May 15

Grace and peace to you this day.

Towards the end of his life, the apostle Paul wrote three letters that are often referred to as the “Pastoral Letters.” One of these was to a man named Titus (more on him in a week or two), and two were to his dear friend Timothy, who Paul thought of as a son.

Of course, Paul never married and had no children. He had no one to pass the “family business,” meaning the new church of Jesus followers, on to. But Paul loved Jesus and loved the church and dearly wished for his missionary work to continue. Timothy was the main person Paul chose, and prepared, to carry on his work.

By the time Paul writes these letters, Paul is an old man. He has been beaten, flogged, stoned, starved, imprisoned, humiliated, challenged, spit upon, and left to die, all in the name of Christ. His encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus so many years earlier had served to sustain and strengthen his spirit, especially at this time in his life when his body was tired, hungry, and broken.

So, Paul writes two letters of instruction to Timothy, who is a young man and who is struggling to find his footing as a leader in the church. One of the things Paul says to him is this:

“I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people — for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

You might not think this is a remarkable statement, you might even meet it with a “Yeah, whatever,” but consider this: when Paul wrote this, he was a prisoner of the emperor Nero. Nero was one of the cruelest tyrants of all time. He was the Hitler of his day. Paul would soon die at his hand, and Paul knew that time was coming, and yet he urges Timothy “first of all,” to pray for him.

And therefore, Scripture urges us also to do so today, no matter what side of “the aisle” we’re on, and I can promise you, Paul was not on Nero’s side of the aisle. Let me ask you, when’s the last time you prayed for President Biden by name? Vice President Harris? Speaker McCarthy? Let me suggest that as the elections loom and the mean-spirited attack ads air, now would be a great time to start.

IHS,
Pastor Lou
May 16

Grace and peace to you this day.

The apostle Paul cared deeply about the church. Not necessarily about whether the music should be fast, slow, loud, or soft. Or if the bulletin should be free of typos, the technology free of glitches, or the air temperature just right.

My guess is that he would not have cared if the grass was a little “weedy,” the parking lot had a few cracks, the coffee was regular or decaf, or the creamer hazelnut or French vanilla.

He probably would not have minded fussing babies (I don’t either!), anxious new parents, a few people who maybe fall asleep from time to time, or a cell phone that inadvertently rings.

Instead, what he was deeply concerned about was that people knew who their Savior was. He cared about people’s hearts. He cared that the church and its people conduct themselves with love, compassion, and integrity. This is what he says to his dear friend and follower Timothy in the first letter he writes to him:

“Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (3:14-15).

Notice here that Paul uses the phrase “God’s household” instead of “God’s house.” This implies two things: first, that the church and its people belong to God. Second, that we are not just a building or a gathering place, but that we are a family; specifically, God’s family.

As always, Judy and I are so honored to be part of a church “family” that lives this out day by day and in the passages of life. Now that’s what Paul’s talking about!

IHS,

Pastor Lou
May 16

Grace and peace to you this day.

The Declaration of Independence famously says this (in part):

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Notice that it doesn’t say that we have the right to exist in happiness, only that we have the right to pursue it. It doesn’t mean that you will find it, only that you have the right to chase after it.

Maybe this is a bit of patriotic heresy, but I sometimes think that “the pursuit of happiness” is something of a fool’s errand. This statement in the Declaration arises out of the Enlightenment and Enlightenment thinking, meaning that it places human reason and self-definition at the top of human existence. In this context, we are free to define our own happiness, do whatever makes us happy, and pursue it by whatever means we choose within certain constraints. To me, this is the road to failure and disappointment.

Contrast this statement to what the apostle Paul says in his first letter to his dear friend Timothy:

“But godliness with contentment is great gain” (6:6).

Paul says this: first, start with “Godliness.” That means live a life of mercy, grace, love, and compassion. As the Lord said through the prophet Micah: “Act justly, seek mercy, and walk humbly with your Lord” (6:8). Paul implies that living a “Godly” life will lead to a life of contentment. He decidedly does not use the word “happiness,” nor does he encourage us to “pursue” it. Instead, he encourages us to lead the kind of life modeled for us by our Savior, because that is the path to true contentment, spiritual joy, and inner peace.

That, Paul says, is not just “gain,” but “great gain.”

Don’t get me wrong. The Declaration is one of history’s greatest documents. But Jefferson’s words won’t set you on the path to contentment. Only God’s Word can do that.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
May 17

Grace and peace to you this day.

Today we will look at the last letter the apostle Paul ever wrote, the letter we call “2 Timothy.” Paul is in prison and at the end of his life, facing death at the hand of the emperor Nero. He is on the threshold of eternity, and he writes these words to the young man he calls “dear son:”

“He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (1:9-10).

Once again, the eternal nature of God is revealed to us. Paul says that the grace we experience through Jesus was given to us “before the beginning of time…”

You know, I often wonder what it means to be made “in God's image.” Many people much smarter than me have attempted to answer that question. As I read this, I wonder if this passage from Paul’s letter to his dear friend gives us a hint.

Could it mean that not in a divine sense, but in a spiritual sense, we are also meant for eternity? Paul writes this in Ephesians: “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (1:4) and in the passage for today we learn that the grace we experience, which allows us to live eternally after our physical death, was similarly given to us “before the beginning of time.”

Whatever the answer, know this: As Paul speaks to Timothy, so does he speak to us. The Truth he declares as his life comes to an end is summarized beautifully in a single phrase: “[Jesus] has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Again, to that I say, Amen.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
May 18

Happy Friday, everyone!

Here’s your musical devotional for the week. Turn up the volume and enjoy!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y81ylo1_3o8

IHS,

Pastor Lou