

Testimony!

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1 Timothy 1:12-17

“But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.”

Where are you going? Do you have any idea? What will it be like when you get there? Where are you going, do you have any idea? I had a piano teacher who used to say again and again that if I did not set any goals, if I did not know where it was that I wanted to end up, then I would not know how to get there or even if I was progressing or even how to get there. How fast did I want to be able to play my scales, how much did I want to have memorized, how many pieces did I want to learn? “Where are you going?” he would ask, “and how are you going to get there?” Today we read from what is known as a “pastoral epistle.” It is one of a number of letters that is written to a learning growing, and struggling church. The author of the letter is offering advice as any teacher would offer advice to a student; this is the advice of a missionary to a young leader or and young community. Today we read a letter that may or may not have been written by Paul (it probably wasn’t) to a new church that is a part of a new movement. It is a church that is trying to understand its identity in a religion as the religion itself is still taking shape. It is a church that is asking, who are we and where are we going.

Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? Have you ever found yourself asking where it is you are going? You stop, you look around, and you wonder where you are and where you are headed. You feel lost, you feel a lack of focus, and you don’t know which way to turn and walk, because you don’t know where it is you want to end up.

As a church, there is a collective feeling of being lost. As a pastor I often have this feeling of being lost, not knowing where I am going, where we should be going, and how we want to end. Where are we going? Are we going to be a church that caters to the young adults, the baby boomers, or a different age bracket? Where are we going? Are we going to have a contemporary worship style or a classical worship style? Where are we going, do we have any idea? And what will it be like when we get there?

If we don’t know where we are going, then how will we know when we get there? The wisdom of my piano teacher rings true. With misdirection, lack of direction, or no direction we could end up anywhere. In the TV show, *The Simpson’s* Homer was sent off to be a Christian missionary without any instruction or preparation. He had no idea where to go with the people, what direction head, or even what his purpose was on the island. He took the little bit he knew about Christianity and the large amount that he knew about society and went in a direction. The end result was that Homer introduced controlled gambling, casinos, and macaroni salad to the indigenous people. Was that where he was “supposed” to go? Was it where Homer initially intended to go?

When we have no focus, no direction the same could happen to us. We become taken up by movements, whims, and fads. We lack focus, direction and purpose. We get caught up in our needs, in our worldly pursuits, in our temptations. So we purchase, buy, and live well, and then live better. Look at credit card debt – no one plans on going into debt, but somehow many people find themselves there. Lack of direction, lack of focus, and lack of purpose with the credit card and with our lives leads to living by the dictates of the world.

The same happens with churches. Isn't it ironic that in Rick Warren's work *The Purpose Driven Church*, which comes from Warren's experience of growing a large, mega-church, that Warren suggests the church meet the "felt needs" of the people. Warren does argue that the church must be focused on offering the people Jesus Christ, but there is such a risk of becoming lost in the "felt needs," that the church can become a place where people can have their cars repaired, drink good coffee, be entrained, and feel good about the feeling they are having while praising Jesus. So many churches have become places where people are served, not where people can go to serve. So many churches have become places where individuals can feel good about themselves, not where people can care are each other. The boundaries that set apart Christianity's high standard of the church community and the world's individualistic standard (where the most important unit is the individual) of community were lost, because there is not a clear focus on where they were going (or they were focused on growing). Like a herd of sheep, we are so easily led astray to meet our "felt need" dictated by the world and the world tells us we need to grow, so that is where we go. We are in the woods, we want to pick a direction, we see many paths, and in choosing one, do we not often chose the one that is more trod? Is that not the path that beckons most?

