

1st Timothy 1:1-7; 6:11-21
The perplexity of preaching.

Ruskin Falls, September 23, 2018
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
18th Sunday after Pentecost

TEXT (*English translation: NRSV*)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight 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. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith.

Grace be with you.

(1)

Those are the opening and the closing paragraphs of the letter we call 1st Timothy.

What we are given to hear in this letter are words of pastoral counsel and wisdom from the experienced church leader and seasoned preacher, Paul, to a younger and less experienced ministerial colleague, Timothy. Timothy has been working with the church in Ephesus. He was planning on leaving soon to go help out in a church in another city, and Paul was hoping to come and do some work in Ephesus sometime soon himself. Now, however, Paul suggests a change of plans. He wants Timothy to remain in Ephesus longer than he originally had planned on staying.

Paul has become aware that there are influential persons in the church in Ephesus, who, should they get their way, are going to end up distorting rather than furthering the cause of the gospel of Jesus. Moreover, Paul sees in Timothy – despite Timothy’s youth and inexperience – the right person for dealing with the situation. He just needs, Paul believes, some solid advice and encouragement. Therefore, Paul tells Timothy he should stay in Ephesus and work at getting that church on sounder theological footing than it now is, before he moves on; and Paul offers Timothy advice and encouragement regarding how to deal with that church’s situation.

So, what we hear in this letter is a tried and tested minister of the gospel, giving advice and counsel to an up-and-coming minister of the gospel regarding issues that are causing tension among the members of the Ephesian congregation. This morning, I invite you to focus on one of those issues, namely, the issue that is at stake in this question: What is the key to – what is at the heart of – what is of primary importance in – sound and true proclamation of the gospel of Jesus? We also can put it this way: *What, first and foremost, distinguishes Christian preaching that is sound and true, from Christian preaching that, in the end, is meaningless talk?*

(2)

Paul’s counsel to Timothy with that question in mind is this: Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the life that really is life, namely: life that becomes ours through God’s eternal love; and keep the commandment of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope.

Paul’s counsel is this: Let your preaching be grounded primarily and centrally in true faith, real life, and divine command – none of which is at your disposal to be grasped or mastered on your own; all of which comes to be, only as *God* acts to bring it about.

Paul’s counsel is this: Even while a preacher must pay close attention to what the natural and human sciences have taught us about ourselves, preaching is to be rooted first and foremost not in that, but in faith’s apprehension of God’s act of *self-revelation* in Jesus Christ; preaching is to be rooted not in what we ourselves have discovered or otherwise come to know, but in what God *reveals*. And, even while a preacher must pay close attention to what people commonly take to be real, preaching is to be rooted first and foremost not in that, but in God’s *gracious interruption* of worldly reality with the embrace of a love that is *more real* than is anything in and of the world; preaching is to be rooted not in the reality of the here and now, but in the reality of God’s love coming into the world from beyond the world. And, even while a preacher must pay close attention to the social, cultural, and historical situation we find ourselves in, preaching is to be rooted first and foremost not in what we ourselves have found to say about the human situation, but in what God in Christ *commissions and trains* us to proclaim; preaching is to be rooted not in what we preachers think we *have* to say, but in what God’s grace *gives* us and *charges* us to say.

Paul’s counsel is this: Christian preaching, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is not primarily and centrally – is not first and foremost – a matter of stepping up to the pulpit to share with the congregation information, insights, and knowledge that we preachers have acquired on our own and now desire to share with others regarding human life, the natural world, and/or the politics and morality of our situation. Rather, primarily and centrally, first and foremost, preaching is a matter of humbly yet boldly stepping up to the pulpit paradoxically *not* on one’s own, paradoxically *without* any information, insights, or knowledge of one’s own to share, yet nevertheless somehow oddly called, somehow strangely compelled, somehow mysteriously commanded by God, to trust and to declare that, in the life and mission and death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ – which is to say: in the history of Jesus Christ – eternal God was and is at work in the world, revealing and making available to people the reality of God’s grace. And, in a supremely important sense, God’s grace is a wholly new reality in the world. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that challenges the lines that we humans have been drawing between what is and isn’t believable, and between what is and isn’t possible. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that actually joins our mortal lives to the eternal love of God and to God’s loving plan to re-order our life together in this world and to fit us for a place and role in the future that God intends. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that we ourselves cannot grasp with clarity and certainty, but that grasps us by holding us open to Christ’s resurrection Spirit. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that lets us recognize, acknowledge, and confess that human governance is set, one day, to yield entirely to the unconditionally loving governance of God, and, furthermore, that lets us recognize, acknowledge, and confess that we can and should begin here and now letting our lives accord with God’s governance.

