

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

In 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: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching.

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, 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. As for you, be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

People Prayers: Strengthen the Congregation - October 16, 2022

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Last Sunday, members of our congregation had a wonderful meeting with members of the Haddon Heights Church. As you know, we are exploring the possibility of working more closely with them in the future.

The purpose of the meeting was to simply to get to know each other better. Strange isn't it? We are both members of the same denomination. Our buildings are located only a few miles from each other. We share much in common. Yet, we are strangers to each other. We know almost as little about them as we know about the Episcopal Church next door or the Baptists on the next block.

It goes further. I know almost nothing about the Presbyterian pastors ministering around us. Sure we've met, know each other's names, had a few conversations now and then. But mostly we are strangers to each other. Yes, we have this group called presbytery that meets every other month where we're supposed have fellowship and support. But that seldom really happens. When we meet, there are a number of short, superficial conversations among us and me checking my watch.

The fact is that the Christian experience for most of us is limited to what we see and encounter within these walls. Despite similarities in denomination or theology, each building is a kind of fortress. Us vs. them, regardless of who "they" are.

Moreover, we live in a time when the Church in general has become increasingly unpopular. At our meeting last week, everyone was lamenting how "back in the day" schools would end early on Wednesdays so kids could go to their respective churches for Wednesday Club. Many remember the time when kids sports teams would never practice or play on a Sunday. When I was a child, I could stand on the porch of my house with my mother and she could point to every house in our neighborhood and tell me what church the family attended.

We may indeed be sighing over the loss of those days because they recalled a time when people were at least partially able to acknowledge the existence of God and accept that they didn't have all the answers in life. They maybe could even admit to themselves that they couldn't go it alone in life. Despite our flaws, congregations are good things.

Back then, people tended to go a church that was close by. After all, it's only been in the past 60 years or so that many families had the ability to get in their cars and drive a distance to go to a church outside of their neighborhood. Looking at the communities of Collingswood or Haddon Heights, we see dozens of church buildings, some open, some closed, which remind us of the days when people

actually walked to church. When our building was opened over one hundred years ago, most people came in the Fern Avenue entrance. Now, of course, most come in the door nearest the parking lot. Quite a change!

So in 2022, we are in a church-going situation quite different from what we had as children. Nowadays, there are pretty much two sizes of congregations: small ones like ours and big ones, even super big ones. A small church like our offers a level of closeness and fellowship that most big ones can't match. When one member hurts, we all share the pain. We celebrate each other's joys and pray for our concerns and we know that we're not alone.

In many larger churches, not so much. It's easy to become faceless and anonymous. Sure you might know a few people and bond with them, but most worshippers are strangers to each other. No one cares very much if you came or went to services as long as they had your email. No question nowadays larger churches can offer not merely a worship service, but a worship experience, complete with professional praise bands, well-crafted light shows, trained choirs and top-of the line videos. Certainly a far cry from our not-always-reliable simple screens and Zoom service.

Every week in our prayers we pray for our congregation and its work in the world. We ask God to:
Strengthen this congregation in its work and worship. Fill our hearts with your self-giving love, that our voices may speak your praise, and our lives may conform to the image of your Son. Nourish us with your Word and sacraments that we may faithfully minister in your name, and witness to your love and grace for all the world.

The phrase that stands out for me is when we ask God to "Fill our hearts with your self-giving love, that our voices may speak your praise, and our lives may conform to the image of your Son." That, I pray, is always our goal here at Collingswood and I pray it is the goal of every church in the world, regardless of location, regardless of denomination, regardless of theology.

However, such is not always the case now. Moreover, it has not been the case from the beginnings of the Church.

Our scripture today is from the second letter the apostle Paul wrote to his student and colleague Timothy. Timothy was one of Paul's earliest assistants and went with him on many missionary journeys. He was born into a Christian family and devoted his life to Jesus. Now he was ready to go out on his own and this letter from his mentor Paul is intended to warn and prepare him for the life of an evangelist.

