

“Be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable”

II Timothy 4:1-8

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I sometimes wonder whether the message I am bringing is faithful to the gospel or shaped more by my own wishful thinking. Have I sacrificed clarity for gentleness? Have I chosen words designed to elicit praise that compromise the truth? Have I allowed my personal views to bias my understanding of scripture? Has my tendency to look for and acknowledge the human hand in the Bible blinded me to the word of God in that same Bible?

“For the time is coming,” Paul writes to Timothy, when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth...” (4:3-4). Thomas Oden warns us in his commentary on these verses that “our own cravings and projections and passions” can be “substituted for the word of God.” Every preacher should acknowledge the possibility of replacing the word of God in scripture with their own ideas.

But then Oden writes this: “Few images better describe the ethos of popular theology than that of ears itching to be tickled. Words like ‘demythologization’ and ‘conscientization’ and ‘contextualization’ and ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ become the basis for whole careers and entire schools of theology spawning piles of journals designed to tickle itching ears” (p. 138).

Thomas Oden, who died in 2015, was considered by many to be the mouthpiece for a return to classical orthodoxy. The words that he connects to “popular theology” are shorthand for important insights in the field of biblical interpretation over the last ninety years or so. They were concepts he adopted early in his theological career only to reject later in his conversion to “orthodoxy.” You may not know these words, but they have shaped my preaching from my very first sermon. Rudolf Bultmann recognized that the language of the New Testament reflected a worldview not necessarily shared by us today. The image of “heaven” conjured up by scripture’s first readers doesn’t fit with our understanding of the known universe. This doesn’t mean that we reject the concept of heaven, but that we need to reinterpret it for our context today. We need to “demythologize” it.

Liberation theologians urge “conscientization” on us, meaning that the injustices spoken of in the Bible should awaken us to similar injustices today. Feminists urged us to stop overlooking the sexism implicit in the biblical worldview. We should treat with “suspicion” those places in scripture where patriarchy has shaped the writer’s understanding. “Wives, submit to your husbands” should not be taken as a prescription for all time. In short, these movements urge us to recognize the human hand in scripture. Only then will we understand “the word of God” for us today.

That this is popular among the academic biblical interpreters is probably true. That this approach is popular in the majority of so-called Christian churches today is not. The less tenable literal approach, reinforcing traditional gender roles among other things, is what many Christians hear from the pulpit. Whereas I find Oden's rejection of things that I consider essential for faithful biblical interpretation, I take his warning to heart. How one reads the Bible doesn't reduce the danger of personal bias shaping the message. Am I preaching just what seems right to me, preaching what I think you want to hear?

I've spent some time on this, because this is the main thing that Paul writes to Timothy about. It would appear that Timothy is at odds with his community. The message that he has been preaching is being contradicted by other more popular preachers. The people have rejected "sound doctrine" and embraced teachers to suit their taste.

Paul is not the least bit surprised by this. It was a problem he dealt with in the faith communities in Corinth and in the province of Galatia. Other teachers followed Paul to the churches in Galatia and urged them to become circumcised. Paul reminds them that the gospel was about freedom, that being uncircumcised was no longer a barrier to becoming a part of God's people. He even urges Timothy not to subject himself to this ritual procedure.

To a possibly discouraged Timothy, Paul says, "Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable." There are always times when the gospel falls out of favor. We don't know what the temptation was in Timothy's faith community. But often it is a preference for self-righteousness over the love and grace of God. Certainly in retrospect, it isn't difficult to see the self-interest in the justification of slavery, supposedly based on the Bible. The more literal reading of the Bible is used to justify male authority, violence against people of other faiths, and slander of the poor. When people need an enemy to feel better about themselves or justify a certain political position, the sacred scripture, read a certain way offers plenty of support. The gospel of love is not favored by aggressors of other nations, by despisers of those who are different, or by lovers of money, prestige, or position. The gospel is not palatable to those who see life as a competition. The systems by which much of the world operates undermine the proclamation of God's love and disrupt the harmony of many faith communities.

"Proclaim the message: be persistent...." The health of the church depends on its leaders being faithful to the message, being aware of the temptations to replace the love of God with some measure of success. This is not to say that achievement is unimportant. We want a more faithful prayer life. We do struggle for justice: working to address issues of poverty, hunger and homelessness. We want to correct inequities that exist around race, gender, and ethnic identities. The message of God's love isn't a call to separate from the world and all its problems. It is encouragement to engage the world for the common good.

This letter offers hope to Timothy and church leaders today. It doesn't offer solutions for the problems facing the church, but encouragement to its leaders to stay the course. Scholars call Timothy and Titus, the pastoral epistles because they are written not to congregations, but to leaders that Paul has been discipling. He is near the end of his

ministry, imprisoned in Rome, writing to leaders who will shape the next generation of Jesus' followers. To a discouraged Timothy, he says, "pay attention to what I have told you. The gospel, at its core, is not subject to change: God visited us in the person of Jesus. His life, death, resurrection, and teaching emphasize God's love and desire for wholeness in creation. Beyond the things that I have taught you, the scriptures will offer you guidance."

"All scripture is inspired by God," he writes just prior to the section we read. Literally, this means "God-breathed." It's important to understand that Paul is not referring to anything in the New Testament. There is no NT canon at this point. So we have to look to the Hebrew scriptures to understand this expression. And when we look there, we see in the creation story that God breathed the breath of life into the human being. The same breath that God breathes into scripture, God breathes into us! To look for a word from the Lord apart from the human context is to deny the presence of God in our lives, to marginalize the message of the gospel that the "word became flesh and dwelt among us!"

It may be that on any given Sunday, I choose wording that may be more palatable and more praiseworthy from you than the challenge of the gospel. It certainly reflects my biases, but there is a "word from God" present in the intersection of scripture read and life experience. The time for hearing the word is favorable when you set aside self-interest and are willing to rest in the love and grace of God. These moments arise when we recognize the limits of our abilities to solve the problem, when we understand that our value rests in God's love and not on our achievements, when our needs are beyond what we can satisfy. This is why many people hear a word from God in the midst of crisis, a chronic health problem, an injury slow to heal. God speaks to our loneliness, to our despair, to our shortcomings. God speaks when we let go of arrogance, pride, and self-sufficiency. Just as God can speak through scripture loaded with human fallibility, so God can speak to us in our human situation.

"Proclaim the message: be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable." These words are not for leaders only, but for all of us. They are encouragement in those times when the world, including the church, seems opposed to the love and grace of God. But they also encourage all of us to seek out a spirit favorable to hearing a "word from God." God does love us, and whether or not God "has a wonderful plan for our life," God offers a word that speaks to our need, a word that leads to life, a word that we need to hear, and a word for a broken world. May our ears and hearts be open to that word which God speaks to us. Amen.