Paul’s counsel therefore also is this: Our world has desperate need of changes that are not going to happen as long as you and I insist on remaining the way we are right now, rather than yielding – heart and soul and mind and strength – to what God’s grace is saying to and doing with us. And the task of preaching is, first and foremost, to declare, not what we preachers on our own believe we have to say, but what God’s grace is saying to and doing with us all in Jesus Christ.

One of the difficulties Timothy was faced with in the church in Ephesus, was the tendency of some in that congregation to want to hear what Paul called myths and endless genealogies and speculations. What Paul is getting at here is what we today could describe as wanting to hear preachers talk of God primarily by, for example, telling heart-warming stories of human adventure and heroism; or by identifying biblical principles for having a happy marriage and raising successful children; or by speculating about the United States of America as a new Israel, God’s new chosen people; or by acting as if they have special knowledge regarding which political party God is a member of, and which candidates God is supporting, and how God is voting on the major issues of the day; or by advancing new discoveries in the natural or the human sciences as advances in our knowledge of God.

The point is this: The central and primary task of preaching is not simply to add to all the other human ways of viewing the world, a supposedly Christian view of things. The central and primary task of preaching is to speak of God in ways that let God’s grace speak *itself* into people’s hearts and minds. The central and primary task of preaching is not to try to speak for God, but to point to the history of Jesus Christ and let the word of God revealed in that history *speak for itself*. The central and primary task of preaching is not to try to speak for God, but to speak of God in ways that let *God’s grace* take hold of people’s lives and, in turn, enable them to take hold of the life that really is life – life “rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future” – life touched by the new reality revealed in Jesus Christ that gives life in this world a new beginning.

The problem Paul saw in Ephesus was this: expecting preachers to be able to speak God’s word in God’s stead, when, in truth, preachers are to speak of God in ways that let *God* speak into people’s lives the word *no preacher* on earth can speak, namely: *God’s own gracious word*. That is why, whether I explicitly say it or not, my prayer each Sunday morning is that the things we say and sing and do in worship shall become fitting instruments for God to use to speak God’s own word into each of our lives.

(3)

A member of our congregation, LaWanda Harris, is presently pursuing seminary studies in preparation for ordination as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Except for the two weeks each August she spends on campus at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, she's doing her courses online. This semester, she's taking three online courses and doing the fourth here in her home church as what's called a Supervised Practical Ministry (and this, while continuing to work as a nurse at St. Vincent Infirmary!). I serve as her supervisor and our session serves as her evaluation committee. LaWanda had to choose four main areas of focus for this course, and one of the of the areas she chose is *preaching*. One of the requirements of the course is that she preach before this congregation twice this fall, and she'll be doing that on the last Sunday of October and on the last Sunday of November. And, she and I are spending a lot of time each week, reading about and discussing together the task of preaching. Perhaps that is why, of all the issues that Paul was trying to help Timothy deal with, the issue of preaching dominated my attention this time.

Moreover, as I have pondered this morning's passage, I have had constantly in mind something LaWanda and I read in an essay by the theologian Karl Barth in a book originally published in German in 1924 (see: *The Word of God and the Word of Man*; Harper and Row, 1957, pp.183-217). In that essay, Barth writes about what he considers to be the greatest perplexity a minister faces, namely, the perplexity of *preaching*. That perplexity, as Barth identifies it, is this: "As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory. This is our perplexity. The rest of our task fades into insignificance in comparison."

