

Advice to My Friends

This afternoon, in a rather different format than we had planned, we're going to be officially ordaining our dear sister, Denise Ann Lavarney Aanenson, to the Gospel ministry, an act that has been at least eleven years in the making. We'll also celebrate the recognition by American Baptist Churches, USA, of the previous ordinations of our brothers, Rev. Stephen Gituma Guantai and Rev. Jorgé Arturo Saquic by the Methodist Church in Kenya and the Baptist Seminary of El Salvador, respectively. For that service, since this is Pastor Denise's ordination, I invited her to choose her own preacher and she has invited her long-time friend and former classmate, Rev. Meredith Dodd, to preach. I'm looking forward to hearing Meredith preach. I don't get the opportunity to hear other preachers as much as I might like. And I didn't feel slighted, because I knew that I would have the pulpit this morning and that I would also get the opportunity to offer, as I titled the sermon, "Advice to My Friends."

So, what follows are my ruminations on the Scripture that I just read, a well-known passage from Paul (or whoever wrote the Pastoral Epistles) purportedly giving advice to a younger pastor – Timothy. One generally doesn't hear this passage outside the context of an ordination or an installation because of its specific context. But I'm going to challenge the usual expectations in a couple of ways. First of all, one of the pastors we'll be honoring this afternoon is actually older than I am. I'm not going to say who, but I will tell you that although this co-worker beat me onto the planet, I've got more years in the pulpit than they do, so I feel qualified to give them advice. On the other hand, one of these beloved ones who actually is younger than me was ordained before I was. I'm going to dare to give them advice anyway. Finally, the advice that I'm about to give our three Associate Pastors is actually sound for every Christian. Remember what our bulletin says every Sunday when we have a physical copy? Above the listing of our pastoral team and lay leaders for the morning are the words, "Every Member a Minister." I take the old concept of the priesthood of the believer very seriously, as a good Baptist should, and I hope you do, too. So let me encourage you to pay rapt attention to the advice I'm about to give. And if your mind wanders, fear not! I'll give you verbal cues as to when I'm about to tie my words to my co-clergy folk to the lay folks as well.

Before I plunge into Paul's advice to Timothy, I need to backup just a bit, to the beginning of Chapter 4, to provide some context. Most New Testament scholars are agreed, as far as my researches show, that the heretical adversaries Paul is pushing against in I Timothy are yet another group of Judaizers, those Jewish Christians who insisted on Gentile Christians following the whole Law of Moses, despite the ruling of the Jerusalem Council that we heard about a few weeks ago. Listen to Paul's words against Timothy's opponents from Chapter 4:3: "They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." These highly ascetic heretics are not only preaching against "unclean" food and the "sexual immorality" the Council warned against, but against sex of any kind, even within marriage.

So, it is these teaching that Paul speaks against to Timothy: "Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales." In one of the commentaries I consulted for this morning, the volume on "Pastoral Epistles" in the Word Biblical Commentary, William Mounce uses words equally direct but less sexist in describing what Timothy is up against. "...the theology of the opponents is vacuous, no better than prattle. It also explains why Paul does not spend more time arguing against the heresy itself; a person cannot argue against prattle." Or, to quote another

commentator with a slightly less aggressive tone, in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries volume on “The Pastoral Epistles,” Donald Guthrie writes, “That the best refutation of error is a positive presentation of the truth is a principle which the Church in every age constantly needs to learn.” Please notice, lay people, that Guthrie’s advice and, by extension, Mounce’s is not simply for our pastoral team. It doesn’t do any good to argue with what Paul calls “myths.” In 2021, we might call them “conspiracy theories,” or “disinformation,” or “prejudices.” I think you know what I’m talking about. The best thing we can do when confronted with those who cling to prejudices, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like, is to simply point them to the truth, again and again. The same is true for those who indulge in conspiracy theories like those spewed by QAnon or the somehow undying lies about election fraud. Don’t get wrapped up in their world view; just remind them as often as you can of the truth. Likewise, again for those who either deliberately spread disinformation, for example about COVID, or who naïvely accept what they see on social media or Fox News as truth. Just point them to the real truth. For my pastoral colleagues, you can add to these guidelines the use of your own theological training. Don’t let those in your spiritual care be taken in by the “pop” theologians of our day, who sell themselves as Biblical experts without so much as a single higher-level course from an accredited institution to their name.

