

The Gospel as Public Truth
II Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:1-10

“Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord....”

To begin, I offer two stories from Friday’s New York Times for your consideration on this World Communion Sunday. Both wrestle with our witness to the gospel as public truth. The dateline of the first is Echmiadzin, Armenia where the first Christian nation was established in 301 A.D. and where every bishop of the Armenian Apostolic Church gathered this past week for the first time in 600 years. Presently, the bishops are setting their theological differences aside to confront a common set of challenges: entrenched secularism at home, assimilation of followers in the large Armenian diaspora abroad and general disaffection with organized religion. According to Catholicos Aram I of Lebanon, “The church is in dire need of renewal.” Contrary to its past, he says, “the church has to be responsive to the needs and expectations of the people.” According to Catholicos Karekin II of Armenia, the bishops are “an entire century behind the opportunity to modernize the church.” They are hoping that this historic gathering of bishops will be enough of a media splash to catapult their witness into the twenty-first century and return the gospel to the public square of a post-Christian nation.

The second article has to do with the opening of a Christian dorm in an American university. “Citing reports from students who say they are hungry for more faith-based options on campus...officials at Troy, Alabama’s third-largest public university, opened...a roomy 376 bed dormitory that caters to students who want a residential experience infused with religion.... ‘It is not about proselytizing, but about bringing a values-based opportunity to this campus,’” Troy’s chancellor said. Others are less convinced. “Providing a dorm based on a set of values is one thing,” the Director of the Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum and senior

scholar at the First Amendment Center in Washington said, “but providing housing so closely tied to religion is another.” “We don’t want to offend people,” a resident student countered, “but we don’t want to be offended. We have to be tolerant of so many things, but nobody has to be tolerant of religion.” In what sense can the gospel be public truth in a nation that wrestles with the difference between freedom of religion and a religion-free common life?

When Timothy received a letter counseling him not to be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, he was struggling no less than Christians struggle today with his witness to the gospel in a world more taken with abstract values than with the author and giver of life. The son of a Greek Gentile father and a Jewish mother who had been baptized by Paul, as had her mother before her, Timothy was literally the offspring of a pluralistic age. Far from rejecting his Jewish identity, he had been instructed in the Hebrew Scriptures and circumcised by Paul even as he had accepted the gospel and became Paul’s constant companion on his missionary journeys.

Now his imprisoned mentor, his father in faith, by whose side he had been tutored in word and deed, was facing execution in Rome because of his witness to the gospel—the same gospel that Timothy, through the laying on of Paul’s hands, had been set apart to represent. Going forward without Paul, Timothy would face a diverse population drawn to speculative discussions and senseless controversies that bred quarrels, people fascinated with myths and genealogies, vacillating between asceticism and spiritual license, between cheap grace and lucrative religious chicanery. Where in this social stew was the gospel to get a hearing? How was the faith to survive another generation? What would the heirs of the apostles dare and do for the sake of him who died for them? These are our questions as well!

Imagine, then, that the Second Letter of Timothy has arrived in the mail addressed to each beloved child of Paul present this morning because, by the work of God’s Spirit, it has and

it is. The writer first reminds us of those whose faith now lives in us. A mother, a grandmother, a father, an uncle: for many, faith begins as a family affair and leads us to wonder if our children and our children's children will ever say of us, "I know the God in whom I put my trust because of the deep faith of my mother, because of the searching questions of my father, because of the way my grandmother called upon God in times of trouble."

Even so, the Christian faith is not a matter of blood but of baptism. Who knows by what circuitous working of grace faith first took hold of you and led you as an infant in a parent's arms or as an adult trembling on your knees to be baptized into this visible, motley, random, dysfunctional family that is the church of Jesus Christ. For better or worse, together we are those who have been gathered and addressed by God's word, week in and week out, not simply for our own good pleasure, but for the sake of the world God so loved.