I believe that Barth is quite right. The task of preaching is not the task of having important-sounding things of our own to say about God. The task of preaching is to point to Jesus Christ, to point to the history of Jesus Christ, to point to Christ's resurrection Spirit, in ways that let, not the preacher's words, but the word that God alone can speak, impress itself on people's lives – even in all its otherworldly mystery.

As in Timothy's time, so today, the church is faced with far more problems than just the perplexity of the task of preaching. There is, for example, in this country, this problem: that the church today is playing an increasingly insignificant role in people's lives. I dare say, however, that one very important reason for this latter problem is this: so many of us preachers have become so confident that we ourselves know and have a lot to say about God, that we've turned the church into a place of meaningless talk, when what it needs to be is this: a place where, with an eye to the history of Jesus Christ, words are offered up for God to use to speak *God's own word* uniquely into people's hearts and minds and lives.

To be sure, words giving voice to human knowledge, wisdom, and insight are always deeply important. They can probe, they can edify, they can encourage, they can beautify, they can inspire, they can guide, they can hearten, they can lighten, they can console, they can move the human spirit in profoundly important and needed ways. In the end, however, the world will not be saved by human words. It will be saved by the *word of God* coming at us *through* human words that have been humbly yet boldly offered up for God to use to speak into the world *God's own word* of guidance, healing, transformation, and redemption through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let it belong to our constant prayer that that be always the word that you and I are in this place to hear and heed and serve. Amen.

1st Timothy 1:1-7; 6:11-21
The perplexity of preaching.

Ruskin Falls, September 23, 2018
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
18th Sunday after Pentecost

TEXT (*English translation: NRSV*)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight 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. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith.

Grace be with you.

(1)

Those are the opening and the closing paragraphs of the letter we call 1st Timothy.

What we are given to hear in this letter are words of pastoral counsel and wisdom from the experienced church leader and seasoned preacher, Paul, to a younger and less experienced ministerial colleague, Timothy. Timothy has been working with the church in Ephesus. He was planning on leaving soon to go help out in a church in another city, and Paul was hoping to come and do some work in Ephesus sometime soon himself. Now, however, Paul suggests a change of plans. He wants Timothy to remain in Ephesus longer than he originally had planned on staying.

Paul has become aware that there are influential persons in the church in Ephesus, who, should they get their way, are going to end up distorting rather than furthering the cause of the gospel of Jesus. Moreover, Paul sees in Timothy – despite Timothy’s youth and inexperience – the right person for dealing with the situation. He just needs, Paul believes, some solid advice and encouragement. Therefore, Paul tells Timothy he should stay in Ephesus and work at getting that church on sounder theological footing than it now is, before he moves on; and Paul offers Timothy advice and encouragement regarding how to deal with that church’s situation.

So, what we hear in this letter is a tried and tested minister of the gospel, giving advice and counsel to an up-and-coming minister of the gospel regarding issues that are causing tension among the members of the Ephesian congregation. This morning, I invite you to focus on one of those issues, namely, the issue that is at stake in this question: What is the key to – what is at the heart of – what is of primary importance in – sound and true proclamation of the gospel of Jesus? We also can put it this way: *What, first and foremost, distinguishes Christian preaching that is sound and true, from Christian preaching that, in the end, is meaningless talk?*

(2)

Paul’s counsel to Timothy with that question in mind is this: Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the life that really is life, namely: life that becomes ours through God’s eternal love; and keep the commandment of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope.

Paul’s counsel is this: Let your preaching be grounded primarily and centrally in true faith, real life, and divine command – none of which is at your disposal to be grasped or mastered on your own; all of which comes to be, only as *God* acts to bring it about.

Paul’s counsel is this: Even while a preacher must pay close attention to what the natural and human sciences have taught us about ourselves, preaching is to be rooted first and foremost not in that, but in faith’s apprehension of God’s act of *self-revelation* in Jesus Christ; preaching is to be rooted not in what we ourselves have discovered or otherwise come to know, but in what God *reveals*. And, even while a preacher must pay close attention to what people commonly take to be real, preaching is to be rooted first and foremost not in that, but in God’s *gracious interruption* of worldly reality with the embrace of a love that is *more real* than is anything in and of the world; preaching is to be rooted not in the reality of the here and now, but in the reality of God’s love coming into the world from beyond the world. And, even while a preacher must pay close attention to the social, cultural, and historical situation we find ourselves in, preaching is to be rooted first and foremost not in what we ourselves have found to say about the human situation, but in what God in Christ *commissions and trains* us to proclaim; preaching is to be rooted not in what we preachers think we *have* to say, but in what God’s grace *gives* us and *charges* us to say.

