

Series: Joy in the Journey
Today: Timothy-Letting Go of Shame
Text: I Timothy 1:2-16

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Most of you know that Cherie and I have a son, and that we are very proud of him. His name is Timothy Scott Riggs. He is named after two people who had a shaping influence in my own life. His middle name, Scott, is in honor of the man who was my best friend in college and my roommate in seminary: the Rev. Dr. Scott Sullender, who is currently Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and the Director of the Lloyd Center Counseling Center on the campus of San Francisco Theological Seminary. Scott was like the brother I never had. We studied together, prayed together, were best men in each other's weddings, and he is still one of my trusted advisors.

Tim's first name is in honor of the man who is the focus of our message today and whose faith journey intersected my faith journey when I felt the call to become a pastor in the Presbyterian Church over 40 years ago. My pastor suggested that I read the letters of Paul to Timothy to gain biblical insight as to the role of a pastor.

Timothy was a protégée of the Apostle Paul, and two of the letters which have been preserved as part of the New Testament of the Christian bible are personal letters of an older man who is about to be martyred to a younger man who will carry on his work offering him advice on what is really important in the ministry. Timothy is the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father (a gentile). Their home town was Lystra where Paul had been stoned and left for dead by Jewish leaders who were threatened by his ability to heal and his proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

However, Timothy's mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, became followers of Jesus because of Paul's witness, and they raised Timothy to understand how the scriptures of the Hebrew bible had been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was Eunice who gave Timothy his name which carries the meaning "*one who fears God.*" It was almost as if she knew from the time he was born that he was destined to be a leader in the church.

Timothy was the son that Paul never had. There was a special bond between the old man and his younger student. On his second missionary journey, Paul revisited Lystra and invited Timothy to become part of his ministry team. Later he becomes the Bishop of the church in Ephesus, and in 97 A.D. he was put to death, just like Paul, for his unflinching proclamation that Jesus Christ was the messiah; the one whom God chose to free the world from its sin.

So when we read the letters to Timothy, we want to pay careful attention to the advice which Paul offers his protégée, and this morning we focus on his first words in chapter one of his first letter. From it I would like to lift up two important messages: 1) The Right Use of God's Law; and 2) The Central Message of the Gospel.

The Right Use of God's Law

The church of the first century which Timothy was called to lead was not all that different from the church of the twenty-first century of which we are a part. It was filled with people of vastly differing understandings of what how we are to interpret the scriptures. There were those who were more fundamental in their attitudes and would have probably placed the bumper sticker on the back of their donkey carts which says: "*God said it. I believe it. That settles it.*" Then there were those who believed that the Bible was meant to be a helpful guide, but it should not be taken literally. Paul says that the purpose of the instruction from scripture is intended to be

love, and if love is at the heart of biblical teaching, the people will want to follow what the pastor is teaching.

I am reminded of the story about a Methodist bishop who was faced with a dilemma. He was visited by a delegation from a congregation that had a history of conflict with its pastor, and he was asked to remove the current pastor because he was too rigid in his preaching. The bishop was reluctant to take sides against his colleague, but the people were insistent that the current pastor was driving people away, so at the next appointment date he removed the pastor and replaced him with another pastor whom he knew was of the old school; preaching hellfire and brimstone.

Six months later the bishop visited the parish, and she was amazed to find that the church was thriving. The Sunday school was full. They had to bring extra chairs into the sanctuary for worship. Things were going great.

Following the service, the bishop sought out the lay leader in the congregation who had requested the change, and she asked him, *“I am confused. You asked for a new pastor and I gave you what I felt you needed. His preaching is not all that different than the pastor you had before, yet the church is growing in its ministry. Can you tell me what has made the difference?”* The lay leader said, *“Bishop, that first pastor used to tell us that we were all going to hell, and he seemed to be glad of it. This new preacher tells us that we are going to hell, and it seems to be breaking his heart.”*

The right use of God’s law is to express the love of God for all human kind; that it breaks God’s heart when God sees people who lie, cheat, steal, misuse sex, or treat people as property instead of the human beings they are created to be in the image of God. The message we are to carry to the world in which we live today is that there are things which have become acceptable

in the eyes of the culture in which we live, and it breaks God's heart to see us behave as we do. However, God is not going to intervene again. God intervened in the person of Jesus Christ; once and for all. It is our job as Christians to tell those who are lost in behaviors which violate the very nature of our humanity that there is another way, and to invite them to come and see; come and join with us as we seek to follow Jesus Christ and discover what a relationship with God in Christ can mean to the way we treat others and the way we live in the world.