Yet this was occurring with Timothy's church as well. It was struggling, it wanted to have a clear idea of direction and focus, but was running the risk of going the wrong direction. Outside influences, outside ideas, outside temptations were luring the church toward one heresy or another. Heresies that seemed attractive in the eyes of the world were tempting the sheep, and maybe could be justified in the church by one or two crafty theologians. One could almost imagine Timothy, the young leader, the young pastor sitting and listening to all of these ideas pulling him intellectually, theologically, and mentally in all directions. Did he not feel like the hiker at this moment, confronted with many different paths, many different directions, and many different possibilities? Why not chose that one that has been tried and true by the world, the one that leads to the most success? At least then he would know where he was going, and he would be seen as great in the world. After all, if you don't know where you are going, how will you know when you get there, and the world offers an end result that is tempting.

But words of reason and wisdom hound us, don't they?

Often, those who have gone before us can give us an idea of where it is we need to go. Oh we see the rolling eyes of our children when we offer advice from our own experience. We hear exasperated sighs when we tell of how it was when we were growing up, but there still is some wisdom that comes from our past. The stories we tell based on our own experiences offer advice for those beginning school, jobs, and other major aspects in our lives. At a bachelor party or a wedding shower is it not a part of the ritual for those who have already run the gauntlet to offer advice based on their own experience. It is a kind of storytelling that I am talking about. Yet it goes further than base advice. We are looking for more than individual experiences, more than whimsical anecdotes and pithy sayings. Instead we are looking for the grand story, the meta-narrative, the story that connects to the truths of our collective lives and experiences. A good example is the indigenous stories of the Native Americans. These are stories that tell the origin of the rain, and explain the seasons for planting and harvesting. For their own respective tribes, their stories point to a truth in an experience, it points to a collecting meaning that guides and delivers the people in basic life challenges and experiences. Or another example is the Italian dance, the Tarantella. It is said to be the dance that people would partake when they had been

bitten by a tarantula, so that they could dance the evil spirits out. Whether that was the case, or the individual was sweating out the venom, the story connected to a universal experience of the Italian people. When you get bitten by a spider, dance (because it may be your last dance).

The theologian, and one of my own teachers, Terrence Tilley speaks of a grammar of a tradition and a practice of a tradition. The Tarantella is a way we talk about curing ourselves of a spiders bite, the dance is the practice of that tradition. The stories connect to values and cultural identity. The Catholic immigrant community in America of the 1900s passed on stories of Saint Jude (the patron saint of lost things and hopeless causes) intervening on one woman's behalf or another. Through these stories the cult of Saint Jude grew, but even more, a profound strength and hope was found in the destitute situations of many immigrant families. The grammar of a tradition (prayers to Saint Jude) and the practice of a tradition point towards a greater truth that can be found within a culture. This goes for denominations, and churches as well as families and cultures.

Think about the implication of passing on the stories of your past in order to pass on lessons and values. Do you think that the neglect of one's cultural heritage in an effort to achieve the homogenization of today's society, in an effort to mainstream American culture will have a positive result? When we forget our culture, the stories and traditions, we all end up living in boxes, pretty boxes made out of ticky-tacky. We lose our focus, our direction, our sense of where we are going. And that becomes boring, dull, and depressing. We are given a map by those who have gone before us, offering us a sense of which way to go, how to get there, and even where it is we are going. Those who have gone before us can give us an idea of where it is we need to go.