No doubt that is why this letter turns immediately from the personal to the public setting of Christian witness and so from the private home to so-called civil society. "The Christian is a witness of Jesus Christ," Karl Barth writes at the very end of all of his volumes, "who as such is not engaged in a private enterprise, however beautiful, important or salutary, but lives and works in a public ministry" and so proclaims a public truth that is good news for all people. The news, contrary to appearances, is that death has no dominion. Put another way, the final word said over every human life is not said by those who would wield the power of death in the workplace, the classrooms of Dunblane and Sandy Hook, the bedroom, the city's streets, the halls of congress, or even the church: "This grace...given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began...has now been revealed through the appearing of [him] who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Therefore the gospel becomes public truth when we bear witness, in face of the death and the hopelessness that seemingly reigns, to the assurance of

things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. The gospel becomes public truth when, in the midst of the common life, we point to the in-breaking of God's reign glimpsed, just glimpsed, in "the freeing of what is bound, the healing of what is sick, the correction of what is [distorted]": intimations of God's reign that we may recognize only because God's reign been revealed for the sake of the whole world in him whose power was made perfect in weakness and yet whose name we are often ashamed to mention in mixed company.

Nevertheless, while the Armenian bishops are trying to figure out how to be "relevant" to the world they opted out of not a hundred but a thousand years ago to argue about theology, dorms of young people in this land of the free and home of the brave are asking that their questions about God be given central place in the rooms where they wake and sleep and dream and defecate. I take this to be no frontal attack on the classroom where a fact is a fact that can be proved and truth a disembodied value to be debated. I also take it to be no sectarian withdrawal from engagement with truth where it may be found. I imagine it rather as an experiment in learning the scales of rejoicing and seeking the meaning of a story that can make sense of the chaos of their young lives and trying out a way of being in the world that refuses the way things are in favor of the compelling promises of the God who freed the Israelites from Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead. Obviously this is threatening to the status quo: to the Gentiles of the day, even though they are asking for a chaplain to lead a secular community gathering even now at Harvard; and to the guardians of a freedom that is bondage to an increasingly fractured nation of self-made, self-serving individuals.

In this sense, the first century is not so far away from the twenty-first. Paul was in prison because his witness to the one whom death could not conquer nor the grave imprison made him a threat to the death-dealing powers of the social order. To repeat, "God wills that among those

who have no hope, [the Christian] should exist as one who has...who hopes for others too, for those who are without hope.” And even though in this pluralistic world we may prefer the winsome counsel to “Preach the gospel at all times, when necessary use words” not because we are ashamed of Jesus but because we are ashamed of the hegemonic history of Christianity, nevertheless we have been given a word made flesh. We have glimpsed the substance of hope not in some disembodied set of principles or values but in the life, death and resurrection of a first century Jew.

When God reigns, Jesus says, the hungry will be fed and then he invites us to see five thousand satisfied in one seating. When God reigns, Jesus says, the sick and the broken and the possessed will be healed and then he invites us to notice the lame walking, lepers cleansed, the demons exorcised. When God reigns, Jesus says, the mourners will laugh, the dead will be raised, the tears will be wiped away and then he invites us to the foot of his cross, the agony of his death, the stench of his grave and the triumph of his rising. If he lives, if he truly lives, then faith would be our eyes refracted by his gospel to glimpse an almighty, powerless hand bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice, toward peace, toward self-giving love. And short of joining our hands to his, we at least may enter the public square as those who point to the ordinary, everyday places where his living presence surprises us, overturns our expectations, upsets the applecart of our privilege, refuses the pomp and circumstance of death.

There was a third article in the Times on Friday, an op-ed about why Italians love Francis. Apparently the pope was leaving Casa Santa Marta, the spartan guesthouse where he lives instead of the palatial papal apartments, when he spied a bishop waiting for his driver. “Can’t you walk?” the pope asked with a smile. “This pope communicates,” Beppe Severgnini wrote. “Not because he tweets; the powerful everywhere do. Not because he calls strangers on

the phone....Francis' ability to communicate derives from empathy....He understands that irony is the lay sister to compassion: it enables you to accept the world's imperfections."

Can't we walk? Can't we quit this building for the avenue where in public we hope for those who have no hope that Christ lives? "As for me," wrote a cantankerous Christian ethicist named Paul Ramsey, "Let us shout as we walk/that the Christ is living/...Let us shout of loving/and shout out loudly/that men shall perish/who do not believe.../that sin is enormous/on the mountain and in the city/and that Jesus only/can make us human and/can make us free./ The other details/ may be worked out/in subcommittee/This is of course/a way of talking/among good friends./...[but] as Christ is my witness./ I am more serious than I dare believe." Thanks be to God!