

SERMON: “Proclaim the Message...with the Utmost Patience in Teaching”

September 27, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: By the light of your Spirit, O God, illumine the word written that it may become for us the living word of our living Lord, forming and reforming us for the work to which you call us as fellow stewards of the gospel of grace; through Christ the Word made flesh. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 40:6-10

Epistle Lesson: 2 Timothy 3:10-4:6

You have called **Craig Foster** to be your **Associate Pastor for Education and Discipleship**, and this morning a commission from Foothills Presbytery will install him in that position. As we prepare to do so, I want us to reflect on the work to which you have called Craig and on the ministry we share together. We shall do so in light of the words you heard a moment ago from Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy.

But first, let me congratulate you on your wisdom in calling Craig as your **Associate Pastor for Education and Discipleship**, and on your good fortune in having him accept your call. As our granddaughter likes to say, **“Good job!”** I am convinced that Craig brings just the right gifts, the right training and temperament and experience, to do well the work to which he has been called by God and through the voice and vote of this congregation. I would also commend you for the wisdom of combining **education and discipleship** in his job description. Every time you see his full title, **Associate Pastor for Education and Discipleship** you are reminded that education in the church is not merely for the sake of acquiring *information* about the life of faith. It is for the *formation and the re-formation* of disciples of Jesus Christ, **“equipped for every good work.”**

Now, on to our text, which will serve as the basis both for this sermon and for the charge to Craig that I will offer later in the service. The letter to Timothy from which we read this morning is one of what are called the “Pastoral Epistles.” They are called **pastoral epistles** because they are addressed not just to congregations, but to pastors charged with the care of those congregations. The fact that these letters were originally directed to Paul’s colleagues in ministry, Timothy and Titus, does not mean that the letters are intended for pastors only. The issues addressed in the letters are of concern to all who share in the life and leadership of the church of Jesus Christ, then and now.

Paul’s charge to his young protégé Timothy revolves around his admonition to **“proclaim the message; be persistent (in doing so) whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching.”**

But before we consider that charge itself, look at the context in which it is set. Both before and after Paul charges Timothy to “proclaim the message...with the utmost patience in teaching,” he reminds Timothy of the challenging situation in which the charge is to be lived out. See if any of what he says sounds familiar.

First, Paul reminds Timothy that ministry is challenging. “Indeed,” he says, **“all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”** Ministry is challenging, then and now. Old heresies never seem to go away for long. Old conflicts continue to bubble up in the church. And the deeper the ideological divisions in our own society become, the more those same divisions threaten to tear apart the church.

No one should so naïve as to be surprised that there is conflict in the church. What else would you expect from a bunch of “recovering sinners” like us? Conflict has marked the life of the church from the very beginning, as Paul’s letters to the fractious church in Corinth make clear. The church and its ministry have never been immune from the conflicts that rage, both within the church itself, and in it the wider community and world.

That is one of the reasons why ministers need to read church history and the classic Christian theologians across the centuries—in order to be saved from the nonsense of thinking that the conflicts and challenges the church faces today are unique.

In his insightful little book, *Letters to New Pastors*, Michael Jenkins tells of reading a book on pastoral ministry in which the author whined that some particular crisis today “was the greatest the church had ever faced.” Jenkins says he can’t remember what the particular crisis was that the author was so concerned about—just that he thought it was the worst ever—to which he responds,

“Not only is this inaccurate bunk, it whips up anxiety about the state of the church, and anxiety is the worst enemy of wisdom....Anxious people tend not to make good decisions; they just make desperate choices.”

Jenkins goes on to say,

“The voices of Basil, Chrysostom, Gregory, Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many, many others give me perspective. They remind me that the church is far larger and grander and deeper and more extensive than my meager experience of God.”¹

One of the gifts that Craig brings to his ministry among you as Associate Pastor for Education and Discipleship is his knowledge of church history and his readings in the early Church Fathers. Craig’s grounding in the wider, deeper, longer traditions of the church will serve him, and you, well as you deal with the challenges of ministry in a way that is not driven by excessive anxiety. Of course, there is much to be concerned about in the church and our society. But that has always been the case. Across the centuries the living Lord continues to say to his anxious people, **“Do not be afraid, I am with you, always.”**

So **“proclaim the message...!”** Give voice to the good news that overcomes our anxieties, however threatening they may be. Preach the Word, Teach the faith, Embody the Gospel... whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. Indeed, writes Paul,

“the time is coming 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 and wander away into myths.”

