

SERMON TITLE: "Varieties of Religious Experience: Growing with God"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Timothy 1:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 21, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

In these weeks of August, we've been considering varieties of religious experience. Two weeks ago, we read the story of the woman at the well, whose encounter with Jesus quenched her spiritual thirst. Last Sunday, we read the story of Saul's conversion on the Road to Damascus. After Saul was struck blind by lightning, a Christian disciple named Ananias laid healing hands on Saul and baptized him into the Christian faith.

Saul and the woman at the well were both adults when they came into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Their spiritual experience of Jesus called for and brought about significant changes in their lives. Today's reading from 2 Timothy provides us with a different variety of religious experience that is much less dramatic, but probably a lot more common. Let's see what we can learn about the young man Timothy and what his experience might teach us about "growing with God."

1—GROWING UP WITH GOD

The first thing we see in this story of Timothy's religious experience is that growing with God often begins with growing **up** with God. Bible scholars are conflicted about whether this letter was written by the Apostle Paul or by one of his assistants or followers at a later time. Whichever it was, the person writing this letter in Paul's name was familiar with Timothy's early life. Timothy didn't need a 180-degree pivotal conversion by a well or along a Damascus Road because he had learned the Christian faith growing up with a believing mother and grandmother. Acts 16:1 tells us that Timothy's father was a Greek, but we get the impression here in this letter that Timothy probably never considered himself anything but a Christian. The sincerity of his grandmother and mother's faith naturally planted in him the seeds of faith that had grown through his childhood and adolescence into his young adult years.

The importance of this kind of religious experience can't be underestimated. In verse three, the letter writer says of his own faith, "I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did." It's a wonderful thing to be born into a faith community and a religious heritage. Having a Christian birthright, having faith-filled parents who bring a baby before God for baptism or dedication, having believing parents who nurture their little ones with Bible stories and mealtime and bedtime prayers, having a family that devotes Sundays to worship and Sunday School, having a spiritual home in the church, having a group of religious belonging, having a sense of divine purpose—all those things are invaluable assets to a young person's life.

Obviously, parents are a huge part of a child's opportunity to grow up with God. But Timothy's grandmother Lois reminds us that grandparents can also play a significant role in leading a child on this path of spiritual growth. Other members of the extended family and congregation can help too. By our faithful examples, by our nurture and teaching, by our wise leading, and by our generous giving, we create a spiritual garden where children and youth can benefit tremendously from growing up with God.

2—FEELING ASHAMED OF OUR FAITH

This letter to Timothy doesn't just extol the benefits of growing up with God, however. The writer also addresses a concern that Timothy might have grown to a point of feeling ashamed of his faith. We see this in verse eight. The letter writer was worried that, as Timothy was growing up with God, his spiritual experience had become compromised by embarrassment about some issues of Christian faith.

This is a problem that the Apostle Paul addressed in some of his other letters, as well. Apparently, there were folks who were ashamed of the way Paul spoke. They thought he wasn't eloquent enough or wise enough. They wondered why he didn't come across as impressively in person as he wrote in his letters. They were also ashamed that the Christian missionary and apostle had been thrown in prison. In fact, some of them wondered how Jesus could be the Savior, when he was crucified on a criminal's cross. Aren't spiritual leaders supposed to be above such vile human experiences? And if Jesus and Paul were

legitimately doing God's work, then why would God allow them to be treated like that? The whole Christian situation seemed shameful.

To me, those kind of objections sound like some of the protests against Christian faith that a teenager or young adult might raise today. If a boy grows up believing that God created the world in seven, 24-hour days, and then goes to school and learns about how the layers of the earth were formed and shaped over billions of years and how the plants and animals came into existence through evolution—the biblical creation story can seem really puzzling and weird. If a girl grows up believing that Noah put two of every kind of animal on one boat, and then that girl grows up enough to realize how many kinds of animals there really are on the earth, even the biggest boat starts to seem embarrassingly small. If a kid grows up believing that a man named Jonah really got swallowed by a whale and was spit out alive, and then one day considers how improbable that story is, that kid might feel ashamed of himself for being so gullible. In fact, he might even become ashamed of his family, his church, and his faith. At the very least, that kid might become less enthusiastic and disaffected.