But we do need to be careful that we follow those who have taken our own path, and not stray to others. We need to be true to our story. In the movie "Soul Man" a white law student changes his pigment so that he would look black, and in doing so, he begins to understand a bit of the black culture. But he can never fully understand many of the nuances, because it is not the story that he was brought up with, it is not who he is, and the experience of the black people did not speak in the same way to his own experiences. We need a map to give us a specific direction, but we need to be shown which paths to take in our journey. Timothy was offered a number of different ways to go, he was offered a number of different nuanced understandings of what it meant to be a Christian community, but they led in different directions, pointing different ways. Our story, as Christians, is different than the story of the rest of the world, and in part this is what the author of the letter is offering to Timothy – a story of Christ transforming one's life. In that story we find the hope that Christ is present, available, and open to all people regardless of one's sin. In that story we find the hope that salvation is offered to all sinners, all sinners regardless who you are. In that testimony, we are offered the hope that God's mercy is available and offered to all people in the world, again and again. In this, in our great Christian story we hear and learn what Tilley calls the "grammar" of our tradition. Words like salvation, redemption, sanctification, reconciliation, grace, peace, love, hope, life, forgiveness – all of these terms mean something specific in the Christian story, different that what the outside world may understand. The definitions and understandings are strong and firm unlike the whims and fads of the outside world. And our understanding, our grammar does not begin and end with the testimony found in the letter to Timothy. No, we have a great cloud of witnesses behind us, offering us their story, their testimony and their focus and direction. From the disciples themselves to Augustine's great conversion in the garden, to the living testimony of the martyrs like Perpetua, and Polycarp. We have a testimony! From the theological brilliance of Thomas Aquinas, and Anselm of Canterbury to the mystical visions of Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross – we have a testimony! From

the bite and spit of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli to the courage, strength and fortitude of John Calvin and John Wesley – we have a testimony! In the Baptists, we have the bravery of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, to John Bunyan and Roger Williams. The leadership of John Clarke, Andrew Fuller and William Carey. The courage Judson and Rice, Leland and Backus – we have a testimony! From our preachers like Billy Graham to Charles Spurgeon to Martin Luther King Jr., we have a testimony! From our own parents, grandparents, great-grandparents to each one of you here in the pews – we have a testimony!

In all of these examples we find a testimony of faith. In all of these we gain a language of what it means to be a Christian and a practice of how to be Christian. They help us, and show us so that we can carefully take the path that those before us have taken.

When we do hear and integrate the story, we must remember that we are still writing our own story. This is where the bold, the brave and the risky action will take place. We are not Paul, and Paul's testimony is not our own. Yes, it informs us, it guides us, it helps us understand what it means to be a Christian, but it ultimately is not our own testimony. Timothy must move forward with the guidance offered by Paul's testimony, returning to the hope and the truth that Paul offered in his story, and then making that a part of his own story. We must do the same; we must take the story and make it our own. We hear how Christ has effected the lives of many, many individuals, how has Christ effected your life? We hear how individuals have found peace and salvation through the cross, what is that peace and salvation for you? We have been given a map, and shown which path to take, but there is no telling if the terrain will be the same as the first person who walked this path. Questions that have been asked in the past, and we can find examples in our past – testimony in our friends – hope in our community. This is what Tilley calls inventing our own tradition – when we go forward rooted in the tradition that we have been given. When Martin Luther King, Jr. studied the non-violent methods of Gandhi and then applied them to his own situation, he was learning the story of a specific type of resistance, and then applying it to his own situation. The risk is that something new will be happening, something fresh will be occurring and we just don't know what that will be, what exactly it will look like, but we are given direction and focus. When we hear and integrate our story, we then begin to write our own story.

So with our tradition behind us, our story of Christianity fresh in our minds, and leading us, let us go forward and continue to write our own story. Today is a significant day, for today I am being formally installed as the minister of this church – of your church – of your community. Where do you want to go, and will you know when you get there? What kind of community are we called to be, what should it look like, and how can we be a positive part in the process? Turn to your sister churches and ask them to testify – ask for a testimony of hope. Look to our past, our heritage and ask for a testimony, ask for some hope. I look to the Holy Scriptures for the testimony of who we are called to be as a community, loving, caring, humble, honest, etc. And I hold up the grace of Jesus Christ as I find it in the Holy Scriptures for the hope that we can and will one day be that community. So let's go and find our testimony, let's work towards the day when we as a church can stand up and testify for the sake of other churches. Lets be a place where people can share their experiences of Christ's grace, and people can experience Christ's grace. Steeped in our story, true to our heritage, and always ready to offer a testimony let us together become the church that we have been called by God to be.

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