

Carrying On...

TEXT:
2 Timothy 4:6-18

October 28, 2007

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation ... I have finished the race ... from now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness..."ⁱ

In this second letter to Timothy, we read that Paul is done. Certainly in these very pointed final verses Timothy gets that message, too. Gone are the lengthy arguments and the winding verbosity of Paul's previous letters. Finished are the musings and exhortations on theology, Christology, and ecclesiology to the new churches scattered throughout the Gentile cities. Here are final, practical words to Timothy (Paul's companion and protégé), because Paul's time is coming to a rapid close, and he must pass the torch and accumulated wisdom, so Timothy can carry on.

Reading this letter, Timothy would understand the urgency in Paul's closing words. The traditional context for Paul's second letter to Timothy tells us Paul is in prison about to die.ⁱⁱ Paul conveys this to Timothy by referencing the Jewish drink offerings (the libations) poured upon the altar to end a sacrificial rite as commanded by God in Numbers 28:7.ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul then incorporates Jewish and Hellenistic practices of crowning people with flowers or leaves to celebrate holy festivals or reward a competitor for an

athletic victory.^{iv} Assured that his hard work, dedication, faithfulness, perseverance, and prowess will be rewarded with the crown of righteousness, he coaches Timothy on how to take over, hoping, it seems that Timothy will make it to Rome to receive final verbal instructions. If not, though, Timothy has been trained to run the next race, and Paul has included these final, important, practical points, too.

"When you come, bring the cloak that I left, the books, and above all the parchments. [Oh, and] Alexander ... did me great harm ... You also must beware of him."^v

These instructions will enable Timothy to preserve the written Word, the collected testimonies of other witnesses, avoid enemies and false teachers, and carry on the work of the newly formed church.

This is a turning point, historically, for the Christian movement, which as of yet has no concept of itself as the Christian church. This is the point where Paul signals loud and clear that the first generation (the apostles, disciples, and eye witnesses of Jesus) are done, and it's time (whether they want to or not, whether they believe they can or not) for the next generation, the second generation, of Christians to take over.

Since we are here today, we know Timothy and others and subsequent generations did carry

on. And they worked hard. And they were dedicated. And they were faithful. And they persevered. And at the end of their leg of the great race, they passed on their knowledge and wisdom and love of God to the next generation, and so the traditions and the Good News and the mission of Christ were carried on.

And the Christian movement became the Christian religion. And the Christian religion became legal and sanctioned. And the realm of Christendom emerged, spreading from Rome throughout the East and West, and it went North and South, stopped only (and only for a short historical while) by the expanse of oceans. And Christianity crossed the seas. And few places in the world were not touched in some way by the generations and centuries of men and women who carried on the faith. New faces, new places, and (as the centuries went on) new expression and ideas for a now ancient faith in a modern world.

And Christianity reached another turning point as the voices of Hus [1370-1415]^{vi} and Wishart [1513-1546]^{vii} rose and were silenced. As the writings of Wyclif [1330-1384]^{viii} and Edward [1538-1553]^{ix} were written and banned. As the words of Paul resurfaced with new urgency and warning, "bring the books, and especially the writings, and watch out for Alexander, because he can't be trusted."^x Except Alexander now has a new name be it Pope

John^{xi} or Mary Tudor or the unnamed officers of the Inquisition. And as the libations poured out on the altars of sacrifice, as lives ended for the promotion of the Word of God and mission of Christ, the next generation arose to carry on.

And that, my friends, is what we celebrate today, or more specifically celebrate on October 31st, that culmination, that climax, when Father Martin Luther had had enough, when the churning and burnings and pangs of reform that began as early as 1382^{xii}, prompted his legendary outcry and Father Martin took his complaints and his hammer and his nail and posted that pivotal prose on the doors of the church (the Holy Roman Catholic Church, guardian and might of Christendom) and began the Protestant Reformation as we know it.

This is a turning point, historically, for the Christian church and led to unprecedented religious and political upheaval throughout the papal realm of Christendom.

We remember this. As good Presbyterians and good Protestants, we celebrate this. And so, Reformation Sunday pops up on the calendar, and we recall our history. We pay attention to our theological roots (thank you Luther and Calvin) and our denominational roots (thank you Knox and Elizabeth and James), and we anticipate All Saints Day that immediately follows, and then we get back to our liturgical year and wrap up with Thanksgiving and begin again with Advent and Christmas.

Reformation Sunday kicks off a

season of history, if you will, when we remember the old stories of Luther and the pilgrims and the nativity, and are grateful that all that happened all that long time ago, so we could sit here today and enjoy the Christian life and the Christian privilege we have in our own modern time and place.

