

OPENING:

There is an old saying that we are all only nine meals away from murder.¹

That is to say, regardless of how advanced our civilization gets, we are still “this close” from chaos and anarchy

Some might say that that’s actually a pretty optimistic prediction, that you or I would start breaking things way before missing that ninth meal!

In his letter to Timothy, Paul offers a similar prediction, saying, in effect, that the “Good news is always one generation away from extinction.”²

That’s bad news for Timothy, as Paul says “Your grandmother had the faith, your mother had the faith... what’s up with you?”

Those are dreary notions to ponder on this Kickoff Sunday for our 2023 Stewardship Campaign, as we are tasked to carry on the Good News to the next generation, and beyond.

Dreary notions, add that to the dreary weather outside, and the fact that we get a lot of TEARS in our readings today: we get Lamentations, we get “By the water of Babylon, we sat down and wept”, AND then we get Paul shedding tears over the delinquent young Timothy.

Meanwhile, research statistics about the Church continue their endless negative report, a constant blizzard of depressing data about church membership/ attendance/ giving—nationally, within our Denomination, and closer to home.

With that comes this sneaking suspicion that the “treasure/deposit” which Paul talks about, had been faithfully received from generation to generation, but at this moment in history that it reads “Insufficient Funds.”

Dreary, dreary, dreary, it reminds me of those questions that I got at seminary, and in the ordination process: “What are your thoughts about the decline of the church. And what would you do to arrest the tide of secularism?”

¹ [The Big Apple: “Every nation is about nine meals away from a revolution” \(barrypopik.com\)](http://barrypopik.com)

² Olive Hinnant, “Pastoral Perspective” (2nd Timothy 1:1-14) 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, 136.

Now, if I had all the answers to those problems, I would not be standing in front of you. I would be giving TED talks across the country on that very subject, with my own boutique consulting firm charging by the hour.

I don't know how to answer those questions other than to say:

“St. Timothy's (Herndon) is back!”

All I can say is that Paul's Letter to Timothy is Good News, that I think that the “deposit” has been received. That a balance remains in the deposit, that it's secure in our hands, and that we will be able to carry it over.

SHIFT:

A Bishop recently said, talking about church decline, that “we have actually been here before.... At the very beginning, Jesus lost 1/12th of his congregation right there at the Last Supper. Judas' departure meant an 8.333% decline in participation and giving. What a start for a new organization!

But what happened next? They found Matthias, plugged him right in and did not look back.”³

We are in that same position as the early church, we have lost a bit, it hurt. It still hurts.

But, in response, Paul counsels young Timothy. He says “you have got this, you are not alone, because you are supported by three things: by the church, by your family, and by the Holy Spirit.”

Let's look at each of those, in the light of our Stewardship Kickoff and of our proclamation: “St. Timothy's is back!”

CHURCH

First the church as Paul reminds Timothy: “I laid my hands on you. I taught you myself.” In other words, “I got it from Jesus, you got it from me.”

We have a parishioner here who, when he got confirmed, the bishop showed him this kind of scroll that showed, person by person, the apostolic succession. It was kind of like a family tree, a series of names of ‘who laid their hands on who.’ So this parishioner got confirmed by that bishop, who had been consecrated by bishop so and so, and on and on and on. It was a *big* scroll, and it went all the way back, back to Peter, the first Bishop of Rome, and therefore back to Jesus of Nazareth.

³ Paraphrase from [Decently Writ, XVII: A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton | Sed Angli. \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.eugene-taylor-sutton.com/2017/07/23/decently-writ-xvii-a-sermon-by-the-rt-rev-eugene-taylor-sutton-sed-angli/)

Pretty cool! But not a parlor trick! We believe that means something. That God is working through all those sinners and saints that call themselves the church, and especially through the ordained leadership and the church structure.

Now Timothy is bucking at that, he does not think he is capable of it. Paul replies: “you are not alone, we will support you. Do not be afraid.”

So, we can say: “St. Timothy’s (Church) is back” because we too have been before, through that same dynamic. We have been down and then got back up again. In our early days, we were served by one minister, who had to ride (on a horse) to five different churches in Western Fairfax County. Once St. Timothy’s got written up in Diocesan records for not paying the \$10 it owed to that minister.

But we survived, hopefully paid that bill to my predecessor, and thrived.

That’s in our congregational DNA, we are hardy folk that persevere. There’s a distinction in the Diocese of Virginia, between “cow churches and horse churches” (today was supposed to be Blessing of the Animals!) It’s a socio-economic difference between churches that were from the aristocratic elite in Early Virginia and the churches led by, well, Cowherds. Take a guess at which one we are and the obstacles that we have had to face. Cow churches were never overly secure in their finances. But they can punch back, and they know how to pick themselves off the mat.

“St. Timothy’s is back”, because we are capable of living into the reality of 1868 or 1900 or 2000 or 2022. Horse, railroad, Dulles Airport, COVID-19, we will adapt, we have kept the “deposit” secure regardless of the context.

FAMILY

That leads to our next one, family, and this one is actually tougher, hits closer to home.

Paul appeals to the faith of Timothy’s mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. (You never would have guessed it but apparently, Timothy’s mom and grandma were Episcopalians from the 1950s!)

Eunice and Lois raised Timothy in the faith while Paul had no children, and so Timothy was like a son to him.

The closeness of that relationship, I think, is why Paul does not avoid “going there” and saying these tough truths. Paul’s message includes the words “timid” and

“shame” and “cowardice.” That must have landed hard on Timothy, and it might land hard for us: where is the next generation? where are the children? Why don’t my adult children go to church? I ask myself all the time: “why don’t my friends my age go to church?” Those are tough discussions that we need to have.⁴ Paul is not afraid to “go there” and neither should we.

Maybe Paul allows me to say: “St. Timothy’s is back... but it will never be 1995 again. It will never be culturally mandated that people attend church. Soccer practice will continue to be on Sundays. So this church needs you and it will not survive without you. Lois and Eunice have carried it, but Timothy, St. Timothy’s we need to continue to steward that deposit.

CONCLUSION- HOLY SPIRIT

But I would not count us out.

Do you know that there has been an numerical explosion of Worldwide Christianity in the last 50 years, all created without the force of arms?

I would not count the Holy Spirit out on this one.

That’s the last thing, that’s Paul’s ace in the sleeve. Christianity has proved remarkably flexible and durable, over 2000 years

When I have bad days (which are few), I think about it this way, I am priest-in-charge of this magnificent campus, charge of this community of Episcopalians which has been here 150 years. A preschool that’s been here 40. Meanwhile, think of the venerable institutions:

Sears Roebuck, Radio Shack, Blockbuster all have gone by way of the Dodo.

American Football, American Movies might not exist in my lifetime or my son’s lifetime. My guess, though, is that Episcopal Church in Herndon will still be here. I am not a betting man, but I really think it will be.

St. Timothy’s is back.

We have the support and the witness of the church.

We have the support of all the families,

and then we have the Holy Spirit, that lives within us.

The deposit is secure, let’s rekindle the flames.

AMEN

⁴ Hinnant, 134.