One message you've heard from me many times is that following Jesus is hard work. He sets a standard for human behavior that forces us to constantly examine our words and actions as we compare our lives to his. None of us can be Jesus, of course. Not even close. But that does not mean we cannot try.

Yet from the beginning of the Church, there were many who liked Jesus's message — but not all of it. The parts about loving enemies and forgiving those who have wronged you over and over again are among the hardest things Christians have to do in life.

Now, we preachers have a choice. We can either proclaim the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ, reminding them of the challenges Jesus presents us with. Or, we can water down the Gospel into an inoffensive, tasteless mush that neither offends nor challenges anybody.

When we were children, we loved pitting our caregivers against each other, didn't we? If mom said, "No," we'd run to some other adult and ask the same question, hoping for a different answer. If we got the answer we liked, we'd do it. Too bad if the adults disagreed!

It was easy back then and it is easy today to shop around churches, looking for the nice and easy message you want to hear. The question of worship and being part of a church is this: is worship and church membership intended to affirm everything you do and believe or is it supposed to make you think and grow as a human being?

Paul warned Timothy against preaching what people wanted to hear. He predicted that, "People will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth." In other words, if they don't like the message they get from one preacher or church, they will leave that church and find another. Of course, the message they don't like will be the one that forces them to look into a spiritual mirror and remind them how far short they have fallen from Jesus' standard. They will then seek out those preachers who tell them everything is all right. Their lifestyles and choices are godly and Jesus approves of everything they do.

There is no question that an essential part of worship is to experience a sense of community. We all need comforted from time to time. We all need to be assured of God's love and presence in our lives. We all need to be surrounded by people who share our journey, our pain, and our struggles. In meeting with our friends at Haddon Heights, we both shared our love for fellowship, food, and simply being together. Such things are indispensable parts of being a church community and were an essential part of Jesus' ministry. He made people feel welcome and accepted.

But that is not all what the Church is about. If fellowship is all we do, than we are no different from any number of clubs and service organizations out there. On the other hand, people can also find support and companionship in a book club or a bowling league.

However, the Church must be more. I hope every Sunday you leave here with a sense of belonging, support, and love because that is what Jesus is about. Yet, if that is all you experience, we have failed. Jesus did not come merely to comfort the world, he came to confront and challenge the world. He came to get his listeners to think about who they are in relationship to God and to each other. He challenged them, enlightened them, and sometimes even criticized them. Good churches do not merely affirm the lives of their people, they transform them. In other words, in this congregation, we strive each week for you to leave here changed, touched, and healed by God's Word.

Change is difficult, transformation is difficult. It is far easier to go to a church that will simply agree with the person you are now than to make you uncomfortable by pointing out how different your choices and ideas are from those of Jesus. It is easier to run away and just avoid it all.

Friends, it was as true 2000 years ago as it is today: people seek the easy way out. It is no wonder that we have many churches in the nation who irrationally support guns and endorse candidates who lie and rally behind politicians who are racists and take stands on so many other sinful issues that Jesus and the Old Testament prophets would condemn. There is no such thing as wealth being a sign of God's blessing. Jesus told us it often was a curse. There is no such thing as males being inherently superior to females. God created all humans to be equal to each other. There is no such thing as Jesus supporting guns! Jesus, the one who laid down his life for our sake.

Sadly, friends what Paul told Timothy back then is true right now: the church world is full of people who reject the honest truth of the Gospel and will simply find preachers who say what they want to hear. No wonder the Church is distrusted by so many, believers and non-believers alike!

Obviously, we can't change the culture of people seeking to be blessed just as they are now, not as Jesus encourages them to be. Paul told Timothy to nevertheless be faithful to his calling, "As for you, be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully."

Friends, we may be few, but the work and witness of a few who are dedicated to Jesus Christ is far more powerful than an army of megachurch parishioners hearing only what they want to hear and doing only what they want to do. God sees us, God hears us, God knows us.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.