

## **LEGACY: THE TIME IS COMING**

### **2 Timothy 4:1-8**

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27 May 2018

Ruth and I had the privilege of attending Beau's ordination interview and worship service a week ago Thursday, and celebrating with him when his ordination was approved. My hope and prayer is that Beau finds as much joy and meaning in ministry as I continue to do. One of the unique experiences ministers are afforded is the opportunity to be present with people at some of life's most significant moments. I have been invited to hold newborn babies, and I have been invited to sit at the bedside while someone is taking a last breath. Those experiences are very different in some ways, of course, but they feel equally sacred.

Funerals are an important part of ministry. Some people may think that funerals would be depressing, or hard to get used to, but most ministers will tell you that funerals are among our most spiritual moments. When I prepare for a funeral, I sit down with the loved ones of the person who has died, and I say, "Tell me about this person. What will you miss about him or her? What is it about this person's life which makes you most grateful? This life that we are honoring - what was it all about?" I hear about people who loved to cook. Relatives remember specialties: lemon chiffon pie, chicken paprikash, homemade noodles. Food that did more than feed stomachs - food that brought families together, food that created traditions and memories. I have heard stories about teachers who saved their students' lives, and quiet unassuming people who took in dozens of foster children, and stories of people whom I'd known were quite

accomplished but what I hadn't realized was the obstacles they'd overcome first. It's amazing to hear these stories, to see the way that lives are woven together.

Some funerals are incredibly sad and difficult. Among them are funerals for people about whom there is little to say. "Tell me about your loved one," I will say. And there is silence in my office. And finally a relative will speak up, "Well, she liked Bingo" or "He was a good bowler." Some people leave behind the legacy of relatives who will not talk to each other or even sit in proximity to one another at the funeral.

I have officiated at hundreds of funerals, and each time, I think to myself, "How do I want to be remembered?" It's always, always, an opportunity for reflection. A reminder that - thanks be to God - I have been given a new day to recreate myself, to change a habit, to extend kindness or forgiveness.

Memorial Day is another one of those perfect opportunities to pause, to realize that one day each of us will be remembered. If there is anything we want to change about the legacy we are leaving, we have this day to begin.

Our scripture passage for today is framed as a final message of Paul to the early church, words given before he dies. He sums up his life's work in two ways. First, he gives words of instruction. "This is how God wants you to live. God wants you to be faithful, in season and out of season. God wants you to be persistent, and stay encouraged, and be very careful who you follow. There will always be false teachers who try to convince you that there are shortcuts, but don't worship them. Worship only God. Follow Jesus. It won't be easy but it is the only way that leads to life - true, abundant life." Paul looks outward, to the people he loves whom he is leaving behind,

and gives those words of instructions, and then he turns inward, and reflects on his own life. He doesn't claim to be perfect, but he does believe that he has tried his best: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

We know that Paul's life wasn't easy. He spent time in prison. He made enemies, he was often misunderstood. He was frustrated when he'd pour himself out, using every drop of energy, to try to start a new church, and then find that - as soon as he left - there were conflicts and infighting and the following of false teaching. Paul lived a life of service. Not just occasional service, but continual service. He gave his life to the work of the early church - he sacrificed himself for a greater cause.

In the Hebrew scriptures, Moses also gives a farewell speech. He'd led the people of Israel through the wilderness, and they are just about to enter what they call the Promised Land, and Moses knows that is going to die before they do. So he gives a speech, to the people and to his successor Joshua, reminding them of the importance of following God's law.

In both of these cases, the speeches are only significant because the lives of these two leaders were significant. Their legacies do not depend on their eloquent last words, or on any of their words. Their words are remembered because of their actions, because of the way they lived. Their words were backed up, supported, by their actions. There was a coherent unity of the things they said and the things they did, and that's why their words have staying power. And the same is true of any of us. If we say one thing but do another, we won't be remembered as people of integrity. But when

people remember that we were true to our word, they'll remember both what we did and what we said.

Here's what I love about the idea of legacy. You don't have to do anything great, anything newsworthy, anything spectacular, to leave a legacy. Leaving a headline isn't the only way to leave a legacy. Neither is leaving behind a million dollars. There are other kinds of legacies which make an impact.

