

SERMON TITLE- "The Basics- Again and Again"

TEXT- 1 Timothy 1:12-17

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There are things that get repeated over and over again. There are times when it can seem redundant- and when things are repeated too many times they can be ignored. The best example of that is the car alarm. When a car alarm goes off- no one thinks that a car is being stolen. Everyone in the vicinity just curses the car's owner. If curses had power- I think a good case would be made not to have a car alarm.

But there is another side to the story. Things that are important are also repeated. This is especially true of defining principles and moments in the life of a people. That is how we learn what is important.

We are an Anabaptist church. What does this mean? One of the stories that gets repeated over and over again is the story of Dirk Willems. He was an early Anabaptist who had been imprisoned for his faith. He managed to escape prison and fled across a frozen river. The man pursuing him fell through the ice. Willems went back and saved the man. Having stopped his flight Willems was put back into prison and executed as a heretic [1569].

This story is repeated in virtually every Anabaptist Mennonite story.

You can see why that would be a story that shaped those of this church. It is a story that is told over and over again. It is a story that we heard as children- and it is a principle we were expected to live by. It is a story that reminds us- that as Kingdom people we are to love our enemies- even when we will not be rewarded.

There are parts of the NT that are of this repetitive nature. As Paul writes his letter to Timothy he hits on several of these recurring themes. His letter to Timothy is designed to help him with the challenge of church leadership- and part of that help turns out to be repeating the some basics.

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. 1 Timothy 1:12

Basic #1. God Gives Us Strength

This is a principle that runs deep below everything that Kingdom people are to do and be. It runs so deep that we usually don't even think about it.

We don't really think about it much until something happens where the limits of our strength are suddenly challenged. Just like the story of Dirk Willems those limits show up when what is expected or asked of us- just goes too far.

As some of you heard, Janet and I went through another big cancer scare in the past 3 weeks. Thankfully the tests on Thursday and Friday put our hearts at ease but suddenly we were up against the limits of our strength, again. That is not a pleasant place to be- and it is good to be able to look back on a season of testing.

But what is clear, from the Scriptures is, that God does give His children strength- even when there is no apparent strength left in our beings.

Until you run out of strength you don't realize how important this deep principle is. But it is when you run out of strength that the depth of this comes alive. I happened to

be going through the Book of Job when my strength was gone. It had a very different ring to it at that moment than it has at other times.

The Scriptures are full of people who have run out of strength. When we went through the Psalms of Lament we heard the cries of those who couldn't carry on any longer. The Book of Job is the cry of a man who couldn't hang on.

My eyes have seen all this, my ears have heard and understood it.

What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you.

But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God.

You, however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! Job 13:1-4

At that moment we, like Job want a Saviour before whom we can stand and make our complaint- and from whom we can hear the words of comfort we need. In the middle of his frustration Job says-

But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God. Job 13:3

Later Job would add-

If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. Job 23:3-4

Those moments rarely come exactly when we want them to but when we have a chance to look back and step away from the moment- we, with Paul know that we have been carried through the storm.

That's what it feels like when you are really up against a wall- when you have heard all the "answers" and none of them make any difference. Here is a man who loves God and tries to serve Him, but who is out of gas. All he has left is frustration at a God who doesn't answer back.

But what do the Scriptures tell us? When we are weak God is strong. When we have lost it, God gives strength.

Those who have turned the keys of their beings over to God have been given an assurance in return- God keeps His promises.

Paul repeats this over and over again in various forms. The verse that was given me at my baptism is one that I carry with me.

being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:6

The idea that God completes His work in our lives is very important.

There are 2 times when we see this-

First, when we look back on trials. That's what Paul is doing. He writes in the past tense here. God "has given" him strength. Looking back on trials gives us the best perspective and the farther back we look the better that perspective is. This is why the old stories are so important. That is not how Job felt in the middle of his trial. But eventually he does also look back.

Second, when we are in a place of sober reflection. This does not take place during the crisis but it is during the period of sober reflection that we are to make decisions about the future and it is during periods of sober reflection that we are to set the disciplines for Godly living.

When our bodies and spirits are in pain we look to find relief but it is when we can think thing through that we determine a course of healthy living and exercise that is

prudent.

And that is why driving this knowledge into our beings when no crisis is present is so important.

The second deep principle that Paul introduces is the fact that-
Basic #2. We Are Chosen By Grace

This is another fact that Paul repeats over and over again. He often does so from the basis of his own story. He does so with the reminder that God-
appoint[ed] me to his service. 1 Timothy 1:12

We do have to choose the course we are going to take. That choice has big moments and cross roads to it- and that choice is also daily and moment by moment. But running right alongside of the choice to keep pressing forward on the Kingdom road is the reminder that we have been called and appointed to a task. We have been appointed to God's service.

In his language around this, Paul is extremely personal. This extremely personal language is a reminder that God loves us as individuals.

In the cancer journey we are constantly reminded of the big picture. We are reminded that for all the frustrations of the medical system in which we live, for all the anxiety that waiting causes- statistically the outcomes in our system are just as good as the much more expensive US system.

That is very good to know. That is the big picture. I am quite confident that this is factually true. And in the end I would sooner have good facts than good feelings.

