

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/MAY 2, 2010

RELATIONSHIP/I TIMOTHY 6:6-12

REV. DR. LYNN CHEYNEY

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

— *I Timothy 6:6-12*

I. PRAYER: Lord, silence in us any voice but your own now, for we have come to hear your word for us; to be reminded that you are, that we are not alone, that who we are and what we do matters to you. Startle us, O God, with your truth, open us to your love which never ends... through Christ Jesus. Amen.

II. A PARABLE

In her novel *Rosie*, Ann Lamott tells the story of how the main character, Rosie, learned to ride a bicycle. Charles Adderly, Rosie's parent's friend, kind of tricked her into it. But like many of us, she didn't want the learning part – she just wanted to be able to do it, to know how to do it. She was afraid of falling. But she had received a red two-wheeler for her birthday, with a rack on the back, and pink streamers pouring from the plastic grips of the handlebars. Charles said he would teach her to ride. "I'll hold onto the rack in the back and walk along beside you. Just pedal and steer; I won't let you fall."

The next day he came over after breakfast. They went out to the sidewalk. Rosie got on the new red bike and put her feet on the pedals, and he took hold of the rack and she started pedaling. She felt so tight that her elbows were locked, and her knees were locked – as much as they could be, since she still had to try and pedal. She didn't really trust him, but he kept walking along beside her as she wobbled down the sidewalk. "You're doing fine," he kept saying. "I won't let you fall." They went all the way to the end of the block, turned around, and pedaled back home. She kept checking to make sure he was there behind her, and he was.

"Let's do it again tomorrow," he said when they were back in front of her house, but she thought maybe taking a few days off in between lessons would be a good idea. But he was there the next morning, in the kitchen with her mother, drinking coffee, waiting for her. She sat by him while he told her mother how beautifully she had done on the bike the day before.

This time they went four blocks. He held onto the rack, and she was still terrified. He kept saying, "Just pedal and steer. I won't let you fall."

The third day he was in the kitchen again when Rosie woke up. He was wearing a red plaid shirt. They went outside, and she got on the bike and started pedaling. He took hold of the rack. She was feeling more confident, a little looser, and she picked up the pace a little,

smiling finally, and he had to walk very quickly, almost trotting, to keep up with her. Then she started pedaling really fast, and after a minute she risked the quickest look over her shoulder to check in with him, as by now he must really have been running. But he wasn't there, he was a whole block away, so far back that his shirt looked pink – there he stood, waving at her. And there she was – riding her new bike.

Now hold that story in your minds for now – we'll get back to it in a few minutes.

III. CHURCH HISTORY

We are the products of a tumultuous change in western civilization that really took hold in the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation – the Reformation set people free to read scripture, to debate theology, to begin thinking – and believing – for themselves. Then, along came the next wave – the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, broadly speaking, left us with two basic ideas – the first is that **we** are in control. It was the Enlightenment that truly gave us the concept that “man [rather than God] is the measure of all things.” Now, that claim had been made some 2,000 years earlier,ⁱ but it became a central theme via the Enlightenment. The second notion is that what is measurable, what is quantifiable is what is real. Science rules.

Now, this is great, even necessary, if you want to create a computer... it is a bit limiting if you want to understand something like love, or faith. We can pretty accurately measure the distance a car can go on a gallon of gas and we can repeat the experiment – but we cannot measure the impact or meaning of, for example, a kiss or an act of kindness even once, much less if we attempt to repeat it. Some things simply reside in the realm of mystery – they must be taken on faith... they do not lend themselves to dissection. Yet, over the last centuries a great deal of energy has been spent dissecting the faith. The result being that much of the modern church seems to have reduced Christianity to particular sets of theologies and beliefs. And that is a problem – for the Christian faith is not primarily a set of beliefs or doctrines, dogmas or a collection of ideas... the Christian faith is, at its heart, about love and faith, forgiveness and reconciliation – it is about relationship. Marcus Borg puts it this way, “This preoccupation with “believing” and “beliefs” has a crucially important effect: it turns Christian faith into a “head matter.” Faith becomes primarily a matter of *the beliefs in your head* – of whether you believe the right set of claims to be true. Yet the twin notions that being Christian is about “believing” in Christianity and that faith is about “belief” are a modern development of the last few hundred years. Prior to the modern period, the most common Christian meanings of the word “faith” were not matters of the head, but matters of the heart... Faith is the way of the heart, not the way of the head.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Faith, like love, is one of those odd human experiences that can be grasped only from the inside – it is a matter of feeling, of trusting, of surrendering; not of measuring, or knowing about, or calculating, or evaluating. To use Paul's words, faith is about pursuing righteousness, godliness, love, endurance, gentleness... it is about prayer and solitude and community. Personally, I find it easier (and more fun) to argue about whether the Letter to the Ephesians was actually written by Paul, or to debate Christology and religious pluralism, than to love my enemies or give myself over to prayer, or find contentment in the very good life I already have.

