

October 20, 2013 Norwalk

Pastoral Prayer

There is a chill in the air O God. It is, of course, the season for such changes -- the scattering nuts, the coloring and falling leaves, the jacket and long sleeves. And there is an exhilaration about it sitting in the bleachers or biting down on an apple or pulling on that favorite sweater. There is a certain glory to shivering and fresh delight in a cup of something steaming, and autumn's relief beckons those longer, less perspirational walks.

But there is a stillness, as well, not always comfortable; a soulful dampness somehow heavier and more opaque. The coolness might make it more pleasant to move, but we are perversely less prone to it. Sometimes it's true even of the walk of faith -- the discipline required, the focus, the effort. Nudge us, we pray. Move your Spirit in us like the wind among the branches and stir us into newness of life.

But we pray not just for ourselves. Hear our prayers for the those who are ill and recovering; those who are lost and searching; those who are lonely and are reaching. Hear our prayers for our leaders and their impasses; our troops and their dangers; our Search Committee and their discerning deliberations.

Hear our prayers, for we offer them in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray saying: Our father...

Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

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 doctrine, but having itching ears, 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, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Regardless of the Season

OK, so I wrote a song. Two, if you want the larger truth. Lori, as you might recall, afforded me for my birthday the wondrous privilege of spending a week with two singer-songwriters whose work I have treasured; and I arrived at the conference center in New York's Hudson River Valley with excitement, trepidation, and giddy anticipation. I didn't have a clue what to expect -- from them, or what they might expect from me -- but I was anxious to find out. This isn't the time to give an accounting of it all, but I'll tell you that of the 20 in the class, I was one of two who hadn't already been busy writing songs for some years, and didn't bring a notebook full of samples to share. And since, as it turned out, part of our class sessions each day involved song critiques I decided I ought to have something to offer when it came my turn, even if that "something" was only words without any tune, as yet, by which to sing them.

There were plenty of ideas I could have spent time developing -- including an eventual tribute to my beloved whose generosity had sent me there. Alongside of that gratitude, my daughter's impending wedding kept occupying my thoughts -- thoughts emanating from the notion that a father ought to have something to say to his daughter on the threshold of such a momentous occasion. Now, I will be the first to admit that the wisdom I settled on as the point of the song is hardly the last word on the subject -- and frankly, not particularly romantic. I'm not even sure it's wise. What it does, however, is try to call attention to the fact that it isn't always easy -- that love isn't all laughter and romance and wine and roses. In fact, sometimes it's the thorns rather than the roses that occupy center stage. It can be hard. But, as I tried to emphasize, that doesn't mean you are failing; it only means that you're NORMAL. The chorus goes like this:

*"Love's a balloon amid wind and rough edges,
and promises won't keep it aloft.
There's joy in the chasing; laughs in the reaching,
but after awhile you grow tired.
Now, all that I know's from forgiveness and failure,
but what they have taught I'll pass on --
--from fallible father to hesitant daughter:
think of your ring as a string on your finger
that reminds you to fiercely hold on.
---just remember to fiercely hold on."*

Well, whatever value such an insight might have to a newly-minted bride and groom, it is, I think, virtually the same counsel that Paul was offering his protege Timothy -- and through Timothy, to those other Christians he might have occasion to reach. It isn't always easy. Conversion is exhilarating. Baptism is breathtaking. But after that it gets more complicated. Sometimes the crowds around you are supportive, while at other times they are seductive. Sometimes they are hungry for the gospel message; other times they can't bear the sound of the words. That, and there always seems to be this insatiable itch for the new, the novel, the clever, the flashy -- never mind that this isn't a toothpaste we are talking about or a fashion runway or the auto industry's ever evolving new model year.

"And don't think that are you exempt," Paul notes with a word of caution. Our own spiritual seasons change, too. The wet fertility of spring becomes the cold hardness of winter when our prayers fall like stones and our soul feels clenched like a fist. Wise, then, the counsel as the old translations rendered it:

"proclaim the message -- persistently, in season and out of season."

Or, as my humble poetic efforts put it, "amidst the wind and rough edges...just remember to fiercely hold on."

At least at its core because this Good News by which and to which we have been called is worth holding onto. Paul, in his own poetic waxing extols the preciousness of scripture:

"There's nothing like the written Word of God," as one contemporary translation captures it, *"for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us."*

Or, as Matthew Henry summarized it, scripture "instructs us in that which is true, reproves us for that which is amiss, directs us in that which is good" (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6, p. 847).

Of course the "scriptures" that Paul was referring to constituted what we think of as the Old Testament. There was no "New" Testament at that time to talk about; just the law and the prophets and the associated writings that reflected on them. Those, and their sense of how those biblical imaginations had been fulfilled in the life and witness of Jesus of Nazareth. It's not that one should never question scripture, or study it

critically, or that every single sentence has the heft and character to stand alone never mind what the rest of those sentences might say. It's just to say that as a gathered witness to God's will and way for the earth and all its creatures, it is the arch beneath which we are wise to pass, and only foolishly discounted or avoided because it's sometimes hard -- or even more damning, "not fun."

I'm not sure what season we might be in -- you as a disciple, or we as a congregation. As to that latter, no one is likely to relish this as a favorite time -- in-between ministers, weary in one way or another; a fear of settling into a state of stale stagnation. It's understandable to feel like missional direction and spiritual vitality are a little untethered and adrift in these colder, leafless days of a congregational autumn. And God knows it's a lot more work right now making sure that everything and everyone gets tended to instead of just assuming that the minister will take care of it. Will the doors get opened and later locked? Will the communion bread get baked and the money counted and newsletter sent on time? Will the sick be prayed for and new opportunities picked up on -- "Oh, and by the way, did anybody notice and welcome that visitor a couple of weeks ago"? It's all sort of complicated and tedious right now.

And we look out across the calendar's landscape and recognize that it isn't going to end anytime soon. The Search Committee is prudently doing its work, but even an optimistic forecast of a conclusion to their efforts falls somewhere beyond winter and into spring. We remain closer to the beginning of this wilderness than its end, and congregational discipleship -- like love -- is also a balloon amid wind and rough edges, and it will take more than good intentions to keep it aloft. It will take a collective recognition that it's important, and worth our concerted attentions to keep it buoyant and bobbing along.

But let me just observe that this is when it really matters -- precisely when it ISN'T easy. This is when we finger around on our faith as we hold onto it separately and together and see what it's made of, and what it's worth, and what all we -- I -- will do to sustain it. This is the time to return to those scriptures whose truths compelled us in the first place; whose comforts sustained us, whose guidance channeled us, whose glimpses into God's imagination inspired us, and let them go to work on us afresh as grace and guide and ground and prod.

There will be those times, Paul cautions, when people fall away -- when the ears are turned against you. Heck, who are we fooling? There will be those times when it is our own heart that has laryngitis and our

own ears that can't bear the sound and our own spiritual legs that cramp with a missional weariness.

That, counsels Paul, is when you hold onto that string more fiercely than ever. *"Keep your eye on what you're doing,"* he adjures us; *"accept the hard times along with the good; keep the Message alive; do a thorough job as God's servant."*

For as even an aspiring, barely-more-than-ignorant farmer can attest: the seasons will change yet again. The heart's soil will warm and the Spirit's rain will fall and we will want to be seeded and rooted when it does, and nourished and already growing and strong enough to bear the weight of the fruit that will surely feed the many who will find their way beneath our shade.