

**“Do the Hard Thing”
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
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Today’s scripture comes from 2 Timothy which is part of the so-called Pastoral Letters which include 1 & 2 Timothy as well as Titus. Tradition has held that the apostle Paul wrote these letters to Timothy and Titus, respectively, although the style and language used would suggest a different author who was probably connected to Paul in some way.

Regardless, the author of our focus of study today was an evangelist trying to spread good news in partnership with other evangelists like Timothy. It is letter of encouragement to Timothy as the language would indicate that Timothy has had a bit of a rough time. Additionally, the author was writing from jail and alluded to his own suffering, a consequence of this evangelism, so all around things weren’t going so well in gospel business. So I invite you to think of 2 Timothy as a letter from one discouraged pastor to another.

But lest you think that today’s scripture is only directed to the professional Christians like Scott, Rachel or myself, think again. This is a word for every Christian, and it is a word with great urgency. Christianity was not an organized religion at writing of this letter. You see, this was a time before Constantine, before Christendom, before the Christian Church was officially established and wielded any kind influence or authority. This was a time before seminaries and an institutional, hierarchal church. This was a rag tag group of people living out in the margins in a time when power, money and influence were held exclusively by the Roman Empire to the detriment and oppression of most under its reign. Within these margins was a group of fledgling Christians who had powerfully good news to share about a new kingdom, a new government, where the poor and the sick, the underrepresented and the minorities were loved and lifted up by its divine ruler. This group didn’t know what would become of the story of Jesus Christ, and so they had a sense of urgency to spread the word as far and deep as they could. They understood that it was the call of every disciple, every follower to share this good news with rigor.

But, as you can imagine, sharing this transformational word was met with a lot of resistance by the Empire and those that benefitted from the current structure of Roman power. Morale was often low among this underdog group of Christians, and as it got harder, they began to yearn for Jesus to come back. With all that in mind, let us now hear God’s word for all of us, as fellow believers and followers of the Word. I’ll be reading from 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5, and I invite you to receive the word that God is offering to you today:

¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to



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instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

4In 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: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³For 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, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Do you see where we are headed today? In the interest of full disclosure, I'm fired up following a Transitional ministry workshop that I attended in Oregon a couple of weeks ago. While I was among the Oregon pines, I chose this particular text to preach today, because it was eerily relevant to what I had been immersed in for that week. It was like the Holy Spirit grabbed my shoulders and said "This. Share this with your congregation and share it immediately!" So I am.

I signed up for this workshop at the recommendation of our General Presbyter, Jan Edmiston, because she says (and I agree) that every church is a church in transition whether that church is in between leadership, as we are, or not. If there is anything I have learned in my 11 years of ordained ministry, it is that the very second we think we have a handle on this church business, it changes. Our world is changing at an unprecedented rate and our churches, like many of our institutions, are woefully behind.

There was a time, of course, that was known as Christendom, where the church was at the center of society. In fact, the town of Roswell, GA north of Atlanta where I'm from was built one square mile around the historic chapel of Roswell Presbyterian Church which was my home church. Indeed, community life was literally organized around the church. Businesses were not open and soccer games did not happen on Sundays, and the pews were full. We pulled out extra chairs on Christmas and Easter, and Sunday school classes were packed. And our churches wielded significant power in our society.

For those of you who have been around any length of time, you know that this is no longer the case. We are now in the age of post-Christendom, where life revolves around profit, extracurricular activities, travel, and second homes to escape the lives we've created for ourselves. In the deep South, we've been able to be in denial about this trend a little longer than the rest of the country, but we are catching up fast. When I arrived to Charlotte Presbytery in 2008, there was something like 136 Presbyterian churches in our seven county region. Through church splits and doors being shuttered, we are down to 98 churches, and many of those are in danger of closing. This is real, my friends; the proverbial toothpaste has been squeezed out of the tube.

But, in our anxiety, we like to try squishing the toothpaste back into the tube. We talk about the good old days and in committee meetings, we say things like, “we used to do it this way” or “this is how we’ve always done it” as if the thing we did in the 1950s or 1990s will work today. Let me save you some suspense - it won’t. Like it or not, we live in a different world with different priorities. Those who do recognize the need for change in the church clash with the people who don’t want change. And let me be clear, I deeply empathize with those who are resistant to change. In the midst of the evolution of our society, we all crave just one dependable space, a space that we recognize as a safe place to wrestle with all that we encounter during the week. Can’t we just have one thing stay the same? And so we end up doubling down on programming, right? We do some new, but we keep all the old, with reduced staff, reduced membership and volunteerism, reduced resources. Doing more things is not the answer nor is it sustainable. I’m exhausted, you’re exhausted, and it can seem overwhelming and downright depressing. From where will our help come?

Well, cue today’s scripture: while on the surface, it would appear our context is different than that of Paul and Timothy’s time, we actually have more in common with them than we realize. We are both trying to organize community around the good news of Jesus Christ out from the margins. Neither of our contexts enjoy authority or popularity, so it can feel like pushing a boulder up a mountain most days. The cost of discipleship and standing on the side of justice for God’s children for both contexts is high. Paul, Timothy and many of their colleagues would be criminalized and ultimately martyred for the cause in the same way as has been true for faithful Christians throughout the ages. Practitioners of their faith such as those who hid Jews during the Holocaust, those who freed slaves prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, those who protested racism during segregation – they all broke the laws of the time, and they all paid a significant price to maintain the integrity of their faith. They did the hard thing. Today, with the caging of immigrant families, the rise in race and religious-related hate crimes, and the rampant greed controlling the power centers of our country, our faith demands our involvement, and that, too, will come with a price.