Sound familiar? That is about as apt a description of our time theologically as you are likely to find. **“Itching ears,”** what a great phrase! Ears “itching” to hear “the latest thing,” especially if it raises doubts about the whole Christian enterprise. That’s what sells today. How else can you account for the phenomenal market not only for novels like Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, but for supposedly “more scholarly” works of ones like Bishop Spong, and John Dominic Crossan and the “Jesus Seminar,” not to mention the almost laughably superficial rants of the “new atheists,” like Christopher Hitchens, who seems to assume that anger is an intellectual virtue.

¹ Michael Jenkins, *Letters to New Pastors* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006) p. 64.

In a time of “itching ears,” you can give thanks to God every day that you have a pastoral staff that are well-grounded in the deep wisdom of the church—a wisdom rooted, not in intellectual cleverness, but in the **“scriptures...inspired by God,”** which are **“useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,”** in order to **“instruct you for salvation,”** and so that this great congregation may be well **“equipped for every good work.”**

In a wonderfully challenging time like this, you and I have the opportunity and the charge to proclaim the message of God’s grace and truth in a fresh, intellectually honest way. We are called to proclaim it vigorously and persistently, whether it is eagerly received, or politely ignored, or actively resisted. We to proclaim the word to those who have never heard it, and to those who have heard only such a distorted or truncated version of the gospel that they have rejected it prematurely, and to those who have turned from listening, assuming that all preachers are con-artists who pretty much sound alike.

In a time of “itching ears,” when it is easy for people to accumulate for themselves those who speak or write merely what they want to hear in order to be confirmed in their own disbelief, we are given the wonderful opportunity in the providence of God to preach, to teach, to embody in every aspect of the life of the church **“sound doctrine.”** Not just interesting opinions, not just the latest spiritual fad, but the mature, well-tested wisdom of the church across the ages—**“sound doctrine.”** Preach it, teach it, embody the word and wisdom of God, even, or especially, when it meets the scorn of the “self-enlightened” ones, who stumble about in their own well-loved darkness.

In the face of any and all persecution, in a time when people are tempted to **“turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths,”** Paul encourages his young colleague and protégé Timothy to **“proclaim the message”** rooted in the scriptures inspired by God, and to do so patiently and persistently. **“Convince, rebuke, and encourage,”** he says, **“with the utmost patience in teaching.”**

Ministry in general, and the teaching ministry in particular, is not for the impatient, those who expect quick results and are easily discouraged. The German sociologist Max Weber once called politics **“the slow boring of hard boards.”** I love that image. It is even truer for ministry. Good faithful pastoral ministry is always **“the slow boring of hard boards,”** in season and out of season.

Get impatient for the results *you* want, get anxious to change people and structures to fit *your* vision of how they ought to be, and the resistance, if not the out-right persecution that comes your way, is well-deserved. Ministry is the “slow boring of hard boards.” It is a marathon, not a sprint. Quick “fixes” in ministry may lead to temporary “spiritual highs,” but they nearly always result in bad hang-overs. With the **“utmost patience,”** preach the Word, teach the faith, embody the life of active discipleship... day after day, year after year, generation after generation. And leave the harvest in the hands of the Lord of covenant faithfulness, who has promised to bring to completion the good work that God has begun among us.

Ministry is challenging—always has been, always will be. We dare not expect anything less. A good friend of mine, Tom Currie at Union Seminary in Charlotte, writes of what he calls “the splendid embarrassment of ministry.” Tom says, “There is nothing more intellectually challenging, psychologically demanding, physically exhausting, and theologically satisfying than ministry. It is hard. It is full of disappointments and griefs and even failures. It takes courage and

hope. And often simple, stupid persistence.” “A great deal of ministry,” he says, “more than most ministers would like to admit, is about showing up and showing up on time.”

The “splendid embarrassment” of ministry of which he speaks is this, that none of us is ever any where near adequate for the work to which we have been called by God, and yet God uses us anyway and does through us more than we could ever ask or imagine. The “splendid embarrassment of ministry” is not a final matter of our own inadequacies, however embarrassing they may be, but of the overwhelming riches of God’s grace so freely lavished upon the likes of us.

The challenges of ministry come all wrapped up in the incredible joy of doing what God has called and equipped us to do—never alone, but always in partnership with the colleagues and congregations God gives us with whom to think and pray and study and serve together in his name and to his glory. All toward the end, the goal, that one day we, too, may say with the psalmist, not as a boast, but as an offering of our whole lives and ministries to God,

“I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation...

I have not restrained my lips, O Lord... I have not concealed thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness from the great congregation. Do not thou, O Lord, withhold thy mercy from me; let thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness ever preserve me.” (RSV)

“Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching...as you “carry out your ministry fully.” In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Preached at First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg, SC, on the occasion of the installation of the Rev. L. Craig Foster as Associate Pastor for Christian Education and Discipleship.