

2nd Timothy 2:15
Do your best . . .

Ruskin Falls, September 30, 2018
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
19th Sunday after Pentecost

TEXT (English translation: NRSV)

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by God,
a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

(1)
The three New Testament letters, 1st Timothy, 2nd Timothy, and Titus, are referred to by Bible scholars as “the Pastoral Epistles,” or simply “the Pastorals.” They are called the Pastorals because of their focus on matters of *pastoral leadership* and on the necessity of *sound preaching and teaching* in the life of the church.

The letter we are reading from today is addressed from an older pastor, Paul, to a young pastor named Timothy. Timothy had served for a while as a co-worker with Paul. Now he is working with a congregation on his own. As for Paul, he’s sitting in jail right now, “chained like a criminal,” he writes elsewhere in this letter, because his own teaching and preaching of the gospel has gotten him arrested as a trouble-maker by local authorities. From that jail, Paul writes to Timothy to encourage him to persevere in striving for sound preaching and teaching in the church, despite worldly disdain for the church and charges that the church is but a place of otherworldly foolishness; despite cultural disdain for the church and charges that the church is but a haven for authoritarian closed-mindedness; and despite societal disdain for the church and charges that the church is out of touch with the times.

I believe that the verse we just heard provides a concise characterization of the kind of person Timothy is being encouraged to be as a preacher and teacher in the church in the midst of a hostile world. Also, I believe this verse provides us here at Pulaski Heights Presbyterian particularly significant food for thought in light of the time we devoted just a moment ago to commending Christian education and the Christian educators in our church.

(2)

“Do your best . . .”

The Greek word behind our English translation here is σπουδάζω. As my trusty Greek-English lexicon notes, the word means “to be eager” about getting a particular thing done; it means “to take pains” to see that something is done right; it means “to make every effort” to realize some aim or goal; it means earnestly and diligently to concentrate on giving something your best.

I dare say we are *not* always as earnest and diligent and concentrated as we could be, in matters of Christian faith. We don’t always give our best when it comes to the life of the church. We may do our best to be successful in our career, or to be financially well off; we may do our best at some hobby we’ve taken up, or at some sport we compete in. But, do we do our best in the cause of the gospel of Jesus? When it comes to the affairs of the church, when it comes to worshiping and serving God, when it comes to striving to understand and follow God’s will and way, are we as diligent about doing our best at *that*, as we are about doing our best at other things? Are we eager – do we take pains – to do our best in the cause of the gospel?

“Do your best . . .”, writes Paul to Timothy. Concentrate on your Christian calling! Be an eager,

earnest, and diligent Christian! When it comes to Christian faith and life, we need to make every effort, to do it well and to do it right. We need to do our best, not just our next best.

(3)

“Do your best *to present yourself to God . . .*”

No, God does not need for you to announce your presence to God. God knows where you are. However, God does desire for you to present yourself for *service* to God’s good will and way. God desires that you look to God *in readiness to serve* God’s good aims and purposes in this world. “Present yourself to God” means: “seek openness to God’s presence.” It means to make, “Here I am Lord, send me!”, your constant prayer. “Present yourself to God” means: give yourself over to what God is up to in the world through Christ’s church.”

“Do your best,” Paul writes, “*to present yourself to God . . .*” Diligently turn your heart and mind *away from* the passing fancies, desires, opinions, fears, and authorities of this world, and *toward* God’s providential presence in your life and in our world.

(4)

“Do your best to present yourself to God *as one approved by God . . .*”

That doesn’t mean we have to *win* God’s approval. Paul knows that we’re too trapped in sin – Paul knows we already have wandered too far from the life that God approves – to know how to embrace such life now, on our own. Paul knows we’re sorely deficient in readiness, willingness, and ability to live together as God created and blessed us to live. Paul knows how lacking we are in readiness, willingness, and ability to recognize and oppose all that is opposed to God, and to recognize and embrace all that God desires for us to espouse. Paul knows that being in good stead with God does not mean simply “being approved” but also *being forgiven* by God.

Meeting with God’s approval means this: recognizing that we constantly and repeatedly disappoint God – recognizing that we constantly and repeatedly forsake God’s good will for the world – and therefore trusting God’s mercy and forgiveness to change and redirect us.

The Greek word, δόκιμος, is what has been translated into English as “one approved.” What it really means here is: one who is “tried and true” – one whose desire for God has been tested and found genuine. That doesn’t mean: one who doesn’t fail. It means: one who has let God’s forgiveness send him or send her back to the test, to try again. It means: one who knows God’s forgiveness and, so, refuses to let failure have the final word.

“Present yourself to God *as one approved by God*”: Offer your life in service to God, not because you think you’re up to that service, but because you resolutely desire to serve the good that God can bring about through you, as you learn to receive, lean on, and be constantly guided and corrected by God’s mercy and forgiveness and grace.

(5)

“*a worker . . .*”

You and I have been called to take up the cause of the gospel of Jesus. That means more than just meditating on God’s truth or feeling the presence of God’s Spirit. It means also *doing* things that serve the kingdom of God that Jesus came serving.