Except there's a problem with that. History doesn't stay "back there". The characters of modern legend, the mythic figures of Luther and Calvin whom we remember as larger than life, did not exist in that way in 1517. Instead, they were real people, everyday folks, wandering around working hard, persevering, being faithful, just as you or I do today. After church, Father Martin Luther went home to his family for dinner. On Monday, John Calvin was back in his law office advising clients or prepping for trial.

And the characters of our Epistle reading lived the same way. With the letter written and sent, Paul sat in his prison cell waiting. Timothy, upon reading the letter, had to pack – gathering together the books and papers and forgotten cloak – to leave on his trip. And as real as Timothy and Paul were in 60, or Luther and Calvin were in 1535, we – you, me, and the person sitting in front of you – are very real and very much a part of this generation in 2007, charged to take seriously the faith, share the Good News, heal those around us, and then pass on our knowledge and wisdom and spirit to the next generation.

For the past few months the Session has been reading the book *Christianity for the Rest of Us* by Diana Butler Bass. Bass

has published a number of books about modern mainline Protestantism, including another that I've recently read titled, *The Practicing Congregation*. In *The Practicing Congregation*, Bass discusses the accepted wisdom (both in secular and religious circles) that the mainline denominations are dying.^{xiii} Certainly we've all heard that, the doom and gloom statistics that if we continue to lose members at the current rate, the last Presbyterian will turn out the last light in the last Presbyterian church in less than 20 years.

And yet, Bass takes issue with this and – I kid you not – quotes Monty Python saying we may appear to be dying, but like the man on the cart on his way to the grave "[we're] not dead yet!"^{xiv}

Bass points out that the opposite of our assumptions is true, assumptions fed by fears and external sources. Instead of dying, mainline churches appear to be stabilizing, even growing if and where congregations can stop and listen to the voices within – voices of the church family, church Fathers, the apostles, and even the Holy Spirit – and accept that we (you, me, and the person sitting next to you) are at a turning point in history, that Christianity is changing again.^{xv}

No longer is "the church" – so to speak – the force of power at the center of world politics, but we are moving again to the fringes, to the counter-cultural margins of society where spirituality, prayer, healing, and peace, where feeding and clothing and sharing one another's personal lives and personal burdens is again becoming the norm, much as it was for those early churches

and the early generations who learned from the eye witnesses, who spoke to Jesus and Peter and James and Thaddeus and Paul, and then took the wisdom and the grace and The Good News and carried it on.

At conference after conference, meeting after meeting, I hear again and again that we are living in the pangs of a new Reformation. If you want to know the religio-spiritual climate of 1515, look around and listen today. The church is at another turning point, another pivotal moment in history that future generations will look back to as a time of upheaval, renewal, refreshed commitment and spirit, and institutional change.

May we rise to the challenge, work hard, be faithful, and persevere.

May we be included among the legends of Christian tradition when the Gospel is preached in 2453.

May we truly live up to our creedal cry of "reformed and always reforming" – worthy to celebrate this history marked on this day, as we live Christ's message in the present tense, and mark our place in the Christian story that will be told by future generations – those generations that will carry on when we are gone.

I challenge you this Reformation Sunday to take stock of your place in the great Good News story.

What mantel or characteristic that you possess would you want another to gather up and put on?

What books or portions of Scripture do you want to be sure the children who sat on

these steps a bit ago are sure to read and learn?

What papers, writings, or thoughts do you need to share so that the mission, the message, your love for Christ is passed on to the infants in the nursery?

Paul is writing to you, Timothy, and the person sitting in front of you and behind you and beside you, and it is time to step up and carry on.

May we all pack our spiritual bags, study again the wisdom of Scripture, and carry on the mission of Christ's church from this point in history forward, as we celebrate and remember how we got here this Reformation Sunday.

All Glory be to God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – in the work of His church and all she does in His name. Amen.

i. The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins Publishers) 1993, 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

ii. Ibid., p. 2238.

iii. Keeping Holy Time, "Studying the Revised Common Lectionary Year C", Douglas E. Wingeier, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press) 2003, p. 342.

iv. Ibid.

v. NRSV, 2 Timothy 4:9-15.

vi. Carter Lindberg, The European Reformations (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers) 1996, p. 382.

vii. George Wishart, accessed 25 October 2007, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Wishart].

viii. Lindberg, p. 45.

ix. Ibid., p. 315.

x. Ibid., 2 Timothy 4:14-15.

xi. Lindberg, p. 48.

xii. Ibid., p. 45.

xiii. Diana Butler Bass, The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute) 2004, p. 10.

xiv. Ibid., p. 20.

xv. Ibid., p. 10.

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