Paul’s counsel is this: Christian preaching, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is not primarily and centrally – is not first and foremost – a matter of stepping up to the pulpit to share with the congregation information, insights, and knowledge that we preachers have acquired on our own and now desire to share with others regarding human life, the natural world, and/or the politics and morality of our situation. Rather, primarily and centrally, first and foremost, preaching is a matter of humbly yet boldly stepping up to the pulpit paradoxically *not* on one’s own, paradoxically *without* any information, insights, or knowledge of one’s own to share, yet nevertheless somehow oddly called, somehow strangely compelled, somehow mysteriously commanded by God, to trust and to declare that, in the life and mission and death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ – which is to say: in the history of Jesus Christ – eternal God was and is at work in the world, revealing and making available to people the reality of God’s grace. And, in a supremely important sense, God’s grace is a wholly new reality in the world. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that challenges the lines that we humans have been drawing between what is and isn’t believable, and between what is and isn’t possible. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that actually joins our mortal lives to the eternal love of God and to God’s loving plan to re-order our life together in this world and to fit us for a place and role in the future that God intends. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that we ourselves cannot grasp with clarity and certainty, but that grasps us by holding us open to Christ’s resurrection Spirit. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that lets us recognize, acknowledge, and confess that human governance is set, one day, to yield entirely to the unconditionally loving governance of God, and, furthermore, that lets us recognize, acknowledge, and confess that we can and should begin here and now letting our lives accord with God’s governance.

Paul’s counsel therefore also is this: Our world has desperate need of changes that are not going to happen as long as you and I insist on remaining the way we are right now, rather than yielding – heart and soul and mind and strength – to what God’s grace is saying to and doing with us. And the task of preaching is, first and foremost, to declare, not what we preachers on our own believe we have to say, but what God’s grace is saying to and doing with us all in Jesus Christ.

One of the difficulties Timothy was faced with in the church in Ephesus, was the tendency of some in that congregation to want to hear what Paul called myths and endless genealogies and speculations. What Paul is getting at here is what we today could describe as wanting to hear preachers talk of God primarily by, for example, telling heart-warming stories of human adventure and heroism; or by identifying biblical principles for having a happy marriage and raising successful children; or by speculating about the United States of America as a new Israel, God’s new chosen people; or by acting as if they have special knowledge regarding which political party God is a member of, and which candidates God is supporting, and how God is voting on the major issues of the day; or by advancing new discoveries in the natural or the human sciences as advances in our knowledge of God.

The point is this: The central and primary task of preaching is not simply to add to all the other human ways of viewing the world, a supposedly Christian view of things. The central and primary task of preaching is to speak of God in ways that let God’s grace speak *itself* into people’s hearts and minds. The central and primary task of preaching is not to try to speak for God, but to point to the history of Jesus Christ and let the word of God revealed in that history *speak for itself*. The central and primary task of preaching is not to try to speak for God, but to speak of God in ways that let *God’s grace* take hold of people’s lives and, in turn, enable them to take hold of the life that really is life – life “rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future” – life touched by the new reality revealed in Jesus Christ that gives life in this world a new beginning.

The problem Paul saw in Ephesus was this: expecting preachers to be able to speak God’s word in God’s stead, when, in truth, preachers are to speak of God in ways that let *God* speak into people’s lives the word *no preacher* on earth can speak, namely: *God’s own gracious word*. That is why, whether I explicitly say it or not, my prayer each Sunday morning is that the things we say and sing and do in worship shall become fitting instruments for God to use to speak God’s own word into each of our lives.