There are a lot of books in the general self-help category which talk about how to assess your life, how to decide on your priorities, how to change your habits. You may have a few favorite books like that on your shelf. I've read quite a few, and one of my favorites remains Tuesdays with Morrie, by Mitch Albom. It's the true story of fourteen conversations between Albom, a journalist, and his former college professor, Morrie Schwartz. Schwartz had been diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, and decided to spend the last several months of his life talking about life and death and all things important with his students, with a TV audience, and eventually with Mitch Albom. Albom flew from Detroit to Boston every Tuesday to spend the day talking to Morrie. One day they talked about death. "Everybody knows they're going to die," Morrie said, "but nobody believes it. If we did we would do things differently. The better approach is to actually be prepared for it. Do what the Buddhists do. Every day, have a little bird on your shoulder that asks, 'Is today the day? Am I ready? Am I doing all I need to do? Am I being the person I want to be?' The truth is, Mitch, once you learn how to die, you learn how to live." And then Morrie became more specific, looking at Mitch Albom, the driven successful journalist. "If you accept that you can die at any time, then you might

not be as ambitious as you are. The things you spend so much time on - all this work you do - might not seem as important. You might have to make room for some more spiritual things.” “You hate that word, don’t you? You think it’s touchy-feel stuff.” Both of them laughed, but Morrie went on - “[Here’s what I know...We’re all]... deficient in some way. We are too involved in materialistic things, and they don’t satisfy us. The loving relationships we have, the universe around us, we take these things for granted.”

The writer Annie Dillard says, “how we spend our days is how we spend our lives.” We show what our priorities are by what is on our calendar and what is indicated on our bank statements. Those truly are our legacies.

Next Sunday at this time, we will be commissioning our mission trip participants. Standing up here along with our youth will be many adult chaperones. Each of them has made the decision to give a week of their time - really almost nine days this time - to make this trip possible. Several of them are taking vacation time, some are making complicated arrangements for the care of other family members, all are leaving other responsibilities. They don’t have to **SAY** to anyone, “Mission work is important to me, the church is important to me, serving others is a priority”. Their actions are speaking for them. They are forging a legacy.

I grew up going to church every Sunday and watching my parents put a check in the offering plate, every Sunday. They didn’t lecture me about supporting the church financially; they modeled it, and I learned it.

The way we spend our time and the way we spend our money shows anyone who is watching what is truly important to us. With these decisions our legacy is being formed.

It's true of our lives as Christians, and it's true of our lives as citizens. The great artist Georgia O'Keeffe once wrote this: "One cannot be an American by going about saying that one is an American. It is necessary to feel America, like America, love America and then work."

It's fun to see the way that seeds are planted and how they grow. Within the past year we received a new member who joined the mission team. She is passionate about the cause of children in need in Lorain County. She asked if we could have a man named Tim Green give a Moment for Mission one Sunday. Tim is the head of Voices for Children, which advocates for the needs of neglected and dependent children. Tim spoke, and mentioned the need for more trained volunteers to serve as guardians in the legal system for these children. You might remember that. What you might not know is that at least two of our members - Rob Grandy and Linda Yonkers - were moved that day in church to begin the training, and they have since been sworn in by a judge to serve in this capacity. If others have become involved, please let me know - I don't want to ignore anyone! I'm so pleased that the church was able to help spread the word, and so grateful for this response.

When someone leaves money to the church in their will, it is a way of saying to the next generation, "This church was worth supporting in my lifetime. I don't want to

leave behind a world without this organization, without the values this church spreads into our communities. It is worth supporting beyond my lifetime as well.”

When my children were young, I was very careful about what I let them watch on TV, knowing how vulnerable all of us are to the messages in the media. On PBS at the time was “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” and I wanted them to watch it as often as possible. I wanted them to soak up the spirit of that gentle man, I wanted them to absorb his kindness, and the message that all children are good just the way they are. So, this spring, when I saw that the Cleveland Film Festival was screening a documentary about Mr. Rogers, I bought tickets for me and my daughter. It was a beautiful film, which - if you’re interested - is coming to theaters this June, and I hope we can show it here sometime within the next year. One scene in particular moved me. This scene was filmed in the 60’s, at the height of the Civil Rights movement. Segregation was being heatedly debated. The scene begins with Mr. Rogers sitting in his backyard, rolling up his pant legs, sticking his feet in his wading pool. The neighborhood police officer comes by, and Mr. Rogers engages him in conversation. He talks about what a hot day it is, and how good it feels to put his feet in the water. He invites the police officer to sit down beside him and do the same. Soon the camera pans the wading pool where two black feet and two white feet are side by side. No words were necessary, no lecture, no political statement. In many places in America, swimming pools were being guarded to make sure blacks and whites were not in the water together. In the land of make believe, Mr. Rogers was leaving a legacy. It was quite clear what he believed, what he stood for, what his values were.

It's so easy for us to throw words around these days. To debate with vigor a political point, to retweet, to put a sharp barb on Facebook. But what are we DOING to make the world a better place? I love these words from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "To laugh often and much; To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others; To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded."

The time is coming, our scripture tells us, when each of us will be remembered. If there's anything you want to change about your legacy, here's the good news. We worship a God of unconditional love, amazing grace, unending forgiveness and new chances again and again and again.