Or, another kind of shame might develop like this. A young person grows up in a Christian family and believing in God. But as that child grows to the age of accountability and sees that her thoughts, words, and actions don't always match what she was taught, she begins to feel ashamed. Or maybe a young man notices hypocrisy in his beloved elders, and that causes him shame.

Or, another kind of shame might develop like this. A girl grows up with Christian faith but one day someone dear to her is treated unjustly, and she discovers the problem of evil in the world. Or a young man travels to a place where poverty and deprivation is prevalent, and he realizes that there is great and persistent suffering. Neither of these problems seems to be cured by prayer. Despite years of believing in a God who could part the Red Sea and free the slaves, despite years of believing in Jesus' miracles of healing, these situations of tragedy seem insurmountable, and a crisis of faith occurs. Doesn't God care? Is God even listening? Does God even exist?

Whether young or old, when we are faced with such dilemmas, it's common to feel spiritual weakness and cowardice. In the face of life's big problems, we feel alone and naked of resources. And, for some of us, at least, that causes us to grow to a point of feeling ashamed of the inadequacy of our faith.

3—GROWING IN THE SPIRIT OF GOD

When we grow to that point, many people bail out of Christian faith. Many turn their backs and walk away. They change to some other kind of religion, or they become atheists. At the very least, they become disengaged. They attend and participate in church only on rare occasions, and maybe claim to be spiritual but not religious.

But we're not done with the story of Timothy's religious experience yet. This letter was written to prevent Timothy's shame from getting the best of him. The writer encouraged Timothy not to give up in disappointment or disillusionment, but to "rekindle the gift of God" that was within him. In verse seven, he insisted that God hadn't given Timothy "a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." The letter reminded Timothy that he needed to keep on growing in the spirit of God.

I think way too many of us think that everything we need to know spiritually we learned in kindergarten Sunday school, and I have to tell you that's just not true. If we don't want to become ashamed of our faith, then we need to keep on learning and studying. We don't want to have a case of spiritual arrested development. As we grow older, we need to challenge and apply and practice our faith on an increasingly mature level so life's problems don't leave us feeling inadequate and ashamed.

Alan Livingston's wife, Dr. Judy Elsley, has been teaching our Friday adult study on T.S. Eliot's book of poetry called *The Four Quartets*. Eliot was a man who tried to reconcile the difficulties of his time with his own Christian faith. In the poetry we read on Friday, T.S. Eliot observed that the only thing we can be very confident about is the present moment, and even that is only known to us through fleeting "hints

and guesses” that we might half-way understand. “The rest” of life, wrote Eliot, “is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.” We may not always “fare well,” he declared, but we should always keep voyaging forward.*

This, it seems to me, is the message of this letter to Timothy. In verses 8-14, the writer urged Timothy not to be ashamed of Paul’s suffering in prison, but to embrace that suffering as a positive by joining with him in suffering for the gospel. As the author indicated, we won’t be saved by our own works, but according to God’s power, purpose, and grace. Yes, certainly, God has work for us to do. But our redemption will come through our Savior Christ Jesus who, by dying and rising, “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Even if we suffer, even if things don’t go the way we think they should, there is no shame in a mature faith in Jesus Christ. If we guard the treasure of grace that has been entrusted to us, we can be sure that the one in whom we put our trust is able to guard us and keep us until the final day. We need not be ashamed of our human weakness. Our power comes from growing in the spirit of God.

CONCLUSION

This letter to Timothy is more prescriptive than descriptive. It indicates what Timothy should do, and doesn’t really tell us what he did do. But, since this letter was actually preserved and included in the highly valued writings that eventually became the New Testament, we can be fairly confident that Timothy took the advice of this letter to heart.

Growing up with God, growing ashamed of faith, and then growing in the spirit of God—maybe Timothy’s variety of religious experience is a kind we can relate to. Maybe we can find encouragement here for our own growing with God.

*From “The Dry Salvages.”