But the facts, as true as they are, are strangely frustrating when you are going through a journey filled with anxiety. The fact that 90% of people do very well with a treatment doesn't help very much if you feel like you are one of the 10% that doesn't do well with it.

And so Paul goes back to his personal story over and over again. God has personally called him into service.

This personalization is something that you and I need to understand as well. We can certainly live without it- after all the facts are the facts. God has given us an assignment. That is a fact. The personal acceptance and appropriation of that assignment, however, is a deep comfort when you are on the edge of the emotional precipice.

But Paul moves on to another basic-
Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 1:12-14

Paul had an extraordinary story. He was, by any measure, one of the truly bad characters of the early church. He had been the one actually hunting down Christians in an attempt to clear Judaism of a dangerous cult. And yet he had been called to be a follower of Jesus.

It is an extraordinary story and one that Paul repeats and the early church repeated.

But the story is not just a dramatic story- it tells us something else that is basic to Christianity. That something is that no one who chooses to follow Jesus is disqualified

based on their past.

This is so important to understanding our faith and Paul captures it in a short phrase-

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 1 Timothy 1:15

Basic #3. Jesus Came To Save Sinners

Here is another Gospel basic that needs repeating ad nauseam. The purpose of Jesus coming to earth was not to fine tune a basically good system.

Jesus is not a kind of divine Tony Robbins who will help get the full potential out of us.

He came to a world that is full of hurting people- and came to bring healing a relief into this place of suffering. Jesus also repeated this theme-

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Luke 5:31-32

The biggest problem that the Gospel faces is a world of people who think they can solve all their own problems and that life is basically as good as it gets.

There are moments, thankfully, when we all have a chance to bask in the beauty of life. Those are treasures. There are days when I drive home and look out over Georgia Strait and the evening light is simply spectacular. In those moments life is good.

Those are gifts from God and we should also learn to appreciate those but knowing that God is just as good on a stormy winter night when everything is going wrong- is the reason why understanding the reason that Jesus came to earth- only makes that summer evening beauty that much more spectacular.

But even when life is as good as it gets we are reminded that it is not about simply sitting back and resting in that moment- we are people with a mission- the Good News that Jesus came to a world that also includes the sick and the suffering- with the message of joy and peace.

And Paul- in his fashion concludes this section with these words-

But 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. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. 1 Timothy 1:16-17

Now at this point we need to be reminded of something. There is a temptation to divide the world into saints and sinners in a way that the Bible doesn't do.

In other words, things are not as black and white as we sometimes interpret them. What do I mean by that?

In the stories of people coming to faith there are times when stories such as Paul's become a kind of standard and the pursuit of the dramatic becomes the norm.

I remember the story of Nicky Cruz called, called the Cross and the Switchblade. He had been involved in the 1950s gang world of New York and become a Christian. It is a powerful story.

A similar story is that of John Newton- an evil slave trader captain who becomes a Christian and eventually writes the classic hymn- Amazing Grace.

There are other stories like this and many of you have heard them. Without

meaning to- these stories can create the impression that dramatic conversions have a special power.

So what does that have to do with this context? A great deal. While Paul had the classic sinner story- Timothy, from everything we know didn't. Every indication was that Timothy may well have been Paul's opposite. It sounds like he grew up in a believing home. He seems not to have been a Type A personality like Paul. He may never have been really bad. I doubt that he ever persecuted Christians.

And yet, Paul never indicated that Timothy might somehow have had a less important conversion than Paul did. If we rank sinners, as Paul does in this case, the ranking is only to make clear that a sinner is a sinner and that no sinner is excluded.

Timothy, choosing to follow Jesus and accept being saved by Jesus, is not a lesser act than Paul choosing the same thing.

It leads to the 4th Basic that needs repeating over and over again-

Basic #4. We Are All Sinners

Even though Paul's story is truly dramatic the purpose of telling it is not to separate him from Timothy's far less dramatic story- the purpose was to show how God's grace extends to absolutely everyone.

This is very important as we look around at the world we have been placed in. Jesus came to into the world to save sinners- and we live in a world full to the brim with sinners.

The sinners are not just those who end up on the wrong side of the law. The sinners are not those who have destroyed their lives with some destructive behaviour such as drugs or alcohol. The sinners are also those people whose lives look just perfect.

As I was closing off this sermon I took the dog out for a quick walk. While I did that, he ran up to a man who was also walking his dog.

We started to chat and talked for ½ an hour. He had moved to the neighbourhood from Richmond a year ago and was still basking in the beauty of living in Nanaimo.

He was a very nice man and probably quite successful.

When I came back to finish off my thought, it occurred to me that he was exactly the kind of sinner that Jesus came to earth to save- but I didn't think about him that way.

Jesus came to earth to save sinners- and He has appointed us to give the message to those we live among.

And this work of sharing Jesus with the world is the assignment that we, His Church, are to do together.

As I came back, it gave me a fresh reminder of the assignment our Church has been given.

We began with the story of Dirk Willems doing something that we can hardly imagine- sacrificing our lives to rescue our enemy. That story shaped 400 years of Anabaptists. It was repeated over and over again.

The idea that Jesus came to save sinners- and has appointed us into His service isn't an easy story. In fact for most of us it may even be as terrifying as Dirk Willems- but it is a critically important one to build into who we are.