

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
Sunday, Oct. 3, 2010

2 Timothy 1:1–14

WHY COME TO CHURCH? IV

Syl Shannon was the perfect one to read this message from Paul to Timothy: the elder speaking to the younger. I have to look far and wide to find folks older than me still. So it's good for Syl to be here to give us the rich sense of Paul's words to Timothy. They are like the final instructions from a hero—a person who knows and loves Timothy, who knows and loves his family and has known them for years—aren't they?

Paul reminds Timothy of who he is. He is a Jewish Christian, and that will bring him certain problems. But he also reminds Timothy that he has the very best in mentors. He only needs to look to his own family—to his grandmother and his mother. In Jewish tradition, you receive your inclusion into the people of God through your mother's family, and Eunice and Lois were faithful disciples long before Timothy.

One of the most unmistakable parts of being in this family—this new creation, the church made up of Jews and gentiles, people who no longer have any barriers between them—and the key characteristic of this, is that if you are Jewish you have an indelible identity. I know that every college now wants to claim that they are a people. But Hokie nation just doesn't quite measure up to being included in what it means to be part of God's family. It's important, no question. And the further south you go it becomes more important, but still it's just not the same thing.

If you are Jewish, you are essentially part of one another. You are knit together in a faith that makes you a called people. Families experience life together, and they go through rough times together. I believe we are most aware of our family connections in the church during times when we suffer together, when we face disappointment as one family, when we grieve together. And Paul reminds us today it is in these times that we value one another the most. We are in essence big brothers and little sisters to one another. We are adoring younger siblings who follow older siblings everywhere they go. We are the wise older sister who encourages us to act responsibly. And one reason we come to church is to both give and receive our mentors. You see, we learn character, values—the essence of the faith—from one another.

I'm the youngest member of a family of five siblings. At times, I felt like I was watching my family because I was so far removed by age. I'm actually closer in age to my oldest sister's first child than I am to any sibling in my family. I can remember one fall day watching my father complete a project in the front yard. He was a master carpenter, but also he was something of a mason in his own right. He had just built a rock wall around a flower bed. As he was cleaning up around the flower bed, he turned to my two sisters who were closest to me in age and he said, "You cannot walk on this wall at least until tomorrow. If you walk on this wall, you'll undo everything I've just accomplished." And then he went inside.

The younger of the two girls, Sandra, promptly mounted up and did her balancing act on the stone wall. Almost immediately you could hear the screen door that led into the kitchen slam, and my father coming out and proceeding with the traditional punishment in our family. And after all the commotion was over, Sandra turned to Diane, her older sister, and asked, “Why didn’t you come with me?” And Diane said, “I couldn’t. I’m your mentor.” (I’ve always wondered if she couldn’t see Dad looking out the kitchen window.)

We mentor one another in church as well. Ask yourself if other people duplicated your language, your tone of voice with one another, or if other people treated parts of this family the way you treat people, what would your message be? Paul says to Timothy, we have been given a treasure, a precious gift, this life together. A life marked by never-ending grace, a life which is stronger than death, a life which is sure and certain because it is guaranteed in the resurrection of Jesus, a life marked by peace which goes beyond every circumstance: prison, rejection, pain and hurt, and (Paul would say in other parts of Timothy) even our greatest accomplishments.

So let’s remember as we wrap up this month of Sundays on why we come to church and as we wrap up our time in Timothy, that we come to church so we can learn how to love, how to forgive, and how to appreciate one another. And maybe more importantly, we come to church so that we can mentor those younger than us in those same characteristics. Isn’t it true what we want for our children, more than anything else, is to learn to love well, to be forgiving? And, is there any greater compliment to us than when someone recognizes the uniqueness of our children and appreciates them and compliments them?

I can remember one Sunday—it happened to be the week of the birthday of our oldest child, Will. He came home from Sunday School, and he said somebody had seen in the TEMPO that it was his birthday and said “Happy Birthday” to him. He said it had never happened before. And this kid’s been coming to church every Sunday his whole life.

We come to church to learn the importance of being demonstrative in our love for one another. We come to church because we all know we fail. We all know we forget one another. We all know we neglect to be the very best member of this family we can be. And we come to church because, as we said last week, we must embrace compassion as if it is the very essence of what we are because without compassion, we are as far from God as we can take ourselves.

I know many of you have been anxious to tell me what you did with the dollar you received last week. And I’ve had some good stories—some varied stories. I have to confess, I suppose someone who’s as invested in the ministry that we share here as anyone is my wife. She comes every week and she really tries to take something away from the sermon. She told me that this week she kept her dollar in her pocket, and every time she put her hand in her pocket that dollar was like a token—it reminded her that she had an opportunity to be compassionate, to be generous with someone else. So she expended much more than the dollar over the week, but its value is in being a reminder of all the opportunities that we overlook, that we take for granted, to simply show compassion.

Yes, generous compassion is essential. But we also learn that we cannot do this alone. My favorite thing to say about scripture and the story of scripture is that not once does God ever call anyone into relationship and say, "OK, I'd like you to go out in the desert and be a hermit. Do this all by yourself. Now that I've saved you, we're going to keep you safe. We're going to send you away from all people." God never says that. God always calls us into community. And we learn to make progress on our journey of faith because we are taking turns being mentors and having others mentor us. And life is greater, it's broader, it's more meaningful because as we accept that instruction, we reflect the image of Christ, as we rededicate ourselves to life together.

Paul says at the end of 1st Timothy, we take hold of life that really is life. If I could paraphrase, maybe I would say that life as God always intended takes hold of us. We are about to share a time of invitation and of dedication. Often, Melvin Goodwyn's music selections for the service do a better job of illustrating the passage than the sermon, and this is one of those times. I pray that you will hear and feel God's tug as you read the words of the Offertory Anthem. Would that we could always have the words of our anthems in the bulletin, but we have them here today as a gift. So let us allow them to minister to us as we worship the Lord. Amen.

OFFERTORY ANTHEM

All Thy Gifts of Love
Sanctuary Choir

David L. Brunner
v.1: Diocese of Huron
vs.2-4: David Brunner

*For food in a world where many walk in hunger,
For peace in a world where many walk in fear,
For friends in a world where many walk alone,
We give you thanks, O God.*

*For health in a world where many walk in sickness,
For joy in a world where many walk in grief,
For friends in a world where many walk alone,
We give you thanks, O God.*

*For love in a world where many walk in anger,
Light in a world where many walk in darkness,
Friends in a world where many walk alone,
We give you thanks, O God.*

*For these and all the many things unspoken,
For gifts unknown or, as of yet unseen.
For these and all thy gifts of love,
We give thee thanks, O God.*