

East Liberty Presbyterian Church
The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
October 24, 2010 (Full Inclusion Sunday)
2 Timothy 4:6-18
“Companions on the Journey”

Early in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, old Polonius pulls aside his son Laertes and offers some words of advice: *Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice...Neither a borrower nor a lender be...and to thine ownself be true* (Act 1, Scene 3). Near the end of life, Moses gathered together the leaders of the tribes of Israel, and said to Joshua, his designated successor: *Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to give them. The Lord will be with you; do not fear or be dismayed*” (Deut 31:7-8). In the same way, in the years shortly after the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, members of the early church composed letters to encourage new Christians to be strong in their faith, using the mentor-disciple relationship of Paul and Timothy as their model. In 2 Timothy, they referenced details from Paul’s life and created a farewell speech of sorts.

Paul is depicted at the end of his life, imprisoned in Rome for proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the resurrected and holy one. Paul’s days of missionary travels and crisscrossing the Mediterranean Sea are over. No more speeches in crowded Greek marketplaces. No more escapes from lynch mobs under cover of night or fiery defenses offered before courts of public opinion. He was behind bars, in chains during the time of Emperor Nero’s persecution and winter was fast approaching. Who was with Paul at that moment? We’re not sure, but a man from Ephesus, Onesiphorus, is mentioned twice. And his longtime companion Luke was with him. Others, though, are not there. Crescens, Titus and Tychicus are no longer with him – whether off on missionary work or away because they were afraid of the same persecution that Paul himself was now suffering.

In every life there are cycles in which people come and go from our lives. This happens in families, workplaces, and neighborhoods. School friends sign our yearbooks and disappear until they re-emerge years later on Facebook. People in churches commonly cycle in and out through seasons of activity and seasons of inactivity. That’s because church life and life in general is never static; our faith life will always be active and ever-changing, just as the Holy Spirit leads us.

This is not to say that the ebb and flow of life leaves us no regrets. Having new friends here in Pittsburgh does not negate my missing old friends from my former church in Wisconsin. Sometimes the regrets are because of the way people leave us. In the letters of Colossians and Philemon, Paul mentions that a man named Demas is with him; but now he reports that Demas has deserted him, being in love with this present world. The threat of persecution, a fear of holding fast to faith in a world antagonistic to Christ’s message, may have sent Demas running away. And Paul is troubled by this.

Demas is gone. At the same time, Paul wants Timothy to bring Mark with him. Mark and Paul had a falling-out years earlier. Paul was angry that Mark had once deserted him and refused to bring him along for one of his missionary journeys. But Paul and Mark later reconciled, and at the end of his life, Paul expressly wants Mark with him, saying “he is useful in my ministry.”

A picture emerges here of the Apostle at the end of his life, writing to a beloved son who represents the next generation of believers. But he is writing about mundane things: Bring me my cloak, for winter is coming. Bring me my books and parchments, so I may study and write. Luke is here, but others are gone. Bring Mark; and you, Timothy, come to me soon. Paul’s situation is like our situation. Our days are filled with mundane activities. We work, we eat, we sleep. We read and write or text message. We want friends and loved ones around us; and we want to be a friend and be loved by others.

This basic description of life should be the starting point for any conversation about what it means to be inclusive as a community of faith. Too often the starting points are about disruptions to inclusivity. Too often the starting points are about the violence, the bigotry and prejudice and fear that undermine community. Yes, those things need to be talked about, but they are not where we begin. Our starting point is much more basic: we live together – young, old, black, white, Anglo, Latino, gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, employed, unemployed. We live together now in ways that are pretty mundane, if not boring. We shop for groceries, we pay the bills, we watch football games, TV shows, and read the paper. We exist in relationships – we fall in love; we care for people younger and people older than ourselves. We have children or we adopt; or we don’t do either. You get the picture.

Why is this mundane perspective important? Because too often we begin conversations about inclusion and diversity from the perspective of the disruptions. Last week the young son of Pastor Glenn Grayson was tragically shot and killed at a party. The gunman was angry at others, brought a weapon and started firing, hitting Jeron even though he was not involved and somewhere else inside the house. A star athlete and freshman in college is now dead; a pastor who has been a constant critic of gun violence loses his son to that very thing. It is all too painful.