As Paul emphasized over and over: We are not saved by our own efforts; we do not earn or merit salvation from God; salvation is the pure gift of God's grace revealed in the world in Jesus Christ. It is sheerly a matter of God's sovereignly free determination to go ahead and lift us *sinner*s into life with God, rather than insisting that we first do something to *deserve* that favor.

As Paul, however, also emphasized: to be blessed by God's grace is to be called and blessed *to do good works*. To meet God in Jesus Christ is to know yourself called to *do* things that further Christ's cause in the world – to *do* things that build up and extend the reach of his church. When Jesus takes your hand, it's not to congratulate you on your supposedly godly accomplishments; it's to give you new and godly work to grow into and do.

All of us are given by Christ important work to do in service to God's coming kingdom. We may not all be called to be preachers or teachers in the church. But we all have been called to do good things, in and through Christ's church. Moreover, Paul wants us all to remember that, even if illness, injury, frailty, or other circumstances have curtailed what you're able to do, the Spirit still is calling you to abide in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-discipline to the extent that you can. And to the extent that you do that, you *are* doing Christ's work in the world – you *are*, in God's eyes, a worker in the cause of Christ's church.

(6)

“a worker who has no need to be ashamed . . .”

There are things that we, as workers in Christ's church, *have* to be ashamed of. We have to be ashamed, for example, of the thousands (and still counting!) of times and places (just in recent decades!) where the church has let ministerial leaders act out vile fantasies by manipulating and sexually abusing boys and girls. We have to be ashamed of the church's history of anti-intellectualism as manifested, for example, in its long-ago authoritarian, indeed: despotic, condemnation of Galileo for proposing a sun-centered theory of our solar system, or its relatively more recent peremptory condemnation of Darwin's theory of natural selection and evolution. We have to be ashamed of the church's history of blocking humane social change, as, for example, in its defending of the institution of slavery in the nineteenth-century American South. And the list goes on. There is much that the church has done, and much that it has left undone – there is much that the church even now is doing, and much that it is failing to do – that surely we have to be ashamed of – and that we must respond to with a commitment to a sounder and truer hearing and heeding of God's word.

What, however, we have no need to be ashamed of is this: that we look precisely to Jesus Christ to hear and heed God's word.

To be sure, we must expect to suffer disdain coming at us from our world, our culture, our society, when we look to Jesus for the word of God. After all, just look at the life he led. His world, his culture, his society, did not treat *him* as authoritative, wise, or honorable. He was not what we would call successful. People largely wrote him off and ignored him, or else despised and condemned him. His was a life of humiliation and suffering at the hands of those around him. And death came when he was executed on a cross as a criminal enemy of the powers that be. And none of this is where any of us would, by nature, have looked to hear God's word. It is human nature to find it shocking to think that God's word to us should be heard through someone who sat imprisoned on death row; someone who, in his final agony, was beaten and

stripped naked and held up to public ridicule; someone who was tortured and killed on a cross; someone who, precisely on his way to that cross, calls to us saying, “Come, follow me!” In the church, however, we know Jesus also as the *resurrected* one. We know that, in returning Jesus as the resurrected one to the world that crucified him, God has vindicated how Jesus lived, overturned how Jesus died, and revealed the will and way of Jesus to be, in truth, God’s own will and way.

Maybe not always but still at some point inevitably: Following Jesus in a world, a culture, a society entangled in sin is going to mean cutting against the grain of the world, swimming against the stream of one’s culture, and incurring spite from one’s own society – maybe even, as repeatedly happened to Paul, incurring time in jail. But, we are not to let that embarrass us. We are not to be ashamed. For when that happens, it happens to us hand-in-hand with Jesus. And with our hand joined to the hand of the Son of God, we have no need at all to be embarrassed or ashamed.

(7)

“rightly explaining the word of truth.”

In English translations of 2nd Timothy, it is sometimes rendered as, “rightly dividing the word of truth,” or “rightly handling the word of truth.” The Greek phrase here is: ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας. The word, ὀρθοτομοῦντα (ὀρθοτομέω), has to do with cutting a straight path, especially cutting a straight divide through a difficult forest, so that travelers may go as directly as possible toward their destination. The term also came to be used in the broader sense of doing something in a way that leads rightly and directly to its intended goal.

The point is this: Christian faith very much needs to be nurtured by teachers dedicated to the work of helping us all toward right understanding of the word of truth that is the gospel of Jesus. Our teachers won’t have an answer for every question; their interpretations of scripture and other matters of faith will never be beyond critique and correction. But it *is important* to have persons in our church, who are ready, willing, and able to see to it that teaching and learning take place among us in the church, as we seek our way through life’s thickets and forests toward an increasingly mature hearing and heeding of God’s word.

(8)

May we as a congregation keep our teachers surrounded with encouragement and thanks.

And may our teachers – indeed, may we all – keep close to our hearts these words:

Do your best
to present yourself to God
as one approved by God,
a worker
who has no need to be ashamed,
rightly explaining the word of truth.

Amen.