(3)

A member of our congregation, LaWanda Harris, is presently pursuing seminary studies in preparation for ordination as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Except for the two weeks each August she spends on campus at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, she's doing her courses online. This semester, she's taking three online courses and doing the fourth here in her home church as what's called a Supervised Practical Ministry (and this, while continuing to work as a nurse at St. Vincent Infirmary!). I serve as her supervisor and our session serves as her evaluation committee. LaWanda had to choose four main areas of focus for this course, and one of the of the areas she chose is *preaching*. One of the requirements of the course is that she preach before this congregation twice this fall, and she'll be doing that on the last Sunday of October and on the last Sunday of November. And, she and I are spending a lot of time each week, reading about and discussing together the task of preaching. Perhaps that is why, of all the issues that Paul was trying to help Timothy deal with, the issue of preaching dominated my attention this time.

Moreover, as I have pondered this morning's passage, I have had constantly in mind something LaWanda and I read in an essay by the theologian Karl Barth in a book originally published in German in 1924 (see: *The Word of God and the Word of Man*; Harper and Row, 1957, pp.183-217). In that essay, Barth writes about what he considers to be the greatest perplexity a minister faces, namely, the perplexity of *preaching*. That perplexity, as Barth identifies it, is this: "As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory. This is our perplexity. The rest of our task fades into insignificance in comparison."

I believe that Barth is quite right. The task of preaching is not the task of having important-sounding things of our own to say about God. The task of preaching is to point to Jesus Christ, to point to the history of Jesus Christ, to point to Christ's resurrection Spirit, in ways that let, not the preacher's words, but the word that God alone can speak, impress itself on people's lives – even in all its otherworldly mystery.

As in Timothy's time, so today, the church is faced with far more problems than just the perplexity of the task of preaching. There is, for example, in this country, this problem: that the church today is playing an increasingly insignificant role in people's lives. I dare say, however, that one very important reason for this latter problem is this: so many of us preachers have become so confident that we ourselves know and have a lot to say about God, that we've turned the church into a place of meaningless talk, when what it needs to be is this: a place where, with an eye to the history of Jesus Christ, words are offered up for God to use to speak *God's own word* uniquely into people's hearts and minds and lives.

To be sure, words giving voice to human knowledge, wisdom, and insight are always deeply important. They can probe, they can edify, they can encourage, they can beautify, they can inspire, they can guide, they can hearten, they can lighten, they can console, they can move the human spirit in profoundly important and needed ways. In the end, however, the world will not be saved by human words. It will be saved by the *word of God* coming at us *through* human words that have been humbly yet boldly offered up for God to use to speak into the world *God's own word* of guidance, healing, transformation, and redemption through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let it belong to our constant prayer that that be always the word that you and I are in this place to hear and heed and serve. Amen.

1st Timothy 1:1-7; 6:11-21
The perplexity of preaching.

Ruskin Falls, September 23, 2018
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
18th Sunday after Pentecost

TEXT (*English translation: NRSV*)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight 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. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith.

Grace be with you.

(1)

Those are the opening and the closing paragraphs of the letter we call 1st Timothy.

What we are given to hear in this letter are words of pastoral counsel and wisdom from the experienced church leader and seasoned preacher, Paul, to a younger and less experienced ministerial colleague, Timothy. Timothy has been working with the church in Ephesus. He was planning on leaving soon to go help out in a church in another city, and Paul was hoping to come and do some work in Ephesus sometime soon himself. Now, however, Paul suggests a change of plans. He wants Timothy to remain in Ephesus longer than he originally had planned on staying.

Paul has become aware that there are influential persons in the church in Ephesus, who, should they get their way, are going to end up distorting rather than furthering the cause of the gospel of Jesus. Moreover, Paul sees in Timothy – despite Timothy’s youth and inexperience – the right person for dealing with the situation. He just needs, Paul believes, some solid advice and encouragement. Therefore, Paul tells Timothy he should stay in Ephesus and work at getting that church on sounder theological footing than it now is, before he moves on; and Paul offers Timothy advice and encouragement regarding how to deal with that church’s situation.

