

Itching Ears

Scriptures: Luke 18:1-8; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Instructions for Life

We've been looking at Paul's second letter to Timothy the last couple weeks, and this week, like last week, we've skipped over a good chunk of the book to stay on track with the lectionary cycle. I brought that up last week, but I realize that some people may not know what that is. In the 1970's, the World Council of Churches – that's a group of all the churches around the world of every denomination, including Roman Catholics – sat down together and created the Revised Common Lectionary. It's a reading plan which splits the Bible up into different segments, so that if you use it consistently in worship services, your church hears the Bible in its entirety, for the most part, over the course of a three year cycle. John preached using passages suggested by the lectionary cycle for years, and I've continued to use it. It's good for us as a local church to hear God's word in its entirety.

Prior to the text we'll look at today, Paul has told Timothy – and we talked about this last week – that God is faithful when we are not, and not to waste time arguing with people over words. Between that, and the text we'll look at momentarily, Paul tells Timothy about how people will live in the "last days." Looking at the list starting at the beginning of chapter 3, it's pretty clear that we're in the "last days!" Further, Paul tells Timothy, that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived," (2 Tim. 3:12-13). With this in mind, turn with me to 2 Timothy 3:14, if you have your Bible or Bible app handy, and we're going to read through verse 5 of chapter 4. I'm reading from the New International Version. **Read 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5.**

Did you catch what Paul first said in the text this morning? I think it makes at least a good piece of circumstantial evidence for one of the unique practices of Methodism – infant baptism. "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," (2 Tim. 3:14-15). We're told earlier in this book, that Timothy had learned about Jesus from his mother and grandmother, who Paul had met previously in Ephesus before he was imprisoned in Rome by Nero. During this time period, Jewish boys were taught the Scriptures starting around age five. But Eunice and Lois, Timothy's mom and grandma, had been teaching him the Scriptures "from infancy," which Paul says, "make Timothy wise for salvation through faith."

Why Baptize Infants?

Some denominations look down their noses at people or churches that practice infant baptism. We usually don't like to talk about stuff like this, but it's true. I used to be one! It's only been within the last decade or so that I've gotten more liberal in my views of it. I've told you this before. I was brought up in the Churches of Christ – they sprung out of a Baptist and Presbyterian type background, and practice what they call "believer's baptism." Growing up, I thought you got baptized at age twelve, because it was a hoop to jump through. My friends were all doing it, so I thought I should, too.

The action in that sort of baptism is on the person being baptized. It's flawed thinking. "If I go under the waters in baptism, I'll be 'saved.'" The problem is, the water doesn't have some magic power to save me. I can't save myself. We have to go on with the rest of Paul's words. "salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Ah ha! There's the key! In the United Methodist baptismal covenant, it isn't us who do the work – it's Jesus Christ. He's the One who does the saving – through His death in our place on the cross, and His resurrection from the tomb – and He's the One who gives us the faith to believe that He does it through the in-dwelling Holy Spirit He freely gives to us. So why not baptize a baby, when doing so publicly marks that child as a member of God's family?

Paul's making sure Timothy understands this. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work," (verses 16-17), Paul says. God's Word – the Bible – has great power. He gives it to us as a textbook to deepen our faith. It might not look like a textbook, it has a lot of textbook-type stuff in it.

The Bible as a Textbook

It contains the history of God's dealings with people over a period of a couple millennia. It has Psalms – beautiful poetry and songs of faith. It has the writings of the Prophets, who warned the ancient Israelites when they were doing wrong, and even told of the coming of Jesus Christ, who would save Israel. The Bible has the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which speak of the life, teachings, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. It has the letters of Paul and other ancient church leaders, which provided guidance to young Christians for specific circumstances.

Friends, the guidance that Paul gave to Timothy and the other churches remain good guidance for us today as well. If we know the Bible, it is a great help to us – when we're working out a problem, trying to make important decisions, worrying about the future, or trying to deal with family issues – the Bible is able to help us. If we're familiar with it, it can help us through every crisis that life in a fallen world throws our way. The Bible is the authoritative word of God.

There is a disconnect between the authoritative nature of the Bible, and what we're capable of implementing. For example, there are things we read in the Bible, and if we truly implemented it, New Hope, we have some people here in our sanctuary who we would drag outside the building and stone to death for their sins. Let's be clear – we aren't called to do that. Christ was crucified to do that for us. He took the beating and the nails.

Differences of Opinion

Saying the Bible is authoritative, though, is tough for us when we are focused and insistent on living in our American perspective. We don't like hearing that the Bible is authoritative, because we don't like authority. We think – we believe – everyone has a right to do whatever they want, and to believe whatever they want. And, here lately – I'm sure you've encountered this – we believe that everyone's opinion is just as good as everyone else's. Right? Each of us thinks we are the be-all and end-all experts on everything, and we have all the answers. But church, is that really true?

We don't truly believe that everyone has a right to do whatever they want. We willingly accept laws that limit our freedom, because we don't want to give others the freedom to rob, steal, and murder. People, even in America, cannot do whatever they want. People do have a right to believe whatever they want – but it doesn't mean that they're right.

And it doesn't give them the right to act on their beliefs. KKK members can believe anything they want to believe about African-Americans and Jewish people, but it doesn't make them right. And it doesn't give them the right to burn down their houses. People can believe whatever they want to believe about the previous Presidential election, but it doesn't give them the right to destroy taxpayers' property in the US Capitol building. Do we really believe everyone's opinion is equally as good as everyone else's? If we're being honest, probably not.

