

And Grace Will Lead Us Home

Opening

A few weeks after a stay in intensive care, the poet stepped on the bus. Along the route, an elderly woman took the seat across from him, perceiving the suffering he endured. She reached across the aisle, took his hand, and whispered:

Only we, she said, who've had our share of trouble

Who go to the edge and return, ever understand

How precious time is. Everything we do is double

It was a moment of pure gift for our poet, Michael O'Siadhail, "golden beyond measure."

And then the ever intrusive thoughts in the next moment, "goals and ambitions, so much to do."

As the woman alighted for her stop, she smiled, patted the poet's hand, saying, "don't forget our double time." A precious encounter interrupting the poet's goals and plans. But in the departure O'Siadhail received new vision: "To live will be to have things we'll leave undone."

We come to this final Sunday in our series on 2nd Timothy, a series in which we have considered how we live a life of maximum effort in the Kingdom of God and how we may finish well in Christ. Well, when we have reached the end of this sermon series concerned with finishing well we must confess the poet's paradox: "To live will be to have things we'll leave undone."

I remember reading an interview with the Anglican poet and novelist, Madeleine L'Engle, where she addressed her own mortality. Her work was words, she lived in books, and mastered her craft. She's well worth reading. L'Engle described a moment that caught her unawares in her later years. One day she looked at her library of books and the reality struck her: "I will never read all these books." And she began to weep. An author's

bookshelves are a sign of her friendships, so there was no little grief here. “To live will be to have things we’ll leave undone.”

Perhaps Paul’s words are so familiar to us that we miss the paradox therein. Each of us want to say when our time of departure comes, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Paul confesses his sure and certain hope that a crown of righteousness awaits him, the reward that the Lord will give him. Yet Paul will depart this life, but all is not well among his churches on the whole. Just as he anticipates with Timothy his eternal reward, he opens his soul to his spiritual son of his heartbreak. Fellow laborers have deserted him. Paul had no one to defend him when he stood trial in Rome. His churches are not exactly at peak faithfulness and flourishing at the time of Paul’s departure. How can Paul depart with this kind of confidence when so much seems unfinished?

Finishing Well in Rome

Well, the answer is in the names. Paul invokes 24 personal names in 2nd Timothy. The chapters and verses we often skim in the Daily Office or Bible reading plans may have been the most important to Paul—the names of his brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Paul can say “I have kept the faith,” not only in the sense that he has preserved the purity of the Gospel message from false teachers; he has also kept the faith intact by training the next generation of saints in righteousness. All may not be well in Corinth, Ephesus, and Miletus, but the Lord’s people are in place, proclaiming the Gospel, defending the Gospel. Paul sent Erastus to Corinth, Trophimus to Miletus, Tychichus to Ephesus. And, of course, there’s Timothy to whom this whole final message is addressed.

Our faith remains intact, not only insofar as we personally preserve the faith in heart, soul, and mind, but it remains intact insofar as we pass on the faith to next generations. And that is what we do/did this morning as Luke and Rachel Miller brought their daughter Ellie to the fountain of baptism. We cherish every child, every person who comes to baptism in this parish. This is why vows are so important, not only of parents and godparents, but of the congregation. Keeping the faith in our generation means passing on the faith to the next generation.

For in every newborn servant of God, passing through baptism, we hear the name of a new saint, a name with a calling and a destiny in the Kingdom of God.

Names are precious, names are sacramental. Dumitru Staniloae says that “a name gives a child her own unique, personal form which is the image of Christ in her.” Nicholas Cabasilas also said, “the saving day of Baptism becomes the name’s day for Christians. It is then that we are formed and shaped, and our shapeless and undefined life receives shape and definition. On this day we hear the significant word, our name, as though then we were properly known, for to be known by God is to become truly known.”

This is what it means to be baptized to be known by God. This is what it means to be the Church—to know and be known *in Christ*.

Paul has kept the faith and passed on the faith, not just to individuals, but to whole communities. There are numerous personal names in this letter, but there are also numerous *place* names in this letter—Galatia, Dalmatia, Thessalonica, Miletus. Paul has finished his race, he’s completing his work, not because there are dynamic, charismatic leaders in place who will achieve great success. The Church is a communion of saints, a priesthood for all believers, not a crowd gathering around a religious celebrity. Paul has begun Gospel communities and appointed faithful Gospel pastors and teachers who will guard the faith, suffer for faith, and proclaim Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from dead. All may not be perfect in the churches, there will be unfinished matters when he breathes his last, but Paul’s work is complete. He has kept the faith and passed on the faith.

Lost Friendships and the Prayer for Mercy

Within the great affection of those saints whom Paul loved to the end, we find examples of friendships that had been lost, too. How does Paul finish well in Christ with the reality of this painful, broken fellowship?

A subject that is rarely addressed in our Christian experience is lost friendships. The grief of lost friendships is less common when you’re young, but when you come to the middle of

your life, it will be an experience you have more than once. In our age, we are greatly confused about the nature of genuine friendship.

