

SERMON TITLE- "Family At Home And Away"

TEXT- 1 Timothy 1

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

BY- James Toews

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This past week Ryan and I were away at the 150 Celebration of our MB denomination. I went there with my normal apprehensions- so what are we going to do for a whole week? Will this have any relevance to us in Nanaimo?

I came away with a bunch of other questions but, as we would hope, they were different from the ones I started with.

Let me first tell you a few things I should have had squarely in my head when I went- but which really popped out for me.

1. We are part of an amazing worldwide family. It was overwhelming. Fellow believers from around the world stood up and shared parts of their stories. A couple of base-line facts- there are many times the number of MBs in India and Congo as there are in Canada. And that's just the beginning.

Connecting with these people feels overwhelming at times. One story that struck me was a brief mention of a disaster that took place in Congo on July 3, when an oil tanker turned over and burst into flame. 220 people died. Congo is the 2nd largest group of MBs in the world. I knew that. I did not know that about 40 MB brothers and sisters died among those 220. That was a very sobering realization.

In the end the question was not- what are we going to do all week- as much as- how can we possibly do justice to all the amazing parts of the story?

2. The 150 year history that we are celebrating is a great story- and it is not just about a particular ethnic group that Canadians think about when we say, Mennonite. The question is- how do we hear each other and learn?

But I went there with a real set of questions that centered on how all of that links back to us here.

Let me tell you one way that it linked back here for me. The Mennonites from around the world often challenged us on one point. "We are supposed to be known as 'the People of the Book'- so where is the Book?"

Now we don't necessarily take our Bibles where ever we go- and during a birthday party not every talk is a sermon about a verse of the Bible- but the question was a very good reminder of what links us together with this amazing worldwide family- it is a Book that we all read together. It is our common reading of the Bible that makes us a people.

#1. We Are The People Of The Book

So today we sit here- we are sitting with 100s of 1000s of people of the same family- opening up a Book and not only studying it, but incorporating its message so that when we leave this place- the message of the Book spills out of our beings onto the world around us.

Now in each place that message will have some things that are quite unique and some things that are as unchangeable as gravity.

Today I want to begin a sermon series with that picture in mind- the picture of the worldwide family that we are part of.

But I also want to firmly link it here are home as well. Last week we did our VBS. That was as local as it gets- our kids and the kids of our friends and neighbours lead by our team [with help from Nanaimo Alliance]. And last week we looked at a single verse that was the foundation of our VBS program.

That verse was

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. 1 Timothy 4:12

What a great verse that proved to be! But as I thought about that verse, it occurred to me that a look at the little book from which it was drawn would also be a great linkage point between the 2 weeks I just experienced. So in the weeks ahead we are going to look at one of the short book of the NT- 1 Timothy.

I want to do this with 2 sets of lenses on- a set of bi-focals, if you will. One lens focused on our world right close at hand- and one lens focused on the family we are part of- around the world.

1 Timothy- Introduction

It was called this because it was a letter written by that famous apostle and teacher of the early church, Paul.

It begins-

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope. 1 Timothy 1:1

Now that looks very different from the way most of us would open a letter- but apparently it was just the normal way of writing. The most notable difference is that the writers name is the first thing in the letter. Paul also adds who he is in the context of this letter. It is a bit formal because this letter has a very specific purpose.

This isn't just a casual letter between Paul and Timothy, this is a letter designed to establish Timothy in a job that Paul had given to him. While Paul is writing to Timothy, on the one hand, on the other hand the letter is designed to be read by other people, specifically the people Timothy had been put in charge of as a leader.

We quickly understand that Paul, having established a church in Ephesus had left Timothy as the point person. The story of Paul, Timothy and the beginnings of the Ephesian church are described in Acts 18-20.

If you read this history and from what follows in the 2 letters that Paul wrote to Timothy, it is quite obvious that Timothy had a challenging job on his hands. He needed advice and encouragement. In this case the advice came from far away- from a man with a long distance lens- to Timothy, a man with his nose to the ground of a very specific local church with very specific local joys and sorrows.

And so Paul continues his letter-

To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. 1 Timothy 1:2

#2. We Are Family

This is where the language of the NT goes back to over and over again. There is a shift from the language of the OT. That too has its roots in the language of “family”- but the OT family had 2 very specific centers. First was the center in the genealogy of the descendants of Abraham.

The second center of the OT language of family was the land. God had given Abraham and his family a physical land that they could call their own. They could claim it because God had given it to them.

It is very important to know this because the NT has 2 very specific contrasts with the OT.

1. Our genetic genealogy no longer goes to a physical person- our genealogy now is linked to the new birth by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus explained it very clearly-

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. John 3:5-6

There is only one way to join this family- and that is to be born by the Spirit. Jesus could hardly be clearer. There is only one way to join this family. One must be born again.