So, where is the good news in all of this? Well, it turns out we’ve actually been sitting on it this whole time. The message from 2 Timothy is very simply to continue doing what you have learned in the scriptures and proclaim the gospel. One of the significant ways we differ from the early church has to do with comfort. They had a deep and abiding sense of urgency about getting this good news out. While the Hebrew scriptures had been written down on scrolls in limited number, most of the New Testament had not been written down yet and it certainly wasn’t widely available in a zillion different translations and in the drawer of every hotel room. In those days, scripture was mostly transmitted orally, so they had to know it by heart and they had to get in front of as many people as they could to ensure it would get heard and spread. Ironically, the wide availability of bibles has made our generation of disciples a bit comfortable and dare I say complacent, because we assume anyone can pick it up and learn it for themselves. We take ourselves out of the equation and leave it to the theologians and pastors.

But today's scripture throws us **all** right back in the middle of it. The author reminds Timothy and us all to remember what we've learned and to continue that study so that we may be both proficient and equipped. Equipped for what? Every good work. We are to absorb and internalize God's Word, so we are ready for life outside these walls. One of the common pieces of feedback we get as pastors when we ask someone to pray at a meeting or read scripture during worship or teach a Sunday school class is, "Isn't that what we pay you for?"

The answer is no, not if we are doing our jobs right. It's not that I don't understand the question because that was the model that I grew up in, that was the model that my father as a pastor practiced, and quite frankly, we have done a great disservice to the gospel by perpetuating that practice. If the pastors are the only ones who are doing this work, then the church will surely die. The result is congregations who have little to no ownership or understanding of discipleship and as a result, have fallen into the role of spectators rather than participants of God's work in the world. Or having no skin in the game, they've just left altogether. Our job as ministers is to teach you how to do those things for yourself and encourage you, so that you can teach others about the Word, and they can teach others, and so on. That is why we call on you to practice it in these walls: so you'll be equipped to pray and teach and love when you are out there. At its best, it's a viral, grassroots approach to ministry, and that, my friends, is how the early church grew and spread. We would do well to learn from them.

The text in 2 Timothy names what we are up against in chapter 4, verse 3 when it says, *"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."* If that doesn't smack of truth these days, I don't know what does. In a world with cries of "fake news" and distortion and flat out denial of verifiable facts, we crave a true and trustworthy word, do we not? We are losing our way as a country. Some have questioned in the midst of all this whether the Word of God is even relevant anymore, but I think it is as relevant as it ever has been. This witness is here for such a time as this. But it requires everyone who would claim they belong to God to roll up their sleeves, think creatively, and get to work.

One of our workshop leaders at this training I attended, the Rev. Dr. Heidi Armstrong, is currently the Transitional Pastor at First Presbyterian Seattle. To illustrate what doing the hard thing means, she shared the story of this congregation through its highs and lows. First Seattle's campus occupies a full city block of downtown Seattle on prime real estate. In 1940, they were the largest Presbyterian congregation of over 8,000 members, and they were responsible for planting multiple new churches in the area. With urbanization came decline and a painful split in 2015 has left them with about 25 members. Beyond the help of consultants, mission studies, or a gimmick-y new worship style, there have been lots of conversations about what to do next, what few options they have left. They cannot afford to maintain their property or invest in more staff.

Many churches this size decide to close, but they decided they will not close their doors, at least not yet. They have moved worship from their main sanctuary to a chapel, and they

have opened up some of their campus for the urban homeless. They have a simple, casual, come-as-you-are type worship service, followed by a catered lunch that everyone is welcome to join. Note that they don't lock the doors to the homeless or strangers or anyone else for that matter. Heidi reports that every week they host a rotating, diverse group of people for worship – some original church members, some international tourists, some homeless, some people from out of town receiving specialized healthcare from the local hospital.

She also introduced our group to what she calls a participative style of preaching where everyone there is invited to essentially co-create the sermon with her. She does all of her homework on the selected text as she would typically do with a traditional sermon, introduces context to the congregation, and then opens the floor with some questions to get people started. Everyone has the opportunity to contribute (if they want), interact with, and lay claim, take some ownership of the living and breathing Word of God. Everyone's fingerprints are all over it. Then they share a meal together.

The stranger from a foreign land, the sick, the homeless, and everyone else in between feasting on the Word of God and then a meal together - I can't think of a more beautiful and vivid expression of the Kingdom of God. This is what Jesus was talking about – this is what he was modeling all along. They are committed to do the hard thing together as they prepare to sell their property and find another place for this fledgling community to gather. On the surface, it seems like another tragic story in church decline, and it is not without some pain. But when you peek inside, you realize their identity as First Pres Seattle is no longer attached to the buildings or a worship style or a pastor. It is grounded in radical inclusivity and participation gathered around the Word and Sacraments which means they are at home together no matter where they find themselves in the future. They are discovering the meaning of Resurrection.

There are all sorts of studies and speculation about why the church is in decline. We play the blame game – it's those young people that don't show up, it's those old people who are too controlling, it's those liberals, it's those conservatives. But simply put, I believe the church is in decline because the church has forgotten who she is and why she is here. And what was so powerful and hopeful to me about this little experiment in Seattle is that they aren't employing some fancy, consumer-driven, attractional ministry model led by a young male pastor who is married with two kids who is going to bring back all the families with young kids and ensure our salvation just like Jesus did. It's not about pulpit candy or a rock band.

They are gathering and welcoming all the different kinds of people Jesus talked about around the living and dynamic Word of God, this ancient yet incredibly relevant text. They are remembering who God is, they are remembering who they are, and they are proclaiming the message together. And that's what I think today's letter to Timothy is all about: keep it simple, do the hard thing, and gather joyfully around Word, the font, and the table. Amen.