Social media is the great illusion of friendship. You may have 1,000 Facebook friends on your account but can this truly be called friendship as our fathers and mothers knew it? I don't know how many Facebook friends I have but I've noticed that over time I receive "friend requests" from people I've never met. Sometimes these are real people and not bots. Even then, is this a notch in one's social media statistics or genuine care for one another?

I'm far more concerned with those face-to-face friendships I have had and lost. Now, there are different ways friendships end. God gives us some friends for a particular time or place. When life, education, or vocation takes you to another place, you cannot possibly sustain friendships in the same way from the place you just left. To do so would be to close yourself to new friendships and your actual, real life neighbors.

Then again God gives some friendships that transcend time and place. You maintain contact, but not as often as you look. But there is a loss *within* the friendship *without* losing the friendship. You miss the daily chats you used to have, but you pick up right where you left off when you're together again. This is the kind of spiritual friendship where there's grace and understanding, no hard feelings, but an awareness the friendship has changed.

But then there are friendships where something happened. Or something *didn't* happen for a long, long time. Friendship was lost due to neglect and you *can't* just pick up where you left off. A wound has opened. Something has been lost. /

And here's an important disclaimer: I know that I have failed in friendship. I do not speak of lost friendships as if the other party is always culpable. I've failed as a friend and I've been hurt in friendship. It's part of living in this fallen world. But if there was ever a place to apply Jesus' words, "Take the beam out of your own eye before you remove the speck from your brother's eye," it pertains to friendship.

Paul was no stranger to the loss of dear friendships, even co-laborers in the Gospel, who abandoned him. Demas was like the seed that germinated, began growing, and was choked by thorns. The cares and love of the world choked off his love for the Gospel and his love for Paul. Alexander the coppersmith is probably the same Alexander Paul mentioned in his

first letter to Timothy. Paul said Alexander made shipwreck of his faith and did Paul great harm. And Paul warned Timothy that Alexander might harm the faith of others. He was a friend turned foe and he wasn't safe.

Paul knew the lament of Psalm 55 when the psalmist poured out his soul:

'it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me, then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's house we walked in the throng.'

Paul knew that bitter loss but he didn't become bitter. Remembering how friends abandoned him when he was put on trial, Paul invokes the words our Lord Jesus spoke from the cross; the same words Stephen uttered when Paul (then Saul) witnessed Stephen's martyrdom: 'may it not be charged against them!'

You cannot prevent the pain of lost friendships. But finishing well in the Gospel means choosing mercy over judgment; choosing grace over anger, resentment, and bitterness. Finishing well means 'entrusting one another and all our life to Christ.'

Dad's Story

This past week marked six months since my father died in the faith of Christ. He selected these final words of Paul to be read at his funeral. Many of you were present with me and my family at his funeral, and I know that there were several who were unable to attend. But I want to share with you a story of how my Dad finished well and kept the faith in the Lord. It's a story that will be familiar to those who heard my sermon at his funeral, but I share another moment of my final week with him that I did not share six months ago.

These things you must know always remained true. In our family, we always knew we were loved and that we truly loved one another. In our family we always affirmed faith in Christ and commitment to his Church. These things were never in doubt.

As men, Dad and I had a particular road we had to travel together in this family story. God made us very different. It is not rare in the human story for fathers and sons to struggle and clash in their relationship. And struggle we did for many years. We loved one another, but as southerners often say, 'we had words.' And in those words that hurt, we had not met each other in our brokenness.

I knew that the Gospel required me to take out the beam in my own eye, so I along the way I confessed my failures as a son. But becoming vulnerable and acknowledging his own failures was not something that came easily for my dad. But two years ago, my Dad chose to meet the Lord in his own brokenness. And then he came to me in a spirit of humility and repentance that transformed our relationship and our entire family. When he became weak, he became strong. We had reconciling and healing conversations from 2017 to the very end of his life.

The last week he was alive was Holy Week. On Maundy Thursday—the very day we remember Jesus' new commandment to love one another—my dad wanted to make sure he expressed his repentant heart in our relationship. He expressed how he wished we could have been better friends.

As I listened to my Dad, more powerful in his weakness than I had ever known him, the Holy Spirit spoke the words of the Apostle Paul within me: 'forget what lies behind, strain forward to what lies ahead, press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.' And I told him we leave behind what lies behind and we strain forward to eternal life in Christ Jesus.

And then I told him the great Christian hope of eternal life we have. I said, "Dad, you and I achieved the best relationship we could in this life considering how different God made us. But we don't have to get it right in this life. We trust the Lord to redeem what's broken. And in Christ you and I have an eternity to enjoy the friendship we couldn't fully achieve in this life. And I look forward to that friendship that will grow and grow and grow in Christ."

For this is the same man, who with my mother, brought me to the waters of baptism as a child. He finished his race by walking the way of humility and godly repentance. He kept the faith. And he passed it on to me. This is the faith I will pass on to my children. For this life is not about getting all the things done, it is about loving Christ and loving one another

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to the end, and passing on the power of this Gospel of grace to the next generation, for the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.