IV. THE ANCIENT STORY

Our text today is one of dozens we might have chosen to help us get at the heart of Christianity. In this passage Paul is writing to a young pastor – Timothy. Now, Paul might

have written... “Timothy – here’s what you need to do – get your theological ducks in a row, decide what you believe and don’t deviate from it, pursue precise beliefs. But that is not what Paul said... instead... “Tim, here’s what you need to do – pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.” Notice that they are all connection words, messy words, unanalyzable words; not easily given to dissection. They are all surrender-to-God’s-guidance words; they are all words that, yes, presume knowledge and understanding of scripture; but, that understanding is always in the service of relationship, just as knowing how a bike works helps us learn to ride and enjoy it. They are words based on a faith-filled presumption that God is with us – and that our life with the ever-present God of grace is enough.

Faith is to be experienced – faith is a matter of the heart – faith is a relationship – a relationship founded in love and trust. There is a difference between knowing about and knowing God. What we know about God is not a substitute for faith – it is in service of faith.

V. BACK TO THE BICYCLE

Getting back to the bicycle story. Instead of learning to ride the new red bicycle she got for her birthday Rosie could have parked it in her family’s garage to be studied and analyzed – how many gears, how do they work, why a different bike would have been a better gift. She might have considered whether, given the value of the bike she received as a gift, she should hang onto it and try to sell it to that new kid down the block. She might speculate about how it works, the physics of bike propulsion – that if you sit on the seat and exert pressure on the pedals of the shiny red bike you may well be propelled down the sidewalk. She could gather her friends, and they could study that bicycle together and draft a list of all the things they knew about it. Hardly the point of the gift; hardly what a bicycle is intended for; and certainly a disappointment to her parents.

Given what bikes are for – her bike is essentially meaningless until Rosie climbs onto the bicycle seat and begins to pedal. And that is fundamentally an act of faith – to encounter the bicycle, to trust it enough to climb on board and take the ride. Rosie decided to learn [even if a bit reluctantly] to ride a bike rather than only read about riding one. She trusted a loving friend even when getting on the bike felt scary. Rosie’s story is a story of faith – it is an action story – and faith is really an action word. The Christian faith is not staking a claim to a sentence or two plucked out of the Bible, nor is it rooted in whatever values Fox News, CNN, or any mediator of the culture holds forth; rather it is taking the risk of pedaling through life trusting that we know and love the one who will guide us through. It is about pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness... it is about learning to pray and build community and offer love in many ways to a world crying to be filled. As a bike is meant to be ridden; a meal to be eaten and enjoyed, a conversation to be entered into, faith is meant to be experienced and lived.

The Christian faith, pursuing a relationship with God **is** like learning to ride a bicycle – you climb on, you pedal, you steer, you wobble and get terrified you’ll fall. As Dr. Kathlyn James puts it, “You attempt to live the life God wants you to live, as best you can discern it. You practice, you get better at it. You crash, more than once. You get up and get back on, entrusting your life to God’s hands again. You reflect on your faith in light of your experience. You pray. A lot.”

Faith is an experienced thing – it comes alive, as does love, not when we believe something, but when we know someone. Belief and faith are not the same thing.

VI. THE SUPPER

This morning we share the table of our Lord – the blessings of God for the people of God, food for the journey, a meal of communion with Christ and our fellow companions on the way. There is nothing in this meal that analysis will help. We come to participate in, as Calvin puts it, the spiritual presence of Christ and in one another. It is here that we are focused on the gift God has given us, and here we promise to respond – engaged, heart mind and soul with the ever-present God and with one another – pedaling as best we can, wobbling along at times, sailing along at others; laboring uphill, cruising downhill; singing in sheer joy, praying feebly in the midst of doubt or fear.

In the end it comes down to the risk of living before we know every bit of data, before we have analyzed every assertion. As St. Augustine put it some sixteen hundred years before Marcus Borg or any other theologian of our generation who acknowledges the transcendent and challenging nature of Christianity: “We come to God by love, and not by navigation.” And as we all know, love, when not left as a noun in a dictionary, but lived as a verb with one another; well, love takes a lot of faith.

VII. PRAYER: Lord, help us to yearn, not only to know about you, but to truly know you as well, that we might always remember and live in your gracious presence. **AMEN AND AMEN.**

ⁱ Protagoras

ⁱⁱ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 26.