And last month, over the span of two weeks, at least five suicides occurred related to the bullying of gay young men. The news covered the story of Tyler Clementi, the 18 year old Rutgers student who jumped from the George Washington Bridge after a roommate had spied on him with a webcam and broadcast videos online. There was also a 19 year old, African-American student in Rhode Island who hung himself; a 15 year old boy in Indiana who’d been tormented for years who hung himself; and two 13-year old boys, one in California, one in Houston, who’d been bullied and tormented for their sexuality, and who committed suicide. For one of the boys, Seth Walsh, his grandfather told reporters that they had known his grandson was gay since he was in the third grade. For Seth’s funeral, the church was packed and a younger brother read a statement in which he said, “I just wish people could have been nicer to him.” Bullying was mentioned in the church service, but sadly, sexuality was not mentioned at all.

A few statistics: Suicide is the third leading cause of death for young people 15-24 years old, behind only accidents and homicide. It is estimated that for every completed suicide, there are 100-200 attempted suicides. And gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth are four times more likely to commit suicide than heterosexual youth.¹ The statistics are not about unnamed people out there; the statistics about suicide attempts and bullying, about being ostracized and abused are about people here in Pittsburgh and here in our church. And it is not a question of official “Big Brother”-type persecution coming down from authorities on high. George Orwell’s 1984 vision of surveillance and persecution has been replaced by thousands and thousands of “Little Brothers” – webcams and camera phones and Internet postings, any one of which can bully, threaten, or ruin a reputation or a life in an instant.²

What do we do now? There are several responses. First, we are to live and worship together in boring, mundane ways, where people, black, white, young, old, gay, straight are together in pews, on communities, volunteering, making music, in prayer. Here we learn each other’s stories and take note that our primary identity is as followers of Christ, not whatever label the world might put upon us. Here we let it be known that bullying is not the way of faith, and that a safe place is offered for any who have been bullied and ostracized because of their sexuality. And we proclaim that keeping silence on this is a sin so long as others are so full of despair that they feel led to kill themselves, especially when we’re talking about 13, 14, and 15 year old youth. We must offer another vision to counter the hurt and anti-gay hatred too readily expressed on our city streets and schoolyards.

Second, we must remind one another that the race of life is not a 100-yard dash, but a marathon. We are to keep on “keeping on”, fighting the good fight and keeping the faith. And life’s marathon is never on a smooth race course; rather it is a steeplechase – something full of hurdles to be cleared, hills and valleys, pitfalls and rigorous opposition.³ Paul knew this and fully experienced this. And we know this to be true. May we, like Paul, be able to profess that through it all “the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed” (2 Tim 4:17).

Third, as long as the race of life may be, the end goal, the horizon, toward which we run extends far into the future. It is something beyond any one life. Moses knew that in passing the mantle of leadership to Joshua. Paul knew that as he spoke words of encouragement to Timothy. Paul earlier had said, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (I Cor 15:19). In a related vein, in 1965 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke these words from the steps of the Alabama State Capitol: *I know you are asking today, “How long will it take?..Not long, because truth crushed to earth will rise again. Not long, because no lie can live forever. Not long, because you shall reap what you sow. Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”*⁴

We begin from places like this – a church community proclaiming acceptance amidst diversity – and from here we go out to confront prejudice and injustice, to comfort after

violence strikes again, to challenge whenever homophobia and bullying threaten anyone. We go out from here with one another as companions for the journey – for the marathon journey whose arc bends toward journey. We go out from here keeping the faith, knowing that in Christ the ultimate victory has already been won. Christ's grace is sufficient. Christ's love for us and through us can move mountains and heal all wounds. So with Paul and the church triumphant we proclaim: To him be the glory forever and ever.

AMEN

¹ Source: *Care2: Support Education* website. Studies cites: 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey and Massachusetts 2007 Youth Risk Survey. Article "Bullied Indiana Teen Commits Suicide" by Steve Williams.

² Walter Kirn, "Little Brother is Watching", *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2010; p. 17-18.

³ Robert Dunham, *Feasting on the Word, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18*, Homiletical Perspective, p. 209.

⁴ Quoted by Arthur Howe, January 19, 2009, *Open Salon* website.