

Timothy: Too Young to Make a Difference?

Acts 16:1-5; 1 Tim 4:11-16

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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If you served on this church's Pastor Nominating Committee, would you consider Timothy a likely prospect? I doubt it. Because, for one thing, he was very young. He was probably no older than 19 or 20 when he joined Paul on his second missionary trip. Now, when Paul's letter arrived, Timothy was serving as a pastor in Ephesus, and most of the congregation were older than he was, older, wiser, and more experienced. So Paul felt it necessary to give him this advice: "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." (1 Timothy 4:12) Let no one despise your youth, Timothy, especially you yourself! As young as you are, you've got what it takes, so be an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity.

Do we ever get over the feeling that we're too inexperienced, too ignorant, too weak, too old, or too young to make a difference? Shortly after I went to Valley Presbyterian Church eighteen years ago, a member met me at the door following a worship service and said, "This is the first time in my life I've had a pastor who is younger than I am." Then he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving me speechless. No doubt he meant that simply as a piece of trivial information. But, paranoid as I am, I took it to mean that I could never quite fulfill his expectations of a pastor. Even at 52 I was too young. So I need to hear Paul's admonition. And so do you. However young or insecure you may feel, let no one despise you, let no one look down on you, let no one consider you second rate.

You might be pessimistic about Timothy's prospects, secondly, because he was shy. At least, that's what Paul implies in 2 Timothy 1:7: "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control." If, in fact, Timothy was timid, it could hamper his ministry. Ministers are supposed to be outgoing and sociable, gregarious and congenial. Ministers are expected to be everybody's best friend. But the truth is, some of us are shy. And many of you are shy. It's tough for you to reach out and shake a stranger's hand. It's hard to mingle at a party or make friends during the church's coffee hour. And in a world where the gurus of success counsel us to be animated and extroverted, we shy people aren't sure that we count for much in God's world.

You would be pessimistic about Timothy, thirdly, because he was sickly. "No longer drink water," Paul told him in 1 Timothy 5:23, "but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." What was his diagnosis? We don't know. But I confess I would have second thoughts about inviting Timothy to serve as pastor because he might be out on sick leave too much of the time.

Yet Paul took him on as an apprentice missionary in spite of his shortcomings. Sure, there were things that bred pessimism, but there were more things that excited promise. For one thing, Paul knew his family, his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. He speaks highly of them in 2 Timothy 1:5, and he's confident that the son and grandson of such strong, able, and intelligent women will have what it takes to succeed. Secondly, Paul knew Timothy's faith. He calls it a "sincere faith." It was a faith without guile, deceit, or hypocrisy. Timothy didn't join the church because it was the thing to do, or to make business contacts, or to find a wife, or to get God to help him make a million dollars. Timothy had a sincere faith in God, which meant that he was more concerned to do something for God than to have God do something for him. Thirdly, Paul knew and respected Timothy's faculties. Timothy was a gifted scholar, preacher, and teacher, and Paul admonished him, "Do not neglect the gift you have." That's in 1 Timothy 4:13-14. And in 2 Timothy 1:6 Paul repeats himself: "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands." So Timothy had the right stuff. He came from a strong family, had a sincere faith, and possessed superb faculties. And Timothy had something else. He had a friend, a staunch friend who believed in him. Paul was that friend. Paul took him under his wing. Paul encouraged him. Paul corresponded repeatedly with him. Paul would not let Timothy think anything but the best of himself, and the result was that in spite of some people's pessimism, Timothy more than fulfilled his promise. Every young adult, every teenager, every child, needs at least one friend like that. Will you be a friend like that?

In the middle of his presidential campaign in 1860, Abraham Lincoln learned that a young friend of his son Robert, George Latham, had failed to pass the Harvard entrance examinations. Lincoln sat down and wrote George this letter: "My dear George, I have scarcely felt greater pain in my life than on learning yesterday...that you had failed to enter Harvard University. And yet there is very little in it, if you will allow no feeling of discouragement to seize, and prey upon you. It is a certain truth, that you can enter, and graduate in, Harvard University; and having made the attempt, you must succeed in it. 'Must' is the word. I know not how to aid you, save in the assurance of one of mature age, and much severe experience, that you can not fail, if you resolutely determine, that you will not. In your temporary failure there is no evidence that you may not be a better scholar, and a more successful man in the great struggle of life, than many others, who have entered college more easily. Again I say let no feeling of discouragement prey upon you, and in the end you are sure to succeed. With more than a common interest I subscribe myself Very truly your friend, A. Lincoln."

Lincoln, when he wrote that letter, was less than four months away from being elected the sixteenth president of the United States of America. While giving speeches and corresponding with national leaders, he had his own law practice to run. Lincoln was a busy man, yet he took time out to encourage George Latham, and I have no doubt that George read and re-read that letter in every "great struggle" of his life.

The Bible is God's personal letter addressed to you. In its pages you will find ample encouragement to be all that you can be. Here are portions of God's letter that I turn to in the great struggles of my life:

"Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." (Isaiah 41:10) "Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." (Jeremiah 29:11) "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13) "Who will

separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, not rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35, 37-39)

Abraham Lincoln subscribed himself very truly to be George Latham's friend, and I have no doubt he meant it, so that if Latham had ever gone to him for advice, Lincoln would have laid aside his law books, his unfinished speeches, and his preparation for the presidency, and given his young friend his full and undivided attention. The Scripture passages I just quoted assure us that God will do no less. Never hesitate to go to God in all the great and not-so-great struggles of life. God subscribes himself very truly to be your friend. And he never, never reneges on his promise.