

Text: 2 Timothy 1: 1-14
Title: Dancing Icons
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Paul writes a letter to Timothy to offer encouragement and instruction and address dissension and divisions in the church. He thinks of young Timothy as the son whom he loves and he writes with the warmth and wisdom of a seasoned mentor. And that letter is full of insight and practical application and directions for difficult situations. And....

And there's no indication that it helped. There's no indication that it made matters any better. In fact, things seemed to get worse.

When Paul writes to Timothy a second time he's under house arrest, the church has continued to splinter, and false teaching has persisted. There's mention of tears and rancor and being deserted and harm being done and persecution. And Paul wants Timothy to rekindle his fire for God.

So, dear friends, if you've ever felt discouraged,
if you've ever felt flat,
if you've ever been burned out and beat down,
if you've been in a situation that was recalcitrant and fraught with conflict,
if you've ever lost your way and wondered about your call,
then welcome to the club.
You're not alone.
You've got Paul and Timothy as partners.

Paul second letter to Timothy picks up where the first letter left off not because great progress has been, and the women are keeping silent, and these are the next steps to take, but because they are still stuck in the muck and mire of being human.

When my kids were struggling, as some do, with place and purpose and relationships and finances, etcetera, I did my best to listen and encourage and offer direction. As it turns out my input was not always well received. Sometimes feelings were bruised or buried and communication got complicated. In response I took to writing letters; I have a hard drive full of epistles to my son and daughter. I labored for hours over every turn of phrase, wrenching words out of my heart to offer whatever hard-earned wisdom I've won. Something about writing felt safer; my frustrations wouldn't overwhelm and my words wouldn't run away with me and cause unintentional hurt. I wanted to be helpful and get it right....

And most often my letters landed with an empty thud. Situations didn't change, more words don't always help, and my best efforts at communication proved, at the time, to be ineffectual.

Therefore, I have some sympathy for Paul. His hopes for the early church kept running into the reality of human frailty and fallenness. He may well have felt like his letters landed with an empty thud. Situations didn't change, more words don't always help, and at the time he may

have felt ineffectual. All of that is to recognize that Paul's second letter to Timothy has a certain urgency and intimacy. This letter is not written from an ivory tower but a place of deep pathos and longing.

And, I think it's worth noting that Paul calls on Timothy to "fan into flame" the gift of God. There is an implicit recognition that the spiritual life rises and falls, blazes and burns out. But, Paul's appeal to Timothy is linked to how he came to faith. And that's a refreshing and surprising turn. In the middle of lots of religious rhetoric there is a remarkable little window.

Consider....

When Paul writes to his spiritual son he references the faith of his own forefathers and the faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother. He writes about faith being transmitted through people and passed down through generations.

In Paul's words:

I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

What's refreshing, surprising, and remarkable about that?

Timothy was from Lystra, in what is now Turkey. When Paul and Barnabas visited there and healed a lame man the people thought them Greek gods. So, Gentile or Greek city. Lois, the grandmother, was a Jew probably married to a Greek. Her daughter, Eunice has a Greek name, a derivative of the name Nike, the goddess of victory. And, Eunice, while a Jew and a follower of Jesus, was also married to a Greek man. There is no mention of his faith, but we know that Timothy wasn't uncircumcised. (Until Paul did it later to assuage the Jews....)

In encouraging Timothy to rekindle his faith Paul references two cross cultural marrying women, who came to faith in Christ, and passed that faith along to their son and grandson, whose faith is described as authentic, unfeigned, and without hypocrisy.

And! Most of the time when Paul writes about his life before being assaulted by Christ on the road to Damascus he writes about it with disdain or dismissal, but here there is a sense of gratitude for the faith of his Jewish forefathers who sought after and served God.

Paul sees his faith in Christ as an extension, or a completion of the faith of his heritage. It is part of the same fabric, part of the same unfolding. And that, dear friends, is refreshing, surprising, and remarkable....

How is faith transmitted?

Through real people,
through women who marry outside the fold,
through Jewish ancestors,
through mothers and grandmothers,

through friendships between men,
through Lois and Eunice and Paul and Timothy and....

How did you come to faith?

How was faith transmitted to you?

My guess is that no matter the shape of your faith, no matter how constant or elusive, no matter how deep or derivative, there is a person (or persons) behind it. There is someone encouraging, embodying, listening, praying, loving....

And if this sermon has any practical application may it lead you to express gratitude to those who carried, transmitted, and embodied faith to you.

William Willimon puts it this way...

The good news is that we don't have to reinvent the wheel so far as faith is concerned. Those who walked before us, saints of the past, can show us the way to Christ. There is humility in this.... If you have faith in Christ, then it's because somebody loved you and loved Christ enough to tell you the stories, live the faith before you, and show you the way. None of us created this faith for ourselves, none of us achieved this faith through our constructive thinking about God. All of us are empty-handed receivers.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa is an Episcopal Church in San Francisco. At the center of the sanctuary there stands a communion table – around which is a lot of open space for singing and dancing. They don't do pews and the focal point of the service is the communion not the sermon. The sanctuary is adorned with crosses, fabrics, and art from around the world: Ethiopian Orthodox icons, liturgical umbrellas, 19th-century Russian menorahs, and Tibetan bells. It is a kaleidoscope of colors and smells.

However, what is most striking is an icon mural that encircles the sanctuary featuring ninety larger-than-life figures, ranging from Teresa of Avila, to Malcolm X, to a naked King David, to Anne Frank, Ella Fitzgerald and Queen Elizabeth I. And they are all dancing in a circle led by a dark-skinned, risen Christ.

Saint Gregory's practices open communion – any and all are invited to the table. And the icons were chosen not because they lived blameless lives of Christian service, but in the words of one parishioner, "Rather than piety, or orthodoxy, the icons proclaim a sweeping, universal vision of God shining through human life."

Now, I am not selling the theology or suggesting breaking a Reformed understanding of the table, but I do think the image of the icons is instructive.

There is Jesus at the head of the line, leading the dance. With one hand he is reaching forward, moving gracefully to the beat, and with the other he reaches back to grab the hand of someone following. The one following keeps step and dances with joy (or maybe a limp), and reaches back to bring another along...

And that dance line reaches throughout history, and around the world, and from generation to generation, and across cultural barriers. And the music is from every

corner of creation, and sung in all tongues, and the last in line keeps reaching back for the next dancer....

And that dance, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is not a dance of timidity or terror, but a dance of joy and hope even amidst suffering. That dance is a dance of love...

Dear friends, come to the table this morning with a little dance to your step.

Come to the table with the church around the world.

Come even if your spirit is flat and your faith is flickering.

Come to the table because God's "mercy was had on" you.

Come because you've got a hungry heart.

Come because someone passed on faith to you.

Come to the table with a hand free to grab somebody else.

Come with your head up, looking around at the communion of dancing saints.

Come to the table.

We are all empty-handed receivers.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.