So, what we hear in this letter is a tried and tested minister of the gospel, giving advice and counsel to an up-and-coming minister of the gospel regarding issues that are causing tension among the members of the Ephesian congregation. This morning, I invite you to focus on one of those issues, namely, the issue that is at stake in this question: What is the key to – what is at the heart of – what is of primary importance in – sound and true proclamation of the gospel of Jesus? We also can put it this way: *What, first and foremost, distinguishes Christian preaching that is sound and true, from Christian preaching that, in the end, is meaningless talk?*

(2)

Paul’s counsel to Timothy with that question in mind is this: Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the life that really is life, namely: life that becomes ours through God’s eternal love; and keep the commandment of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope.

Paul’s counsel is this: Let your preaching be grounded primarily and centrally in true faith, real life, and divine command – none of which is at your disposal to be grasped or mastered on your own; all of which comes to be, only as *God* acts to bring it about.

Paul’s counsel is this: Even while a preacher must pay close attention to what the natural and human sciences have taught us about ourselves, preaching is to be rooted first and foremost not in that, but in faith’s apprehension of God’s act of *self-revelation* in Jesus Christ; preaching is to be rooted not in what we ourselves have discovered or otherwise come to know, but in what God *reveals*. And, even while a preacher must pay close attention to what people commonly take to be real, preaching is to be rooted first and foremost not in that, but in God’s *gracious interruption* of worldly reality with the embrace of a love that is *more real* than is anything in and of the world; preaching is to be rooted not in the reality of the here and now, but in the reality of God’s love coming into the world from beyond the world. And, even while a preacher must pay close attention to the social, cultural, and historical situation we find ourselves in, preaching is to be rooted first and foremost not in what we ourselves have found to say about the human situation, but in what God in Christ *commissions and trains* us to proclaim; preaching is to be rooted not in what we preachers think we *have* to say, but in what God’s grace *gives* us and *charges* us to say.

Paul’s counsel is this: Christian preaching, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is not primarily and centrally – is not first and foremost – a matter of stepping up to the pulpit to share with the congregation information, insights, and knowledge that we preachers have acquired on our own and now desire to share with others regarding human life, the natural world, and/or the politics and morality of our situation. Rather, primarily and centrally, first and foremost, preaching is a matter of humbly yet boldly stepping up to the pulpit paradoxically *not* on one’s own, paradoxically *without* any information, insights, or knowledge of one’s own to share, yet nevertheless somehow oddly called, somehow strangely compelled, somehow mysteriously commanded by God, to trust and to declare that, in the life and mission and death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ – which is to say: in the history of Jesus Christ – eternal God was and is at work in the world, revealing and making available to people the reality of God’s grace. And, in a supremely important sense, God’s grace is a wholly new reality in the world. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that challenges the lines that we humans have been drawing between what is and isn’t believable, and between what is and isn’t possible. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that actually joins our mortal lives to the eternal love of God and to God’s loving plan to re-order our life together in this world and to fit us for a place and role in the future that God intends. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that we ourselves cannot grasp with clarity and certainty, but that grasps us by holding us open to Christ’s resurrection Spirit. God’s grace is a wholly new reality that lets us recognize, acknowledge, and confess that human governance is set, one day, to yield entirely to the unconditionally loving governance of God, and, furthermore, that lets us recognize, acknowledge, and confess that we can and should begin here and now letting our lives accord with God’s governance.

Paul’s counsel therefore also is this: Our world has desperate need of changes that are not going to happen as long as you and I insist on remaining the way we are right now, rather than yielding – heart and soul and mind and strength – to what God’s grace is saying to and doing with us. And the task of preaching is, first and foremost, to declare, not what we preachers on our own believe we have to say, but what God’s grace is saying to and doing with us all in Jesus Christ.

One of the difficulties Timothy was faced with in the church in Ephesus, was the tendency of some in that congregation to want to hear what Paul called myths and endless genealogies and speculations. What Paul is getting at here is what we today could describe as wanting to hear preachers talk of God primarily by, for example, telling heart-warming stories of human adventure and heroism; or by identifying biblical principles for having a happy marriage and raising successful children; or by speculating about the United States of America as a new Israel, God’s new chosen people; or by acting as if they have special knowledge regarding which political party God is a member of, and which candidates God is supporting, and how God is voting on the major issues of the day; or by advancing new discoveries in the natural or the human sciences as advances in our knowledge of God.