This is important, not only in contrast to the OT people of God, but also in contrast to how we still think. We want to find other ways to join the family of God. We like the idea of family a lot and we would like to help make up the rules about who is in and out. Of course in the end the people we want in- are the people we like- for whatever reason- and the people we want out are the people we don't like. It is a very good thing that we don't get to decide who is in or out.

And, by the way, that is why we are members of a family with people from all kinds of cultures from all over the world. It is why we are usually a little startled by when we meet them. Are these really my brothers and sisters in the deepest sense of the word?

The answer, of course is, yes! I think it is wonderful to be taken aback by this fact.

2. We are no longer “the people of the land.” For some Mennonites this is a shocker. The one branch of Mennonites came from farming stock. They linked naturally to the land. They make for the best of the “Greens.” They see the whole world the way a farmer sees his fields. You take care of that with every ounce of care you have.

That is a wonderful thing- but something goes along side of this that is not unique to farmers. They begin to think that land and faith are somehow wound together and the land that means the most to them is the land they are living in and one.

The people of God, in the NT are people without land and countries to call their own. Our job is not to think about the interests of Canada- our job is to think about the people of the world.

This too, is a way of thinking that does not come naturally. A person who understands this would not just automatically claim the “eat local” idea as a good one.

Whether we are Nanaimo MBs or members of churches anywhere in the world- we are family that is joined together by a common birth and citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Getting back to Timothy and his assignment. Paul writes from far away and tells

Timothy what his specific assignment is. It is indeed very specific-

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith. 1 Timothy 1:3-4

Now, quickly we should see 2 things. First, that some people in the church had gone immediately to the matter of genealogies that I had mentioned. This had caused all kinds of controversies. This was not good.

The second thing you would probably notice is- this is not the kind of arguments you would find here in Nanaimo. Very true.

The first thing that you are struck by when you meet Christians from other places is how different the controversies are in the different culture.

On the one hand a big gathering is a wonderful celebration of our diverse family. For the most part we hear all the really good stories.

But once you get to know people you quickly find that the people in different cultures are no more saintly than the people you work with here. They do however have very different controversies in different cultures.

The next thing I hope you notice is that controversies need to be dealt with. We cannot pretend that they aren't there or that they are less serious than they appear.

Paul's entire letter to Timothy is written to help Timothy deal with controversies in the church. In this case Paul has given Timothy a cease and desist order which he is to deliver to "certain men."

Now it would at times be nice to have such an order that we could deliver. And I suppose that there are times when we do get them but remember that Paul has a very specific set of arguments in mind. It is important not to use such a cease and desist order when we don't have the mandate to give it.

However, Paul does give us something that we can take forward- he gives Timothy the principle behind the grand order-

The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 1 Timothy 1:5

And here Paul brings Timothy, and with him, you and me the readers 2000 years later, to the deep principle on which the whole enterprise of the people of God rests.

#3. We Are Joined By Love

For God's people this is not just the basis for great sounding song lyrics- this really is at the heart of who are and who we are supposed to be.

I still remember the great rendition reading of 1 Corinthians 13 that was read at Princess Diana's funeral.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

It was as powerful as it was ironic.

It was powerful because there the great NT ideal of love was laid out for all the world to see. It was assumed that of all the great statements of love ever written- this truly said it in a way that should unite the world.

I believe that it did. I don't think anyone from any background was inclined to stand up and say, "I object! That isn't love!"

BUT it was ironic because those who claim to follow Jesus should have felt just a little uneasy by the whole performance. This was being read in a place of controversy and hardly looked like nothing more than a fine sounding veneer to place over a sordid society.

That's not what Christian love is supposed to be. It is not about great sounding songs and performances. Love is an ethic designed to be worked out in the middle of great human struggles. It is to be the foundation that we build everything else on top of- not a veneer that we wrap over the top of things to make them look good,

The picture of love that comes the most naturally is the inverse of what Kingdom love, the love on which the family we are part of, is the love based on words rather than action.

How does that action apply?

Locally it means we keep working at real community that takes 1 Corinthians 13, not as a nice speech or poem- but as a challenge that we keep before ourselves [not those around us] as the standard by which we ask to be judged.

This is not a suggestion according to Paul- he is quite blunt.

Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. 1 Timothy 1:6-7

The temptation for all of us is to try to turn the Gospel into a sermon that we can explain to others. Not a good idea. Paul explains himself at length and then turns his attention back to Timothy-

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. 1 Timothy 1:18-19

We are left with a challenge. Living as the people of God, within the various roles He has assigned to us- is not easy. In fact Paul says, it is a "fight."

But it is a "good fight."

We are part of a big family. Part of it is here rubbing shoulders with us day in and day out- and part of it is lives in the far corners of the earth.

Living as the "people of the Book."

Living as a family.

Living with practical expressions of love.

These are our assignment.

8We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. 9We also know that law[a] is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, 10for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine 11that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

12I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. 13Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

15Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

17Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. 1 Timothy 1:8-17