

SERMON- Proper 24 (C)
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Jeremiah 31:27-34

Psalms 119:97-104

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
October 26, 2022

Luke 18:1-8

OPENING:

It's one of the most famous letters in American history, and it never got put in the mail.

Less than 20 miles from here, in 1861, a Union officer, named Sullivan Ballou, wrote a letter to his young wife back in Rhode Island the day before what would be the 1st Battle of Bull Run.

The letter is a remarkable expression of love, a meditation on life and loss, a theological statement about grief and the power of love.

It never got mailed because the letter's author died the next day.

It made its way to you and me and a worldwide audience more than 100 years later as the centerpiece of the first episode of Ken Burns' magisterial PBS documentary *The Civil War*. Over the haunting tones of the equally beautiful *Ashokan Farewell*, the letter is simply a masterpiece of letter writing, and a profound declaration of what it means to lose someone and what it means to keep on living.

EPISTLE:

That form of writing is called a "Last Testament": and it's what Paul is writing to Timothy in our Epistle by that name

A Last Testament is where a dying figure in a family, or community, or religious group, would write a letter outlining the things that the receiver needs to know, with the letter writer's death close at hand.

In the wrong hands, these types of letter can get long-winded and overly sentimental. In the Victorian Era, the time of Sullivan Ballou and the Civil War, this happened a lot.

I know in my high school growing up, as high school seniors, we would write "Last Will(s) and Testament(s)" to the classes we would be "leaving behind."

In these, you would leave your locker, or your seat on the bus, or your favorite sweater, with various pieces of "wisdom", to the freshmen and sophomores and juniors that were left behind

Paul, writing to Timothy here, for the second and final time, is engaged in that type of thing, but is dead serious. He is in prison, facing death, and he needs to get the word out one more time, and Timothy, our patron, is the recipient.

Paul's message is not quite as beautiful as Sullivan Ballou... as it reads more "(l)ike a warning message in small print on the back of a (medicine) bottle, (the) verses are last-minute instructions for Christians. In case of an emergency (do this): proclaim the message, be persistent, convince, rebuke and encourage."¹

I hear that message acutely, as your Priest-in-Charge. I think about them in the context of "St. Timothy's is Back".

I hear it as "Do the little things, keep doing them. Don't worry about the fancy new fixes, or the newish fads, stay the course, keep showing up because God is here."

Here are some things, coming down the pike for us, none of them are particularly earth-shattering, but they are in line with Paul's message to carry on with the deposit, to secure the treasure, and

- 1) Next week we reinstitute communion wine after many months absent
- 2) During Advent and Lent, we will get our Wednesday Healing Service back
- 3) Likewise, we will have a Christmas Pageant this year with all of the dusty costumes from St. Timothy's past on Christmas Eve (we will clean them first!)

"St. Timothy's is Back": back to who we have been for 150 years, and back to who God is calling us in 2022, to be the church, do the church, together.

ESCHATOLOGY

Sometimes Paul's letter to Timothy gets criticized for being overly conservative, overly institutional, the product of an aging man yelling the equivalent of "Stay of my lawn." But there is so much more in his Last Testament.

If you came to the Adult Forum last week, then you know that my family and I have a unique connection to Paul's letter and to receiving letters after loved ones have died.

My twin brother, Leonard, was killed in action in Iraq in 2004, and right before he died he unknowingly wrote these "last testaments" to myself, and to his soon-to-be widow, and to my mother.

After my talk last week, some of you shared that you too had received letters from loved ones after they had died.

What a gift, and what a blessing, and what sadness that those involve.

¹ Olive Hinnant, "Pastoral Perspective" (2nd Timothy 4:14-4:5) in Bartlett, David 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, 182.

Of course, a “Last Letter Home” need not come via an envelope with a letter inside, it can come as a phone call, a long walk and a conversation, or simply an embrace. As we heard Paul say to Timothy last week: “God is not chained.”²

If you were not able to attend the session last week, you can, of course, go watch again on YouTube or come ask me about my brother, and his death, and those letters that he sent.

I share my personal story because it’s important that you hear it, I share it because I know you can handle it and I trust you. I share it because ultimately as someone in this line of work, you have to preach your own life, your own Testament, and pray to Jesus that it matches up with what God is trying to say to God’s people.

I wish we had time to read the entirety of my brother’s letter that he sent to my mother or, honestly, I wish that I could read it without being reduced to a puddle.

It read, however, in part: “Mom, I know this will be very late, but I hope that late is better than never. I send my heartfelt love to you from across the ocean. I think of Mother's Day from years past - all those wonderful memories of you and the family fill me with emotion... The happy idea of family and home keeps us all going ... I patiently await the day when we return home and I can see you and the family again, the day I can read Paul's letter to Timothy with a good faith and a proud conscience - 'I have fought the good fight, I have stayed the course I have kept the faith.' Love, Leonard ."

I am just amazed, he was 22. In the sands of Iraq, a million things to do and worry about. He wrote a similar, heart-wrenching one to his widow, one where actually he stops mid-sentence.

In both of those letters, there is this sense that he knew that these were “Last Letters”, and he was saying goodbye and saying I love you. They are up there, if I do say so myself, with Sullivan Ballou’s and Paul’s letters, in their ability to collapse time and to testify to the power of love and loss. They say something about what happened on the Cross.

Just to knock my brother down a few pegs, and I can do this as his twin, his letter to me, was not quite an epistolary masterpiece, I mentioned that last week, the letter that I received was full of rambling about that year’s baseball season and a tactical

² 2 Timothy 2.9

comparison of what was happening with his tank platoon versus Civil War troop movements.

Can I tell you something? I have never begrudged him that. I have never thought: well I wish that I had gotten a different letter. How is that?

Because I believe in what we profess here. I believe that Memorial Acclamation:
Christ has died *Christ is risen* *Christ will come again.*

I believe in the Resurrection. I believe that Christ makes all things new. I believe that Leonard is right here. I believe in that more than I believe in, say, the “real world.”

I believe it because of something that my mother said in the video we watched last week, I tried to make this point then, I will try again here because it’s so important: After my mother is finished reading my gut-wrenching brother’s letter, she stares at the camera, pauses and delivers the Gospel truth. She says:

“It does not get any better than that.”

She does not mean, *“Well, I am glad that even though he died, he wrote this letter. That will have to be good enough.”*

NO, her claim much deeper. This is not silver linings.

Instead she is saying, *“it does not get any better than that. When you have an expression of love like that, and a knowledge of the resurrection and true faith of the same. Time collapses. Space narrows. We are all one. You can proclaim that Easter truth: “it does not get any better than God’s love for us.”*

So when we read Paul’s letters, we are reading dead people’s mail, we are overhearing a telephone conversation where everyone who participated in it is gone. But they are actually still right here. A Last Testament of Love can do that for you. I believe that happened with Sullivan Ballou’s letter, it happened with my brother’s, in fact it happens all the time. God breaks through and the pain of the Cross becomes a wooden bridge for some sort of communion.

These are bold claims, ones that you cannot make every day, in every setting. I would not say this to someone who had recently lost a loved one, for example. Death and pain and grief are that powerful. But, I do know, even at the grave we are make our song: “Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”

AMEN