

God Calls Us to be Faithful Stewards of God's Message  
Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA  
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, October 16, 2016  
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost (year C, proper 24):  
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5 (NRSV): *As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

Yesterday at our parish dinner, we talked about stewardship, and next Sunday we're asking for your pledge of financial support for our ministries in 2017. So the plan was for me to preach on Stewardship today. However, the scripture readings today are only indirect in relation to stewardship. So I'll start with the scripture readings themselves, and then see how they inform our practice of stewardship. In particular, I would like to address the reading from Paul's second letter to Timothy.

Second Timothy is a very personal letter. Paul is writing to an individual here, so his letter is different in style than his letters to churches such as Corinthians or Galatians. Timothy was one of Paul's closest colleagues in ministry. Paul writes to Timothy to advise him as a leader in the church. In First Timothy, Paul is concerned with criteria for leadership—how to select wisely the leaders in the church. In this second letter, Paul is concerned with leaving a legacy. It's as if Paul is in old age and looking to pass the torch to Timothy. Paul encourages Timothy to be faithful with the teaching entrusted to him, proclaiming the message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

In this passage, Paul tells Timothy to persevere and to ground his teaching in Holy Scripture. Primarily for Paul at this point in history, Holy Scripture is the Old Testament. But sound doctrine for Paul is also found in the teaching of Jesus and his apostles—the teaching we now find in the New Testament. This is God's message of the Good News of Jesus. Paul received this message from Holy Scripture and from the apostles, and from our Lord himself. Paul then passed this message on to Timothy, and he calls Timothy, in turn, to be faithful with this message he has received. You might say that Paul calls Timothy to be a faithful steward of God's message.

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inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Paul wants Timothy’s ministry to stand on solid ground, so that God’s people may benefit and grow closer to God. This solid ground is found in the Bible. The Bible is not simply a collection of traditional stories. God inspired the writers of the Bible so that we have a faithful basis for our faith. Holy Scriptures are authoritative in the Christian faith and life. The Bible reveals Jesus Christ, who himself reveals God the Holy Trinity. Through Holy Scriptures, we know who God is and who we are as human beings, and who we are in relationship with God. Through the Bible, we learn how to respond to God and how to carry God’s grace to the world around us.

We don’t worship the Bible itself. We worship the God who reveals himself in the Bible. It would be poor stewardship of the Bible if we used bits and pieces of scripture simply to back up our own ideas. But we are good stewards of the Bible when we study and pray and seek a fuller understanding of God’s message in the Bible. Through *that* good stewardship, God equips us to know what is right, and to serve him effectively.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, God gives us a legacy of teaching and learning, grounded in Holy Scriptures. Through this legacy, we come to know God, to encounter the voice of the Holy Spirit living and breathing in our prayerful study of the Bible. As Paul calls Timothy, so also God calls us to be good stewards of God’s message.

So why does Paul emphasize the place of scripture for Timothy? Paul goes on to urge him to proclaim the message. Scripture and the teaching he has received is the basis for this message, and the basis for building up God’s people with teaching and encouragement and patience.

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I tried to think of an illustration for the importance of faithfulness to the message in the face of unrestrained self interest. There are many examples in our current culture, of course, but they might take us off track. So let me share with you this story about self interest and the need for sound teaching. This is a true story of a boy who begged his parents for some candy on his birthday. They went to a candy store and bought a pound of sugar free gummy bears! They each seemed to get what they wanted. The boy was hungry, and he loved gummy bears, and the parents were happy with a sugar free snack. But they failed to read the fine print on the package that read “may have a laxative effect.” Well, the boy ate the

entire pound of gummy bears and was miserably sick! Despite his desires, the boy would have benefited from sound teaching, patient encouragement and especially careful study and attention to what was written. 😊

This is a pattern that happens with more than just gummy bears. People and groups devoted to high ideals can lose those ideals over time out of self-interest. Look at college fraternities that began in the 1800s with ideals of character and scholarship. So many fraternities have devolved into Animal House ideals. The same can be said with many segments of society and in the church as well. Even in the church we can get pulled off-course out of self interest.

Some contemporary churches care so much about being attractive to the public, that they have skewed the message of the Gospel into entertainment or a strange promise of economic success, often called the “prosperity gospel.” Some Evangelical leaders these days seem to put politics over Christian principal. This, of course, happens in main line churches as well. I know many leaders who seem to see Jesus merely as an icon of Marxist liberation. Certainly, Jesus has a preference for the poor, and God calls us to justice in our response to the poor and oppressed. But we serve Christ in the world because of God’s calls, not because the world comes first. We don’t start with political or social goals and then dress them up with Bible verses. We start with Holy Scripture and *then* respond to God’s calls, including in society and governance.

See the difference? It’s not about the authority of political ideology (right or left), it’s about the authority of God and the authority of the scriptures inspired by God. God calls us to be good stewards of his message.

So how does this passage inform our general good stewardship as disciples of Jesus Christ? Is living generously part of faithful stewardship? Yes, certainly. Paul calls Timothy to give of himself for the sake of the Gospel. Is financial stewardship part of living generously? Yes, certainly. Is giving to the church part of that generous stewardship? Yes, certainly. Financially supporting the church *is* valuable to God—but most especially valuable to God when the church is a good steward of the message of Jesus Christ.

At St. Peter & St. Paul, our mission is growing disciples of Jesus Christ. So we are devoted to the worship of God rather than ourselves. We are devoted to the study of Holy Scriptures so that we can learn and grow as Jesus’ disciples. We are devoted to serving Christ in the world as God has called us to serve. In all these ways, we are good stewards of God’s message. Our financial stewardship, then, supports this mission.

Since all together we are the church, each of us has a role as stewards of God’s message. Each of us can convince, rebuke and encourage. Notice the accountability that is part of true Christian Community—helping to bring out the best in each other and not just the lowest

common denominator. Each of us can proclaim the message by word and example. Each of us can be patient, and persistent. Each of us can live generously. Each of us can grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, and grow others as disciples of Jesus Christ.

By God's grace, we can be good stewards of God's message—the Good News of Jesus Christ.