

Is It True?

Lamentations 3:19-26, 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Do you know what makes me mad, what really ticks me off? Well, not really mad, I guess, but do you know what I find more than a little irritating? I don't mean to offend. It's the idea that, "I worship out in nature, cleaning up the Missouri River, hiking in Rocky Mountains, or experiencing fine music or other art, but church really doesn't do anything for me!" That doesn't make me mad because people are saying what is true for them.

It's not as though I haven't felt same things. I get mad because church is often not nearly as translucent to God as is time spent on the river or in the mountains or on the beach, or a museum or concert hall. I get irritated because it is probably true for most people that serving God by coming to church is not as compelling as experiencing God through nature or some other way. The problem is not nature or our experiences in nature. The problem is how we often experience church and what it means for us much of the time to follow Jesus/

Today is the fourth in a sermon series called, "Why Should I Follow Jesus?" Through this series, I am sharing some of the reasons for my faith and why I choose, on my life journey, to follow Jesus. The first reason was "joy." The second was the "promise of abundance." The third reason was how Jesus showed us truth of God clearly in human life. The fourth reason is this: "following Jesus is a journey worthy of your life."

Did you ever play that game—really more of an exercise—in which you imagine yourself at the end of your life. You look back at your life and think about how you've lived. You reflect on your life and how you've spent your time and energy. What do you celebrate about your life? What do you regret? What would you change? The idea is that you can change. From now on you can do things differently. Most people would do more toward building relationships. Very few people who do this exercise say they would have spent more time at the office or tried to make more money or wasted time and energy holding grudges. What values will you embrace with a greater priority? Two questions that each of us should answer after doing this exercise are: What would be on your "not to do" list and what would be on your new "to do" list?

The point of this exercise is not the future or the past. It is here and now—the present moment. The essential questions we face are: "How will I live—spend my time, energy, and money?" "What choices will I make now concerning my life journey, my relationships, my vocation, my personal life, and my spiritual path?" "With what sense of value and priority will I make them?"

Christianity, like other religious traditions, teaches the basics. "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength" and "love your neighbor as yourself." But of course, it's up to us to do the "loving." We have to choose to live the values we profess. We enter communities to support us in the doing and to hold us accountable for doing what we say we value! None of it is easy, but ultimately, when you look inside yourself, it is the only life worth living.

The New Testament book of Second Timothy is one of the Pastoral epistles. An Epistle is essentially a sermon in the form of a letter. Second Timothy was most likely not actually a letter from Paul to young Timothy. Its language usage and historical references led scholars to decide that it was non-Pauline in authorship, that it was written later in the first century, but intended to reflect the wisdom a mentor at the end of his life shared with his protégé.

The elderly Paul was in prison facing death when he encouraged young Timothy. He offered him advice about how to live a life worth living. There were three pieces of advice in today's

scripture lesson for first-century followers of Jesus. It is good advice to us as well and we'll be wise to heed it.

The first piece of advice is to be faithful in your values. Stand firm in your faith in trying times. Have the courage to stand up for what you believe, for what you value and trust. These are not doctrines, but life values. Paul said to Timothy: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." The power is to accomplish what we want deeply. The love is to color all our choices and decisions. The self-discipline is to choose what is ultimately in our self-interest; ultimately reflecting God's values: justice, peace, and compassion.

Do you remember the story of New York doctor killed in Afghanistan just a couple of months ago? He and some colleagues were going to provide medical care to an isolate area of that country when they were caught and executed. At some level, we all stake our lives on our choice to follow God by following Jesus. Most of us won't literally risk our lives, though some will. But as important, we face many social, moral, and political pressures to be silent in the face of oppression or to lend passive consent to injustice. None of us wants to feel that our lives have not been lived well or that they were time wasted. It takes courage to be faithful, courage to stand up for what we value.

The second piece of advice is to trust in who you are and what you feel called to do. You may be getting tired of hearing from me how important it is to discover who you are at your center; of your need to discern what it is you want to be doing in your life—what brings you to life, what you feel called to do, and what you most want to do. Again, Paul shared about his own trust in following Jesus – that even at the end of his life it was still strong. "I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him." Trust in who you are and what you feel called to do.

The third piece of advice is to value the truth of the pathway you're walking. Paul wrote, "Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." What is this "standard of teaching?" You may notice, from time to time, that my teaching not always what you may hear from some other pastors. Some call me a little unorthodox. After thirty years as a minister, 8 1/2 years as pastor here at Crossroads Church, I tend to be a little more forthcoming now than perhaps I used to be. Now I say from the pulpit exactly what I believe in my heart and my head even when my teaching exists in some tension with what some may consider orthodox Christianity.

Following Jesus means to reflect Jesus' values in our teaching and in our living. I try my best to reflect in my teaching the very best of biblical scholarship and the very best of my experience as a pilgrim and a pastor. I believe Jesus showed taught us:

- That God is radically inclusive – everyone is "in"
- That salvation is less about getting into heaven or avoiding hell and more about embracing our oneness with God, with each other, and with all creation right now
- That we are partners with God in shaping this world according to God's dream of *Shalom*
- That we are called to be full and faithful partners with God, partners in faithful living and faithfully sharing this good news with others.

As Paul said to Timothy, "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us."

It is time now to step back and ask yourself a few questions--really one question asked three ways. Is the promise of the Gospel true? Does a life invested in following Jesus lead to life? Does this path touch and reflect the core of the meaning of God?

This call to action is to ask yourself; "Why should I follow Jesus?" It is a question we need to answer, though not a test so you don't have to have final answer today! It is important that each of us who identifies ourselves as a follower of Jesus has at least a sense of why we choose to follow that way. I'm taking this series to share why I follow Jesus. It is because of the joy, the promise of abundance, and how Jesus points us to God. It is also because I find that way to be true. It requires something of each of each of us: some courage, self-awareness, choices about how we'll live, and trust that the heart of life is love rather than hate, justice rather than greed, and compassion rather than contempt.

God, the source of Life that was in Paul, Timothy, and Jesus is also in us. The Spirit who shone so clearly in Jesus' life also shines in each of you. In the end, to follow Jesus in his example and teachings is to trust in that Spirit. It is trust that to live this way is true. It is worth the journey. And it leads to a life that is worth living.