

Am I a Coward?

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – World Communion Sunday

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Text: II Timothy 1

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson – II Timothy 1:1-14

The epistle lesson is part of the correspondence from the Apostle Paul to Timothy, who has been with Paul on many of his missionary travels- and as Paul writes, he is in jail, and there is a good chance that Paul will be killed. Keep that situation in mind as you listen to what Paul writes.

This year I've started a Doctor of Ministry program at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, and in mid-October I'll be going there for my 3rd course - this past week I finished up the assigned reading in preparation for the course, and it has been...depressing! Let me give you a summary:

'The earth's environment and the world's economy are hurtling toward devastation, and the church has been complicit in this collision course with disaster – Western Christian theology in particular has literally sold itself out to the god of unsustainable material accumulation, and the world and its people are suffering profoundly because of it. Environmental and economic justice are today's crucial calling for the church, although it may already be too late to avert disaster.'

...and that's just the first book!

There's more: 'Global Christianity is in a crisis of division between the North and the South, with the global North focused on increasing secularism while in the global South Christianity is expanding with a charismatic theology that is out of step with much of the North – these divisions are leading to increasingly strident power struggles within and between Christian groups. In the midst of this, violence between Christianity and Islam will continue to intensify and spread – and just to make sure no one is left out, the Hindu and Buddhist religions will also contribute to regional conflict and violence.'

There's more: 'many of the current economic and religious fault-lines are heavily influenced by race and racism, and Christianity has usually contributed more to the entrenchment

of those racial fault lines than to the overcoming of racial divisions. Even some of the attempts at addressing issues of race end up instead reinforcing disparities of power and resources and do little to break through the ways we function as insular ethnic communities.’

That’s all – that’s enough! It’s been daunting – depressing – and as I have tried to take that all in, do you know what I have wondered? – I’ve wondered if I am a coward – because it all just seems too much to take in – too much to deal with – too much to do anything about – so I just don’t want to deal with it all. I do not think that is the intended outcome for a Doctor of Ministry program – but (and I am not trying to exaggerate or be melodramatic here) I truly encounter all of these crises and I just want to close my eyes and ears and heart and hands. And I feel like a coward.

Let me tell you about another crisis. Over the past couple of years it has been a very challenging time with my parents. Issues of health and finances and care and housing - and relationships – there has been a lot of stress and uncertainty and difficult decisions. And over this summer through some very intense situations it’s finally come to a point where things are a bit steadier, with some sustainable care in place that puts things less in crisis mode. But you know what? - I’m finding now to be the really hard part – because I’m so weary that I just want to check out from the whole situation - I feel like a coward. The effort of now having to figure out how to stay in connection and support with my parents just about does me in and I just don’t want to deal with it – isn’t that a terrible thing for a son to feel, to say? – truly! - I feel like a coward.

“Coward” is a strong word – “coward” is a word that hits on feelings of shame and failure and disdain – “coward” is a word meant to diminish and demean – it is to be pathetic – which is why I am using it: “coward” – one who in the face of challenge cowers, falters, gives up. I have by that very definition at times lately felt like a coward. I wonder if you ever have, ever do?

So – all evidence to the contrary thus far, I do have some good news today in this sermon! And the good news is that I found out this week from 2nd Timothy that I am NOT a coward - and I would like to offer the same good news to you, and to think how it is good news we can offer to others as well. Because here’s what I found as Paul writes to Timothy:

God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and self-discipline;

God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and self-discipline...

so do not be ashamed – rely on the power of God...who has called us by God's purpose and grace.

And what I heard in that is something that may sound to you like I'm just playing with words, but that I think is very important – it's the difference between "coward" and a "spirit of cowardice" – and here's the difference: "coward" falsely seeks to define me, claims who I am - an identity of shame; while "spirit of cowardice" honestly names the very powerful force present within and around us to cower in the face of challenge. So while "coward" is an inappropriate word for me to say about myself as a child of God; "spirit of cowardice" names the very real spiritual struggle that I feel going on in my life.

It's the struggle of the spirit of cowardice with a very different spirit that's described this way: *a spirit of power and love and self-discipline*. I think that the contrast to cowardice is courage, and while 2nd Timothy doesn't use the word courage, it gives these 3 words that I would assert give an intriguing definition of and content to courage: *power & love & self-discipline* – how's that for a definition of courage? You could say a lot about those words, but I will simply say this.

POWER from the Spirit of God is the power of life over death, that the God of life is present with us to create life: as we heard last week in First Timothy, 'the life that truly is life' – that's true power.

LOVE from the Spirit of God is a relationship of commitment that cannot be broken, a holding in the heart of God that no circumstance can undo – God IS love, and love never ends.

And SELF-DISCIPLINE...self-discipline?! – that sounds quite dry and out of place in the intensity of cowardice vs. power & love...but I find it so profound that it is there – because self-discipline speaks of the EFFORT to not give in to cowardice, but to turn again and again to God's power and love. That is so much what I have felt – the effort, the struggle, the self-discipline not to give in to the deadliness of cowardice, but to turn to, to be turned to, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of power and love towards life.

And that's all I really want to say to you today – to say to myself. I don't speak of being a coward to be melodramatic – or to seek your reassurance (“oh Gordon- you're not a coward!”) – but simply to speak a reality that I feel and that I believe you are familiar with too: in the face of the challenges and complexities of this life and world, it is easy to cower. In the very particular circumstances of my life, small as they are; in the very broad issues of this world, as big as they are – there is a spirit of cowardice at work that in the face of such things tells us to falter, to lose faith, to turn away – and I know that spirit trying to claim me – to take hold of us – to take hold of the church.... But there is a different Spirit – the Spirit of the Risen Christ – the Spirit of courage: of power and love and self-discipline; and I know that Spirit too, for it is the Spirit of God that truly knows me – claims me – claims and turns and calls me to life. And I want you to know that in your life, in this world, in the struggle between cowardice and courage, the Spirit of Christ is to whom you belong too – giving you the power and love and self-discipline to be about the life that is really life.

This is not a table for cowards – never believe that about yourself – we are children of God. But it is a table for people who wrestle with the spirit of cowardice; for here we will be nourished with the Spirit of power and love and self-discipline – the Holy Spirit present within us to live our lives and live in this world in this way:

do not be ashamed – rely on the power of God...who has called us by God's purpose and grace

Thanks be to God. AMEN.