

Benediction

sermon digest

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2 Timothy 1:1-7, 13-14

carolyn dipboye

Two weeks ago, Larry and I journeyed to Gillsville, Georgia, to gather for several days with my best friends from college days. We had not seen each other for forty years, and for the most part, we had not communicated with each other very much either. I suspect for all of us there was a little bit of trepidation about what we would encounter. How much had we each changed during those years? Would we still have much in common? Would we find that we still even liked each other? As we compared notes about the roads we had traveled over the years, we found that we had each experienced some searing experiences of loss in the aging and death of our parents and in some cases, siblings and a spouse, and in some of the challenges experienced by our children. We had made our contributions as teachers and counselors and ministers and in political life; and yet, as we shared our differing stories, I could not help but be struck with a consistency that traced its way back to when we had first known each other. We had shared certain commitments as we had stood forty years ago looking into the future, imagining what our lives might be; and as we came back together it was gratifying to hear that those commitments, although tested and shaped by time, stood firm. I listened as each woman recounted not just her professional experience, but her avocational experience of seeking to make a difference in the lives of people often overlooked and even shunned in our society. Remembering the thoughtful professors, who had not only challenged us in the classroom, but entered into our serious discussions in church basements and around campus, I felt as if we had been sent out with blessing upon us and that through the years it had kept and inspired and strengthened us. Those teachers of psychology and sociology and history and our Dean of Chapel had put us in touch with strengths we did not know we had within us and raised our eyes to see much broader realities and possibilities than we would ever have imagined; and forty years later, I am very grateful.

Words of blessing enable us to love and give. I am reminded of the blessing of my early mentors as I hear Paul's pronouncement of blessing upon Timothy in our text this morning. Questions are raised about the authorship of the books we call the "pastoral epistles"—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Yet, the personal nature of the words here reflect the special pleasure Paul voices concerning Timothy in other letters. On those occasions as here, Paul seems to see himself as a mentor to the younger man, encouraging him and taking pride in his ministry. Speaking of Timothy as "my beloved child," Paul expresses gratitude to God "when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. . . . 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 (1:3-5).

None of us, needless to say, is born fully grown, fully able to stand and love and thrive on our own. Just as we are nurtured and formed within the womb, we must be nurtured and formed following birth. Perhaps you saw this week's news story about a couple who had given birth to twins, one of whom was failing. Disconnecting the infant from life support, the doctors placed the infant in his parents' arms and were shocked to see him rally and gain hold of life in their loving embrace. Forty years ago, psychologist Erik Erikson spoke to the critical importance of nurture in children's lives. The dependability and consistency of the care givers in a child's life instill the child with a sense of trust and the freedom to grow and develop into unique and healthy individuals.

And so it is in our experience of faith. "We love," the first epistle of John says, "because he first loved us" (4:19). We love and give love to others because we have encountered the grace, mercy and peace of God in Christ and in those who reach out and care for us in the name of Christ.

A spirit of fear is contrary to the gospel of Christ. Notice, however, Paul's caution against fear. "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." Many have leaped upon this as evidence of something lacking in Timothy. Maybe he was, after all, a timid soul, not up to the task. More likely, Timothy in his struggles was not unlike us and the ages of people who preceded and followed him in faith. Far from being the only instance when the faithful are addressed on the subject of fear, Paul's admonition is one of more than 300 references to fear in the Bible. That fear is a common impediment to faithful living is signified by the fact that the injunction "fear not" is the most common command in the Bible.

Fear can save our lives, awakening us to danger and putting us on high alert so that we can respond appropriately and quickly. It can, however, do the opposite. It can so overwhelm us that we can hardly shift attention elsewhere. We can become so focused on our fear that we develop a tunnel vision. It's all we can see. In the words of Peter Steinke, when "fear takes over, overwhelming the imaginative capacities and advanced reasoning," we become locked into the present and lose the ability to envision any other possibilities than what seems to be threatening us. "Reality is pruned to the senses, to the synapses mediating fear, to the paralyzing moment," [*Christian Century, February 20, 2007*].

Living in a post 9/11 world in a time of serious economic turmoil, we are no strangers to fear. Some will observe 9/11 this year with protests of anger and intimidation. Some will follow the bidding of the "Christian" Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida, and burn the Koran. Others may join Operation Save America and wage war on U.S. Muslims. Some will target Hispanic workers in our fields and restaurants and yards. However much ugliness our news casts show in the coming week, I hope they also show some of the beautiful diversity and genuine

acceptance that is at work in our country. I hope people at home and people overseas watching America from afar see memorial services led by a broad array of pastors and rabbis and imams, joining hands in mutual respect and commitment. I hope the cameras pan audiences attending those services, showing the vast array of color, nationality and religion that make up our land. If there are noisy demonstrations against, I hope the cameras also capture the daily embodiments of neighbors caring for neighbors across color, ethnic and religious lines. I hope they capture the medical clinics set up in our communities offering caring treatment with no requirement of proofs of citizenship or legality. I hope they show the Muslim teachers who teach our children, and I hope they show Muslim children who are embraced and loved and respected by teachers in our public schools. I hope . . . I hope because as a child of God, I am not a captive of fear. I hope because through the love of Christ, I see new possibilities for this world and the way we relate to and care for each other.

“God did not give us a spirit of cowardice,” the aging Paul counsels young Timothy. “Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,” First Peter warns a young church under siege. Courage to stand is a critical aspect of following Christ. It means standing against forces of hatred, including those who claim to be acting in the name of Christ. “Fear,” Walter Brueggemann suggests, “is our modern form of atheism. . . . The church need not live out of fear as though the gospel were not true. It is destined to live toward freedom, toward the pain of the world, toward the hurt of the world, toward the joy of the world” [*Living toward a Vision*, 144]. Faith, in other words, lives toward hope and gets to work.

Every Sunday morning we go forth from worship with words of blessing, words of benediction, literally “a good word,” ringing in our ears. When my Mercer friends came together, someone recalled the benedictory words with which our Dean of Chapel, Dr. Robert Otto, sent us out each week. As one of our last acts together, we shared that benediction before parting ways. Forty-four years ago, those words of blessing shaped our lives, and over the intervening years they spread over us, shielding us from cynicism and despair and calling us to hope and faith. This morning, as we go, I share those words with you. May they be a source of hope, comfort and courage for you as well.

Depart now in Peace,
And as you go, Remember:
In the **Goodness** of God
You were Born into this World;
By The **Grace** of God
You have Been Kept All the Day Long,
Even until this Hour;
And by the **Love** of God,
Fully Revealed in the Face of Jesus,
You.. are Being...**Redeemed**