

OPENING:

Reflecting back on my time as a high school history teacher, particularly when dealing with high school seniors, I remember talking a lot about (quote unquote) “the real world” that these teenagers would soon discover in college and beyond. I remember making decisions about grades and punishments and rewards and thinking: “this is the way things are ‘out there’ and thus I need to model that reality ‘in here.’”

Sometimes I have wondered since... what in the world I was talking about. What is the “real world”?

There was a TV show, of course, that went by that name: *The Real World*—a reality television show that claims to depict reality, but does so in the fakest way possible. You know that especially if a season has ever taken place in a city that you lived in. You know just how unreal those depictions are. I remember the season that put 7 strangers together in a house in New Orleans, the greatest culinary city in the United States, and the people were constantly eating *Subway*... why? Because it was the sponsor of the show.

That, though, is low-hanging fruit, because it's not just Hollywood producers who believe this... no one is actually immune to this way of thinking.

As a parent, and in this vocation also, I find myself acting and thinking with the understanding of the so-called “real world.”

At Seminary, to give just one example from a place that should know better, we would worship together, pray together, eat together, take all these classes on Scripture and theology and ethics. Then, and at some point, someone would use that expression (a classmate or a faculty member or whoever) “in the real world” or they would say “in the parish.” They would do so, oftentimes in a Canon Law class or a Church Administration class, there would be a proclamation of the REAL, of how regardless what those other subjects said, this was REAL.

My guess is that you also recognize this way of thinking, consciously or subconsciously, in your heart and your mind and, indeed, your check book.

You might wish things were some other way: More fair, more just beautiful, more just, but so it is. Instead, we make decisions about life with the resignation that this “is the way things are”, this is the “real world and I have to live in it.”

EPISTLE

Against that, Paul tells our dear Timothy:

“do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for yourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that you may take hold of the life that really is life.”¹

“The life that really is life.”

I would want to ask Paul: “What is ‘really life’?”

“What is the ‘real world’?”

That might sound like a really abstract, esoteric question that might not really be on your mind. More fit for a smoke-filled college dorm room or a philosophy seminar, than what you need here this Sunday morning.

But our answer to that question “What is the real world?” is the start of all the practical questions of ethics and money and so on.

Here’s how I think might Paul would answer:

Paul is not saying the actual “real world” is in the sky, in heaven, in some cosmic other dimension.

Paul is writing to Timothy lived in Ephesus, a city in Ancient Greece in modern-day Turkey, Paul is saying the “real world” was there for him and his fledgling Christian community.

I agree with Paul, the “real world” is indeed here, in Herndon, at St. Timothy’s, in the United States.

We just cannot see it yet, it’s not fully really revealed to us. We are not living into yet, that dream of God for us is here on this earth.

Still, our fullest, realest selves are fated for life in this world.

¹ 1 Timothy 6.19 (paraphrase)

Paul says that, in his letter to Timothy:

The love of God “gives life to all things” and affirms the real life of ourselves and of others.

BECAUSE “Eternal life and true life are the alternative realities to be seized.”²

Our job is look for it, be able to discern what’s truly real. Incline your heart to it. Then, Paul says: we are supposed to fight for it like the dickens for that real life, that’s Paul’s language for Timothy, we are not to run away from the real life that God has given us.

REALITY

That easy and that hard, right?

Now the great existential question of my generation and those younger is:

“If it’s not on Facebook, does it really exist?

Is something real if it has not gone viral, been posted, etc.?”³

I thought about that this week: I posted a clip on our church facebook page from Joe Weedon reading our Timothy from last week. Go back and watch it some time.

I say that because no one actually, well, did watch it.

I posted it, no one liked it. No one clicked on. Was it real?

I am not commenting on your faithfulness, or even your social media habits. The algorithmic gods simply did not favor it. If I had had that link with a picture of a baby, or a dog, or Queen Elizabeth or a political diatribe, you all would have seen it, I suspect. Those things are real. According to Mark Zuckerberg’s reality.

But instead, I was shouting this post into the nothingness:

I had heard Joe’s reading on my way back from Shrine Mont (talk about a place that is UNREAL, but also for me has been the most REAL in my life). I was driving back from there on this spiritual high and I got a text from Alex Allain and so I clicked over to the service and it sent me to Joe’s reading. I sat there, driving through the beautiful Shenandoah Valley, so thankful to be a part of St. Timothy’s, hearing the words written to St. Timothy, I was so excited to return, excited that Alex preached on the Letter to Timothy. Excited that I had preached on the same

² Stephanie Mar Smith, “Theological Perspective” (Timothy 6.6-19) in Bartlett David Lyon and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2008. *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. (Volume 4, Year C) 1st ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 110, 112, 114.

³ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2012/08/06/beware-tech-abandoners-people-without-facebook-accounts-are-suspicious/print>

lesson, even though in the Shrine, we had gotten the lesson wrong.

It was all so REAL. That's the way I would describe it. It was true.

I was so excited about all this Timothy-ness, that I used that same lesson (with Joe's incomparable delivery in my ears) at our vestry meeting this week. (Talk about a place where the so-called "real world" butts in with a vengeance!) I wanted to hear that passage again, and Maria our Junior Warden read it: this time instead of the lilting cadence of the British isles, we heard the beauty of the Southwest Virginia accent. So again, for a moment, at our vestry meeting, before talking about our copier and our budget, things could not have been more real.

CONCLUSION

Paul gets a little clumsy in his description here, He doubles up in places:

"Fight the good fight"

"Profess the profession"

"Calling to which you are called"

The Sentences invert on themselves.

Paul cannot help himself.

If I were grading this as a high school history teacher, I would say "in the real world, this would not fly."

Again the so-called real world does really good job of presenting itself as the end all and be all of reality. God's vision, that life that "life that really is life" can seem so far away.

Paul is telling Timothy: the realest thing you can do is live your life oriented towards a God that you cannot see or touch but is the realest thing in the universe

The "real world" as intended by God in creation, takes visible form in the re-creation called the church.

The church withdraws from what the world calls 'real' better to discern the world as God intends—the new heaven and new earth of which the church is the foretaste..⁴

Let's do our part in seeking out, proclaiming and creating that world. **AMEN**

⁴ Willimon, William H. 2016. *Pastor: the Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. (Revised Edition) Nashville: Abingdon. 80.