

Text: I Timothy 1: 1-2, 12-17
Title: A Place to Begin
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I've started to write the same book – twice.

On two separate occasions I started to write a series of letters to my children in the hopes that I might communicate something of what I've longed for and learned. I took old sermons and tried to rewrite them with all the humor and heart I could muster....

I know. Sounds horrible. Imagine getting a bunch of warmed-over sermons from your dad. Fortunately, both attempts died on my desk.

But, I'm not alone. There is a long tradition of the weathered and the weary trying to impart wisdom to the young. Google "Letters to a young..." and a library pops up: Letters to a Young Poet, Letters to a Young Catholic, Letters to a Young Therapist, Letters to Young Doubter, Letters to a Young Muslim, Letters to a Young Pharmacist, Letters to a Young Calvinist.... It goes on. You get the idea.

But, there is something human, vulnerable and loving in this literary genre. Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote a long letter to his fifteen-year-old son entitled "Between the World and Me." It became a best seller and in it he tries to pass along what he knows to be true. Like these few lines:

Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – it is heritage. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor – it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against their own interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems or old negro spirituals...

What would you write to those whom you love?

What would you want them to know?

What values or qualities of life would you hope they honored?

Amidst the relentless clatter of text messages, social media posts, e-mail, podcasts, Netflix, talk radio, and fifty-seven channels with nothing on, what would you slowly and carefully write about what you've loved and learned and longed for?

One way to read Paul's letters to Timothy is as letters to a young Christian. They're what Paul wanted to communicate to one whom he loved.

Consider.... Timothy was a bi-racial kid. In a world that celebrated tribalism, or ethnic purity, he was the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father. Scripture notes that his

mother and grandmother became Christ-followers and that Timothy followed suit – legend has it as a teenager. He lived in Galatia (what is modern day Turkey) and the church leaders there thought highly of him; Paul was so impressed that he wanted Timothy as a traveling partner.

Acts 16 reads that Timothy is circumcised by Paul “because of the Jews who lived in the area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.” Clearly they didn’t have the whole circumcision thing worked out just yet....

But soon Timothy is traveling with Paul as a sort of envoy of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. And Paul comes to speak of Timothy as “my son whom I love,” entrusting him with difficult situations and leaving him behind or sending him ahead to carry out crucial work.

So, dear friends, we can read these letters as truth-telling and practical instruction between an older man and his younger “son.” And, therefore, they often have a personal, earnest, quality. Like our text this morning....

Paul doesn’t offer here a polished philosophical position, or an exhortation in ethics, or a systematic theology. He offers his own story and his experience with Jesus Christ.

Frederick Buechner writes:

At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography. Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Tillich, working out their systems in their own ways and in their own language, are all telling us the stories of their lives, and if you press them far enough, even at their most cerebral and forbidding, you find an experience of flesh and blood, a human face smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before something that happened once.

The same is true for Paul.

If you peel back Paul’s letters, if you strip away the theology and the doxology, if you get underneath all the religious rhetoric you’ll find the story of an angry arrogant man – who was sure he was right – being struck down and shattered on the road to Damascus. The rest is all coming to grips with the grace that upended his life.

And that’s where Paul begins.

He starts with his own experience, stacking up descriptors in which he is the acting agent. He’s “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man a violence.” He acted in “ignorance and unbelief,” “the worst of sinners.” He counts himself a wretch....

And in doing so he sets in motion a long line of conversion stories that take the same tact. For example, take the slave trader John Newton.

In 1748 while on a slave ship during a dangerous storm Newton had a conversion experience. But, he didn’t quit trafficking in human lives until his health forced

him to retire 6 years later. Years and years after that, in reflecting on his life, his language mirrors Paul's. Listen to how Newton puts it:

I should have quitted it sooner, had I considered it, as I now do, to be unlawful and wrong. But I never had a scruple upon this head at the time; nor was such a thought once suggested to me, by any friend. What I did, I did ignorantly; considering it as the line of life which Divine Providence had allotted me.... but the good providence of God, without my expectation and almost against my will, delivered me from those scenes of wickedness and woe...

Almost 20 years later John Newton turned that experience into a song entitled, "Faith's Review and Expectation." You might be more familiar with its common name, "Amazing Grace."

The point is that John Newton and Paul and countless others tell the story of acting against the will of God only to be the recipients of an amazing grace that turned them around and reordered their lives. But our text includes a subtle little nuance to that story....

Paul describes an insolent, raging, ruthless, unforgivable existence, and then in stark startling contrast he says literally,

mercy was had on me...

Mercy was had on me...

There is a passive quality to the sentence structure.
Mercy wasn't something that he earned or grasped.
Mercy wasn't something that he deserved or that he did right.
Mercy wasn't something that he mustered or managed.
Mercy wasn't something that he believed.
Mercy was done unto him.

Mercy was had on me...

The word has the sense of extending help to those in misery. Not just as a matter of legal transaction, or economic exchange, or as the outcome of a system, but there is some manner of tender affection, some loving kindness, some commiserating, some motion of the heart.
Mercy comes from the heart of God.

So, Paul writes to Timothy, the son whom he loves, that God is merciful.

It's his essential truth. It's where he begins. The initiative is God's.
The activity is God's. God alone pours out grace and love and faith – to overflowing. And, the language here has the sense of an abundance surpassing capacity....

Thanks be to God.

Therefore, Paul moves from autobiography to proclamation:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners....

Now. Very few of us have conversion experiences as clear and dramatic as Paul or John Newton. Few of us are struck down on the road to Damascus to Detroit. Few of us go from persecutor of Christ to prisoner of Christ.

For most of us this news is just part of the tangled mess we weave together to make up our lives. It is part of our cultural currency all wrapped up in consumerism and middle-class niceties. And many of us can't imagine our lives without all of this religious apparatus. It's hard to place ourselves in stark defiant juxtaposition to God. Many of us better know indifference, question, boredom, guilt, worry....

But, be that as it may, the subtle little nuance in our text is true for us as well. Mercy was had on us. Mercy was had on you. And, there is nothing that we can add to or take away from God's mercy expressed in Christ Jesus. Ours is simply to live in response....

Dear friends, what would you write?

What would write to those that love you about what finally matters?

Where would you begin?

When I was in my early twenties, working as the live-in manager for a house of homeless men in Roseland, my parents came to visit for a weekend. Over pie I rambled on about why when I was dating somebody was I always looking over her shoulder for somebody else, and why did I always procrastinate, and why did money go through my hands like water, and why was I such a lazy student, and why was I wrestling drunk homeless guys to bed.

I don't know remember what they said, but a week later I got a letter from my father. I don't have much from him: a few pictures, a journal, and notes from a couple lectures. And I've used these few lines in a previous sermon. But, listen to these few lines in a letter from a father to a son.

... My sense of what it means to be a Christian seems to grow simpler all the time – what matters is God's way of overcoming evil; baptism, the Lord's supper, congregational fellowship, Bible study, have to relate to that. Overcoming evil, meeting abundant sin with more abundant grace is what the cross of Christ is all about. As the basis of our confidence in God's love for us and as the pattern for our lives in his will, it is what finally matters in the Christian life.

Meeting abundant sin with more abundant grace.

That's a place where we can begin.

Thank be to God. Amen.