The point is this: The central and primary task of preaching is not simply to add to all the other human ways of viewing the world, a supposedly Christian view of things. The central and primary task of preaching is to speak of God in ways that let God’s grace speak *itself* into people’s hearts and minds. The central and primary task of preaching is not to try to speak for God, but to point to the history of Jesus Christ and let the word of God revealed in that history *speak for itself*. The central and primary task of preaching is not to try to speak for God, but to speak of God in ways that let *God’s grace* take hold of people’s lives and, in turn, enable them to take hold of the life that really is life – life “rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future” – life touched by the new reality revealed in Jesus Christ that gives life in this world a new beginning.

The problem Paul saw in Ephesus was this: expecting preachers to be able to speak God’s word in God’s stead, when, in truth, preachers are to speak of God in ways that let *God* speak into people’s lives the word *no preacher* on earth can speak, namely: *God’s own gracious word*. That is why, whether I explicitly say it or not, my prayer each Sunday morning is that the things we say and sing and do in worship shall become fitting instruments for God to use to speak God’s own word into each of our lives.

(3)

A member of our congregation, LaWanda Harris, is presently pursuing seminary studies in preparation for ordination as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Except for the two weeks each August she spends on campus at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, she's doing her courses online. This semester, she's taking three online courses and doing the fourth here in her home church as what's called a Supervised Practical Ministry (and this, while continuing to work as a nurse at St. Vincent Infirmary!). I serve as her supervisor and our session serves as her evaluation committee. LaWanda had to choose four main areas of focus for this course, and one of the of the areas she chose is *preaching*. One of the requirements of the course is that she preach before this congregation twice this fall, and she'll be doing that on the last Sunday of October and on the last Sunday of November. And, she and I are spending a lot of time each week, reading about and discussing together the task of preaching. Perhaps that is why, of all the issues that Paul was trying to help Timothy deal with, the issue of preaching dominated my attention this time.

Moreover, as I have pondered this morning's passage, I have had constantly in mind something LaWanda and I read in an essay by the theologian Karl Barth in a book originally published in German in 1924 (see: *The Word of God and the Word of Man*; Harper and Row, 1957, pp.183-217). In that essay, Barth writes about what he considers to be the greatest perplexity a minister faces, namely, the perplexity of *preaching*. That perplexity, as Barth identifies it, is this: "As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory. This is our perplexity. The rest of our task fades into insignificance in comparison."

I believe that Barth is quite right. The task of preaching is not the task of having important-sounding things of our own to say about God. The task of preaching is to point to Jesus Christ, to point to the history of Jesus Christ, to point to Christ's resurrection Spirit, in ways that let, not the preacher's words, but the word that God alone can speak, impress itself on people's lives – even in all its otherworldly mystery.

As in Timothy's time, so today, the church is faced with far more problems than just the perplexity of the task of preaching. There is, for example, in this country, this problem: that the church today is playing an increasingly insignificant role in people's lives. I dare say, however, that one very important reason for this latter problem is this: so many of us preachers have become so confident that we ourselves know and have a lot to say about God, that we've turned the church into a place of meaningless talk, when what it needs to be is this: a place where, with an eye to the history of Jesus Christ, words are offered up for God to use to speak *God's own word* uniquely into people's hearts and minds and lives.

To be sure, words giving voice to human knowledge, wisdom, and insight are always deeply important. They can probe, they can edify, they can encourage, they can beautify, they can inspire, they can guide, they can hearten, they can lighten, they can console, they can move the human spirit in profoundly important and needed ways. In the end, however, the world will not be saved by human words. It will be saved by the *word of God* coming at us *through* human words that have been humbly yet boldly offered up for God to use to speak into the world *God's own word* of guidance, healing, transformation, and redemption through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let it belong to our constant prayer that that be always the word that you and I are in this place to hear and heed and serve. Amen.