Paul continues his advice to Timothy: “Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” The main verb Paul uses here, “train yourself,” comes from the Greco-Roman gymnasium and refers to exercising or training for athletic competition. It’s important to note that the Greek verb form is what linguists call a “present imperative,” which is to say that it implies continuous action. Pastors and laypeople alike, please note. In the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary volume on “1st & 2nd Timothy,” Hulett Gloer writes, “Training oneself in godliness is not a short-term project but a lifelong endeavor.” None of us should ever consider ourselves “graduated” from learning about God’s calling on our lives. There is always something new to learn, something new to apply. We will only be perfect, as our Father is perfect, when we are perfected by our Loving Creator in the life to come.

Primarily for the sake of my colleagues, I want to argue with Paul for a moment, albeit mildly. Paul writes to Timothy that “physical training is of some value,” and I think that was more true in the first century than it is for us. Both men and women of the Græco-Roman world were far more physically active than we are. In that primarily agrarian society, everyday work and life were physically taxing. You stayed in shape whether you wanted to or not. Even urban life in those days was more active, as one walked wherever one wanted to go. In our society, we drive everywhere, we work by sitting at desks, and we have access to as much food as we might wish, much of which is processed with too much sodium, too much added fat, and far too much high glucose corn syrup. You may take me as a negative example. Even though I know what is and what isn’t healthy for me to eat, I often make bad choices. Even though I know my health depends on a certain amount of exercise, I too often prioritize other activities. To quote another of Paul’s letters, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” I can testify that my emotional and spiritual well-being are very much connected with my physical well-being. I serve this congregation much better when I am taking care of my body. High blood sugar makes me surly and snappish, not good character traits for a pastor. Y’all take care

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of yourselves so we can take care of this congregation we serve together and the others that God will bring into your care.

Now, let's not kid ourselves. All this training, whether physical or spiritual, is hard work. Paul calls it "toil and struggle." I've already confessed that I find physical training to be "toil and struggle." And while I love reading Bible commentaries and books of theology and Church history, I must also confess that putting the lessons I learn from them to work in my life is also often a process of struggle. But, as Paul writes, the toil and struggle are worth it, "because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe." We set ourselves to the toil and struggle of spiritual training not because we must live up to some arbitrary measure of saintliness that we must attain in order to be saved but because the living God whom we love loved us first, as we considered last Sunday. The living God is our Savior as God is the Savior of all people. Scholars and theologians argue about what Paul is saying here. Is God only theoretically the savior of all people, withholding actual salvation to those who believe? Or does God, in fact, save all of those who are created, whom God in Genesis calls good? And if the latter is true, what benefit then is it to those of us who believe? I would answer that latter question in this way: we do not know what the ultimate resurrection looks like nor the time between our physical deaths and our eventual resurrection. But we know what the life of faith looks like in this time and place and what life without faith looks like in this time and place and I believe that the life of faith is richer, more full of love and hope and joy than life without faith. So, I would say to all of you, clergy and laity, talk to people about your faith, your love and hope and joy. You have the opportunity to show them the way to a life that is better, more fulfilling, and more meaningful. But never forget, as you deal with those who are not yet believers in Christ Jesus, that they, too, are God's beloved children, deserving of our love, our kindness, and our respect.

