

Timothy has been struggling with his faith, and Paul is concerned. He addresses Timothy with the gentleness and tenderness of a loving teacher: “Timothy, my beloved child, grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.” Paul has an investment in Timothy. All you need to imagine Paul’s concern is to have been a teacher yourself, or a student. Paul has vested a treasure to Timothy—the good treasure of the Gospel, which Paul entrusted to him by the laying on of hands. But the original zeal with which Timothy testified about his faith has faded. The flame that was bright at the beginning is only flickering now. For this reason, Paul says, “I remind you to rekindle the gift of God within you.”

This may well be the first documented case of pastoral burnout. But you don’t need to have been a pastor to identify. Burnout is a common malady in this age of anxiety, busyness, endless work. But there’s always a spiritual component to it. You don’t need to have burned out to know what it feels like for the flame of the gospel that once gleamed in your heart to be reduced to a flicker, as if someone had turned the knob on your heart until all that’s left is glint of blue on the tip of the wick. One more tweak of the knob, and out goes the light.

Paul says to Timothy, “God didn’t give us a spirit of cowardice.” I’m not sure that was the most sensitive thing to say to Timothy. But maybe it was the most pastoral. Paul has determined that Timothy has been cowed. But by what? Do you think Timothy was afraid of the sheer weight of his ordination to preach? I think of my own ordination, and the hundreds of people who pressed their hands on my head that day. The combined weight of their hands, I could never lift on my own. You who are pastors and deacons, you remember the weight of people’s hands on you, blessing you, sending you. It is a tremendous weight to bear. I hardly know of any church members who, when asked to serve as deacons, don’t consider the weight, and resist it, or wonder, can I do this? Am I worthy?

Already quiet and timid by nature, young Timothy is suffering over sermons on the weekend, while his friends are out—how shall I put this...“making merry.” Even more than that, his teacher, Paul, has gone on record in downtown Corinth, saying, “The message of the cross is foolishness...” (1 Cor. 1:18). And Timothy is following Paul all over the Mediterranean, from Asia Minor, to Corinth, Paul mentions his help in Rome. In all of these overwhelming places, Timothy is trying to tell people the gospel is true, that a man was raised from the dead, making of death no effect. But he’s surrounded by statues of Pythagoras, Socrates, Democritus, Aristotle, Plato, Cicero... What does Timothy know? What do we? How *do* we testify to the gospel in a world of people that don’t really seem to need us? And not merely testify, but to do so with a dynamic spirit of confident power, of love, and of self-discipline. No wonder it’s in the letters to Timothy that we find Paul’s advice to take a little wine for the stomach, and for frequent ailments. By the way, Timothy is the patron Saint of stomach and intestinal disorders.

What’s more, Paul’s testimony story is, as far as we know, far more interesting than Timothy’s. When people ask Paul for his testimony, as the authorities did in Acts 22, Paul stands up and says, “I was breathing threats and murder against the Christians, binding them and putting them in prison. As the crowd swarmed Stephen as he was preaching, and stoned him to

death, I stood there approvingly, holding people's coats for them. But on my way to Damascus, I was blinded by a light from God. I saw a vision of Jesus, and he spoke to me, and asked me why I was persecuting him. For days I couldn't see, until brother Ananias restored my sight, and told me, "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice, for you will be his witness to all the world of what you've seen and heard!"

But when someone says, "Timothy, give us your testimony about Jesus," Timothy just says, "Well, my mom, Eunice, took me to church, and, uh, they told me Jesus was raised from the dead, and, um, well, that sounded pretty good to me." That's it, Timothy? Your mom took you to church? Is that all? "Well, no. My grandma Lois was one of the very first Christians, and she told me some stories about Jesus. And those were pretty good stories." Uh huh. Wow, Timothy. You should go to seminary.

Revelation for Paul was, in many ways, a luxury. He got a laser light show, and a personal visit from Jesus, with a little thunder thrown in for the bystanders. Revelation for Timothy, and let's be frank, for a number of us, would not be great box office material. Revelation came slowly, gently, to Timothy, affording him a testimony composed not of one solid, skyborn beam of light, but delicate refractions from the dreamcatchers in the kitchen window. A church service here with Eunice, and lunch afterwards, and what did you think of the sermon, Timmy? A vacation Bible school there, and Lois, asking at dinner each evening, what did you learn, Timmy? An adventure with a good friend, a late night conversation, a debate with a classmate, and measuring it all against what he overheard Ma and Grandma saying on the patio after Sunday lunch. Now he must testify before the debaters of his age, philosophers, doctors of science who deal in facts and equations, and they've all got more religious options than they know what to do with. No wonder Timothy was prone to frequent ailments.

So draw your breath in pain, Timothy, to tell the old, old story again. Fan the flame my brother, and stand up. Don't be cowed by competing narratives. Trust the gentle message handed down to you. Hold the pattern of sound words entrusted to you. It will not fail you. Tell them what you know. Tell the truth...

That God the Father created the heavens and the earth.

That God fashioned a people and delivered them from bondage and called them Israel

That God in Christ was given to us before the ages began

And that he rested in Israel's belly, and we could feel him bumping, and kicking,  
and turning in the words of the prophets

That God became flesh and dwelt among us, born of the virgin Mary, which means he was completely a gift, and there is nothing we could do to earn him.

That this Jesus suffered for righteousness' sake, and that he invites me to suffer with him. He descended to the dead, and called me to seek out the places in the city where a cross is planted, and to hang my life there.

That in the mystery of the tomb he was resurrected on the third day. That he ascended to heaven, to sit at the right hand of God.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, and the way she sustains the church, and quickens my heart, and emboldens me to say, “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that God is able, to keep that which I’ve committed unto God against that day

I believe in the holy catholic Church, which means I celebrate the whole church, and give thanks for all the Christians around the world, all 2.2 billion of them, with whom I break bread and drink from the cup of life today.

I believe in the communion of saints because they surround me every Sunday, and show me what peace looks like. And they teach me the forgiveness of sins. And the resurrection of the body. And the life everlasting. And I am not afraid.

Christian tradition holds that Timothy, when he was 80 years old, attempted to stop a procession of the goddess Diana, which had brought much violence to the city. He attempted to stop it. But they beat him, and dragged him through the streets, and stoned him to death.

But who’s ever heard of the goddess Diana now? Hold fast to the pattern of sound words entrusted to you. Tell the old, old story with bold joy. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

And watch the idols fall.