The Central Message of the Gospel

Paul follows his instruction with a personal testimony. He is a man who could have easily been consumed with shame for the things he had done. He had murdered Christians in the name of protecting his Jewish faith. He had called them liars when he heard their claims that Jesus was the Messiah. He had blasphemed the name of God and broken the laws of humankind. Yet his testimony is: what God has done for him in Jesus Christ trumps the shame he otherwise might feel.

Shame is a crippling disease within modern culture, and the church has participated in the spread of it. The person who is afflicted by shame believes that down deep, at the core of their being, they are a bad person. Not that they have done bad things, but that they are a bad person. It comes from the messages we pick up from the first authority figures in our lives when we make a mistake. All too often the messages we get from our parents, our teachers, our pastors was, "*You are a bad boy/girl!!*"

The problem with living in a shame based world is that it is a vicious cycle. We spend all our time trying to be good enough or to do enough good things to erase the feeling that we are not good enough without getting to the root of the problem. We may have done bad things, but we are not bad people. We are created in the image of God and after the likeness of God. The

bad things we have done may have caused us to forget that image, but thanks be to God, Paul gives Timothy an antidote to shame. It is the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. By the grace of God through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the Cross of Calvary, all of the bad things we have done are nailed there with him, and we are restored to the original image into which we were created.

Rob Bell is the pastor of a church filled with post modern young adults in Grand Rapids, MI, and he has taken to putting up a Twitter message everyday in order to communicate with them. If you are not familiar with Twitter, it is a new kind of text message you can send from your cell phone to which people subscribe to receive it so they can stay in touch with what you are thinking. The person using it is limited to 144 characters to communicate a message.

Now I have to confess to you that I am not a twitter user. In fact, I feel it would be kind of self-absorbed to imagine that people are all that interested in what I have to say 24 hours/7 days a week. However, Rob Bell wants to communicate with the Twitter generation, so he “tweets” (sends a message to his subscribers every day). This is Rob Bell’s “tweet” on the essential message of the Gospel: *The gospel is the counterintuitive, joyous, exuberant news that Jesus has brought the unending, limitless, stunning love of God to even us.* Let me read it again: *The gospel is the counterintuitive, joyous, exuberant news that Jesus has brought the unending, limitless, stunning love of God to even us.*

One of my all time favorite movies is *The Shawshank Redemption*. In it, Morgan Freeman plays a character named “Red” who has spent his prime wasting away in prison because of a reckless act of violence he committed as a teenager. After 40 years of incarceration, he finally receives his release to enjoy the freedom for which he's longed.

However, he can't free himself from the habit of asking for permission each time he wishes to use the men's room. He's become "institutionalized." This newfound life scares him,

because he's grown accustomed to the structure behind bars. Imprisonment had become safe for him. He didn't have to exercise his own decision-making. Someone else did the thinking for him, and now, on the outside, he faces a prospect more daunting and terrifying than incarceration: freedom.

Red confesses that he contemplates various ways to break his parole and return to the security of his prison cell. He sums up his dilemma in one line: "It is a terrible thing to live in fear."

People caught up in shame are no different than Red. They are scared to death of the freedom God's mercy brings. Many find it much easier to retreat to our emotional and spiritual prison cells of dos and don'ts, of black and white categories. But the church should not protect people by erecting legalistic walls. Instead it can release people by offering the mercy of God and equipping them to discern godly choices on their own. (Source: *Graham Johnston, Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First Century Listeners (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), pp. 126-27*)

Conclusion

Paul's advice to Timothy teaches us two important lessons. First, there is a proper use for the Law of God, and that use is to express the love of God and to provide a way to live lives that are full and free. Second, there is an antidote to shame. It is the mercy of God through offered us in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.