Here, then, are the things that Paul tells Timothy to insist on: "give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching." Over the years, beginning long before I became your pastor, I've received an astonishing number of compliments on my "public reading of scripture." And, while I've mostly retained that task in worship services for myself, I can tell you honestly, it's really not that hard. Some of you may remember that I even did a workshop on reading scripture at a retreat early in our time together. So, for all who may be occasionally called on to read, let me remind you of some basic principles. First, don't be afraid: the Scriptures were meant to be read aloud. In fact, much of the Old Testament and of the Gospels were likely transmitted orally at first; for centuries for the Old Testament and for decades for the Gospels. Other portions of the Old Testament and all of the epistles in the New were written to be read aloud in communities of faith. When you read them aloud, you are participating in their purpose. Second, prepare. Read in advance before your time comes to read in a service and read aloud. Listen for the cadence of the words. Think about what the writer is trying to say and how you would say it. Find a translation that makes sense to you. We use the NRSV in worship here but if you find *The Message* or *The Living Bible* or *Good News for Modern Man* more comfortable, great! And, as part of your preparation, if you find a word you don't understand or don't know how to pronounce, call somebody who can advise you. That's what I'm here for and we've got a pretty large number of seminary graduates in our congregation, not to mention two retired seminary professors. I'm not going to volunteer any of them, but I bet you know who would welcome your call. Finally, and especially when we are all together in body as well as

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spirit, speak up. Use your outside voice or speak directly into a microphone if one is provided. Don't be shy. The Scriptures (and remember, by this Paul meant the Old Testament and some of the Deuterocanonical books) are there for our instruction in the ways of faith. Use them!

Hulett Gloer points out in his commentary that “exhortation” is derived from the same word that is sometimes used in the New Testament to name the Holy Spirit: παρακλήσει, from which comes “paraclete.” Just as the Holy Spirit is the comforter, those of us who are ordained are called on to comfort the flock to which God has called us. Just as the Holy Spirit challenges us all to live according to God's will, so we must challenge those who look to us for leadership. As you've often heard me say, one of my favorite definitions of pastor is one who comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. And, again, my sisters and brothers, I think this applies to lay people as well, as we are all ministers to those around us.

The third thing which Timothy must insist on, according to Paul, is teaching. Even with the vast array of translations of the Bible available to us, there are still things which require good teaching to unwind. I hope I've been a good example to you of that. Even more so than in the public reading of the scripture, you must prepare yourselves when you are called on to teach, and again, I include Sunday School teachers as well as pastors and preachers. Use the resources available to you. Consult with me and others. Read everything you can. We've got at least three full or partial sets of commentaries in the building and there is a wealth of commentaries available online. What topics intrigue you? New books are published in the hundreds every year – you'll find ones on the things that you want to learn about without too much trouble. Proclaim, exhort, and teach!

Now, Denise, Stephen, and Jorgé: this afternoon, you will experience the laying on of hands, something Stephen and Jorgé have experienced before. It will, frankly, change your life. I still remember with great joy my two ordinations, as I was ordained as a deacon in the Southern Baptist tradition, complete with the laying on of hands, long before I was ordained as a minister here in 2006. It is an ancient rite in the Judeo-Christian tradition, dating back to Moses laying hands on the seventy set apart to assist him in leadership of the Children of Israel. And that is still its primary meaning in the Baptist tradition. We who are ordained are set apart from the rest of the congregation for special service. We have no special powers; we are not in any way “better” than the congregation from which we are called out. We are called out to serve. In a subtle way, I have tried to physically illustrate this with my behavior when we are together on Sunday mornings. When it is time for me to contribute, to pray or to preach, I come from among you, third row of house right, to take my place behind or in front of the pulpit. Unlike some of our liturgical brethren, we claim no special power being transmitted through the laying on of hands, though it is still deeply meaningful to me and to others to know that in that solemn rite, we are connected through the hands that touch us to generation upon generation of faithful ministers. To our three who will experience this today, Rev. Doug Avilesbernal and I will have to stand in for all the ministers and lay people who wished to take part this afternoon. I pray that you will still feel the presence of all of them through us.

Paul has much more to say to Timothy, but I will conclude with the end of verse 16: “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.” Paul does not mean by this that Timothy is the “agent of

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salvation.” As Hulett Gloer points out, “God is ever the agent of salvation.” But for those of us who are set apart for leadership and for all of us who are ministers to others, our faithfulness in these ministries is in part what will lead others to God. For this great gift, which all of us are called to live out, thanks be to God. Amen.