to suggest some kind of "either/or" value system, or that what we have come to value in faith is diametrically opposed to the loves we have in other spheres of life. We have lots of "healthy" loves. I love my wife, my children, my home, my job. I love mountains, lakes, birds, and trees.

But sometimes our "loves" get out of hand. I like a glass of wine with a good meal, but what does it mean when I can't do without the wine? What does it say when I can't pass up an opportunity for overtime?

Paul uses athletic imagery that urges Christian to perseverance, to finishing the race, to fighting the good fight; but where do we draw the line in our love for sports? How do we distinguish between an athlete who plays hard and one who's simply violent?

From the outside, we think it's pretty easy to tell when someone else has crossed the line, when success, or money or pleasure has become someone's god. But we all straddle the line. Sometimes it just doesn't matter to us what God might think. Like Timothy, we might be afraid, or we might be ashamed.

I might want to rethink my commitment if it seemed like faith might end me up in jail or might make me the subject of ridicule. I'd be very tempted to wonder what Paul had gotten me into. Fear and shame: it makes sense that Timothy would feel these things.

A colleague was telling me last week that 85% of the people in Tulsa, Oklahoma a church connection. Move to Tulsa and someone will ask you what church you go to and you better have an answer or the pressure will be on. She went on to say that the percentage in Kalamazoo is around 23%.

Now I don't know where the numbers come from, but in some circles we do try to be a little circumspect about religion. You never know when you're going to run into that angry person who considers all Christians judgmental because some rail against homosexuals; or the person who thinks Christians are stupid because they don't believe in evolution; or the person who thinks all Christians are hypocrites.

And it's not just that we want to avoid these embarrassing encounters, but as J. Peter Holmes points out. "Tough questions are being asked of our faith..." (p.135) and if we're honest, we're not always sure we have good answers. We're not only ashamed of what others might think, but a little afraid of what we might discover about ourselves.

So we know about shame and fear. They're the biggest reason, we need to constantly renew our commitment. That's what Paul wants Timothy to do: to rekindle the gift. Let go of the fear and the shame and do what God had gifted him to do.

This is where faithful stewardship really begins: renewing our commitment. The church needs Timothy, and Paul acknowledges the fear and shame that he must be feeling, but not as a way of "playing the guilt card," but as a way of saying that he understands.

And it isn't the shame and the fear and the guilt that will bring us to renewal. Rekindle the gift: these words draw Timothy to gratitude, just as the call to remember his mother and his grandmother was a calling to gratitude. He's not shaming him but reminding him of this connection he felt and how good it was: the faith they shared. Again, Holmes observes: "In the midst of struggles, there seemed to be no thought of anger or anxiety, but rather gratitude.... Gratitude puts things in perspective" (p.137)

That's why I'm asking you to forget most of what I've said this morning. Forget the fear, the shame, even the divided loyalties. You're here this morning because you've been blessed by your faith, because you are grateful for the gifts of God. It is this spirit of thanksgiving that draws us to recommitment. Thankfulness for the community of faith that has seen you through hard times; thankfulness for the gift of worship that renews your spirit for the week ahead.

In this stewardship season spend a few minutes each day giving thanks to God. Gratitude urges us to renew our commitment to God and to the faith community. Gratitude gives courage and calls us forward into service. God is good....all the time.

Amen.

Resources:

Articles by Lewis Donelson and J.Peter Holmes, *in Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 4.*