

SERMON- Feast of St. Timothy

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Isaiah 42.1-7

1 Timothy 1.1-7

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

January 26, 2025

Psalms 30.1-5

John 10:1-10

OPENING:

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Timothy's...
so I will be preaching on Paul's Letter to Timothy.

We read the beginning of that letter as our Epistle today.

I often say that writing letters is one of my few spiritual gifts,
one of my only religious disciplines.

I love writing letters, I love addressing them, stamping them, sending them.

I love composing them. I love the way the ink hits the stationery, the way that my miserable handwriting fills up the page, the way that letters force my heart and soul to do something that email, texting, telephone, even conversation cannot do.

The Apostle Paul, it must be said, also loved writing letters, and he was pretty good at it.

His letters are the earliest documents of the New Testament, the first artifacts of what "Christianity" was.

We have such an artifact, called "1st Timothy" and its opening lines, in front of us this morning. It was written 2000 years ago to Timothy, our patron, and to his community in Ephesus.

But it's also written to us, here in Herndon, signed, sealed and delivered to the 157-year-old mailbox known as St. Timothy's Episcopal Church.

This morning, let's journey together through the beginning of this letter, and hear what it has to say to us.

SIGNATURE¹

First, do you remember learning the formal parts of writing a letter in school?

I do.

I remember hating learning them, which makes my current love for letters ironic.

I remember learning that the salutation came first:

"Dear _____"

¹ Long, Thomas G. 2016. *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 17ff.

Notice how Paul messes that up here.

He puts the salutation second, and he puts his signature first.

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God.”

We have all gotten messages that begin that way though. With the signature first.

“Charles, This is your mother.”

This epistolary signature is technically unnecessary, but important because what follows is usually something difficult to hear,

something you don't want to hear,

but you need to hear.

The throat clearing signature that Paul writes could even be translated as:

“Paul, THE apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope.”

It's Kind of over the top. But the reason Paul introduces himself here in this way is because the folks in Ephesus, Timothy's community, Paul's community, have strayed and he is bringing the hammer in this letter.

PHILOPHRONESIS

It's no surprise Paul then breaks another letter-writing convention in what happens next, or actually in what does not happen next.

Usually in the second part of a letter, there is something called, Greek word alert!, *Philophronesis*, which is means “kind words.” Or “Small talk.”

Multiple Senior Wardens have tried to get your Rector to eliminate this section from my communications. “TLDR!” they say

Paul foregoes that section here, he does not wax poetic about how great the recipients of the letter are.

Instead, he goes straight to the heart of the matter. He says: “I don't know what nonsense you guys have been learning: myths, endless genealogies, speculations, and old wives' tales, meaningless talk, law without understanding.” He calls them out.

We don't know exactly how the community, the recipients of this letter, have strayed. But it seems like they really liked the LAW, and they felt like you could

get close to God by falling the rules, religiously.²

Unlike in my roundabout letters, Paul uses a laser to get to the heart of the matter immediately.

Paul says: “You missed the point... the aim of this Jesus thing is *AGAPE*, The point of all this is LOVE which comes from a pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith.”³

The Letter has become more of a MEMO, from the Boss, saying “Time Out. We need to talk. We all need to get on the same page”

LETTERS

Can you imagine getting that letter from Paul? Being challenged like that?

Perhaps you have received such a letter, or some other form of communication like this one, something that stopped you and your life in your tracks?

Maybe there was a moment this week that perhaps challenged you in a similar way?

I had a few of them.

First, we received a pastoral letter from the Bishop of Virginia this week.

Bishop Mark started with a salutation, and then some small talk, then he said this:

As Bishop and chief pastor of the Diocese of Virginia, I feel led to be direct about a couple of things in the days before us: First, every human being will be respected in our churches, regardless of race, creed, gender expression, nationality, or in any other category or classification of humanity. Every human being will be respected from our pulpits, in our pews, and through our ministries. Rhetoric in the public square that dehumanizes any person or group of people, or is designed to strike fear in people’s hearts, is contrary to the gospel and is to be called out as such.

Further, we are to remember that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were themselves refugees... fleeing for their lives for a season. And, as Jesus points out without equivocation in Matthew 25, how we treat the stranger and those in need has a direct bearing on our relationship with God in heaven. Given these things, we must provide safety to the fearful and stand boldly against tyranny of speech or action.⁴

² Ibid.

³ Johnson, Luke Timothy. 2001. *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*. (Anchor Bible Commentary.) New York: Doubleday, 161-163.

⁴ “A Letter from Bishop Stevenson” (January 20, 2025) <https://episcopalvirginia.org/news/a-letter-to-the-diocese-of-virginia/>

Then he provided his signature. “+Mark.”

Now Bishops write letters all the time, can't say that many stop me in my tracks.

“Goal is not mere conformity to a set of behavioral norms, but the deep internal attitude of the human spirit, disinterested and self-donative love that builds community.”

“Telos is not mental inquiry or intellectual elitism or moral monitoring. The telos is love.”⁵

CONFIRMATION

I had another moment this week, this time *talking* with someone who had attended St. Timothy's as a teenager, way back in the 1960s.

This might sound like a “mindless genealogies”—Charles at the Annual Meeting, coming up with Historical trivia.

But this is what this person, who now must be in their 70s or 80s, said

He talked about *the Confirmation Class* that he and his friends had with Father Henry more than a half-century ago. Father John Henry, Henry Hall is named after him, Rector here 1958-1974. John Henry had served in World War II. And He saw so many who died, pastored so many in WWII. These experiences apparently came through in these Confirmation Class. Biggest questions “Who is God?” I have seen people with their souls leave their bodies. I know He is There. “Who is God?” He has followed that the whole way through. People in his Confirmation Class still talk to one another.

Paul's letter to Timothy elsewhere talks about the deposit of faith, here we read about the importance of teaching.

I think that's a pretty high standard to live up to, but wow, I want to be in that number.

“The way the Spirit instructs, however, is not by beaming information magically from heaven but through the faithful preaching and teaching of wise believers, and this is why the Pastor is so zealous about sound teaching in the church.”⁶

MERCY

Reading Paul's letter to Timothy hit me one more way this week.

Comes back to the idea of the form of a letter and making sure you get the structure right.

Paul usually had as his greeting.

⁵ Johnson.

⁶ Long, 44.

Grace and Peace,

but here in 1st Timothy, he adds to that formula, he adds a word in the middle

“Grace and Mercy and Peace”

Grace and Mercy and Peace.

“Grace and Peace” is normal greeting with Grace as what begins the spiritual life, and Peace as what is at its end.

Mercy: what happens in between, is how we live it.

“To heal the wounds of life, mercy is the most precious ointment of all.”

“The claim of the gospel is that human beings come fully alive when they embody in their everyday life the love, mercy, and forgiveness experienced in Jesus Christ.

AMEN