When we're sick, we seek out the opinion of a doctor. And not just any doctor – we want a good one who seems to have an understanding of what they're doing with our treatment. Right? If we have a heart condition, we're going to a cardiologist, not a chiropractor. If I have a toothache, I'll go see Dr. Ashby, the dentist – not the nurse administering flu shots at the Health Department. And so it is in the area of our Christian faith. Each of us has a right to our opinion – and each of us has an opinion – but that doesn't mean that every opinion is equally true.

Looking to the Saints for Examples

Sometimes when I have some free time – that's a rare thing these days – I like reading about the lives of some of the saints. I can learn from their opinions and how they lived their lives. Like Augustine of Hippo, who developed the doctrine of the Trinity, or Jerome, who translated the Bible from Greek into the Latin Vulgate, which the

Western Church read exclusively for nearly a thousand years. These guys did remarkable things to further God's kingdom.

There are – and have been – great saints in our local church. People who live, or lived their faith with great authority, who I wish I could have another half hour's worth of time to talk to about so many things. I know you do, too, because they're your family members and you miss them more than I do.

St. Augustine and St. Jerome were not perfect people. There were things they got wrong. Augustine at one time was a follower of a heretic sect which attempted to blend some eastern religions like Buddhism with Christianity. Jerome was blamed for the death of a young widow who followed his instructions on fasting. The saints in our local church are not, or were not, perfect. They could be wrong. I'm by no means perfect – and I can also get things wrong. I'm not arrogant enough, or foolhardy enough, to believe I'm 100% right, and everyone else is dead wrong. If you think you are completely right – if we think we're completely right, and all these other people are wrong – we probably need to do a little self-examining and make sure we aren't letting our self trip us up. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall," the writer of Proverbs says, "It is better to be lowly in spirit among the humble than to divide the spoil with the proud," (Proverbs 16:18-19, BSB).

Itching Ears

Are we stuck in a swirling whirlwind of various differing opinions? Do we have anything about which we can be absolutely certain? Paul tells us, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, Who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction," (2 Tim. 4:1-2). God gives us the Bible so we know the truth. It becomes our gold standard against which we must measure all our opinions.

Paul knew Timothy would struggle – he knew we would struggle – and that's why we have what he says next. "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths," (verses 3-4). We're living in days just like this! People don't want to face the truth. They only want to listen to the things they want to hear – even if what they're hearing are lies. They want to listen to opinions from people just like them, which stoke their egos and make them feel even more important.

In 1989, *Dead Poets Society*, starring Robin Williams was released in theaters. In it, Williams plays the part of English teacher John Keating, who returns to his alma mater to teach, using some unconventional methods. One of Williams' recurring statements in that movie is, "Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordi-

nary.” Our country, and by extension, the United Methodist Church, is drowning in a thousand heathen opinions which focus primarily on this idea of “carpe diem – seize the day.” Live for today, heck with tomorrow, and anyone who doesn’t go along with what we think is right – they can go to you-know-where, too. That’s the loud and clear message our society tells people, because it’s a world that says “use them, and lose them.”

It’s a message the Church, with all it’s in-fighting sends back to the world. We don’t have time to focus on your problems, because you are the cause of our problem. So we’re going to do whatever we can to keep ourselves from being polluted with worldliness. In a nutshell, that’s the message the current fussing sends to the secular world. If you think for a minute the atheists aren’t aware of what’s happening in the UMC, the still-birthing GMC, and in local Methodist churches that are in the process of becoming untied, I’ve got news for you. This is the sort of stuff they laugh and chat about over coffees with their friends. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will,” (Rom. 12:2).

Birds of a Feather Flock Together

In the age of opinion, where people with like opinions tend to flock together like birds of a feather, we don’t need another opinion. We need Truth. God gives us truth in His Scriptures. We should be faithfully reading the Bible on a daily basis. Along with doing daily prayer – it should be a pattern of our daily life. A lot of people in the Church – generally speaking – don’t give the Bible much of a place in their lives.

I stumbled across a poem that speaks to this earlier this week, unfortunately I couldn’t find the name of the author, or when it was written, but at its latest, I’d guess it comes from no later than 2014. Listen to what the person wrote, though, because it really fits our current situation. “They lie on the table, side by side; The Holy Bible and the TV Guide. One is well-worn and cherished with pride. Not the Bible, but the TV Guide. One is used daily to help folks decide. No, not the Bible, but the TV Guide. As the pages are turned, what shall they see? Oh, what does it matter, turn on the TV! So they open the book in which they confide. No, not the Bible, but the TV Guide. The Word of God is seldom read. Maybe a verse before they fall into bed. Exhausted and sleepy, and tired as can be. Not from reading the Bible, but from watching TV! So then back to the table side by side, Lie the Holy Bible and the TV Guide. No time for prayer, no time for the Word, The plan of salvation is seldom heard. But forgiveness of sin, so full and free, Is found in the Bible, not on TV!”¹

If that’s us we need to refocus our sights. If that’s you – you need to refocus your sights on Jesus Christ. Paul tells Timothy, and us today, “But you, keep your head in all

¹ *The Bible and the TV Guide*. Accessed 10/12/2022, from <https://kubik.org/lighter/tvguide.htm>

situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry,” (2 Tim. 4:5). In the drama-filled, entertainment-driven *Dead Poets Society* in which we live, the Church, in general, and us here at New Hope in particular, would do well to keep the Main Thing, our Main Thing – be focused on Jesus Christ – He’s the Main Thing! And making Him known for the transformation of the world has always been, and will always be, the mission of His Church.

Prayer: O God, Spirit of righteousness, You temper judgment with mercy. Help us to live the covenant written upon our hearts so that when Christ returns we may be found worthy to be received into Your Presence, by His grace. Amen.