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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Catchphrases of the Faith”

Text: 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Dear people of God, the great baseball player, Yogi Berra, always entertaining in his use of the English language, grew up in St. Louis. A couple of decades ago, he received an honorary degree from one of the local St. Louis universities during a commencement. Wanting to impart some tried and true wisdom to the graduates, Yogi realized that he should address them in the form of the pithy sayings for which he is known so that they would remember. Among the yogiisms he told were the following:

“You can observe a lot just by watching.”

“If you don’t know where you’re going, you might wind up someplace else.”

“In theory there’s no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is.”

“If the world was perfect, it wouldn’t be.”

And “The future ain’t what it used to be.”

Though we laugh at Yogi's paradoxes and tautologies, he had the right strategy in trying to communicate with the graduates. He understood that a good commencement address should be advice in short phrases in the form of a pep talk, and that the last thing these graduates wanted to hear after four years of college was another lecture. These yogiisms are like mottoes and slogans, which are easy to remember. They can encapsulate a truth better than a long, drawn out sentence.

What we read in today's Sermon Lesson is similar. Here the apostle Paul, near the end of his life, is giving advice in the form of a pep talk to his young protégé, Timothy. And he tends to use pithy sayings, or at least those who edited his letter, or mixed it with their own advice, did so.

Paul is writing from prison. Unlike his other letters, this time he realizes he's not going to be released. The end is near for him. All he sought to accomplish in his life as a follower of Jesus Christ and the future of this small religious movement that we now call Christianity depends on people like Timothy to carry it forward. So there is an urgency for Paul to write this letter. It's not a very long letter, compared to several other letters by the renowned apostle. And again, we are not sure just how much of the letter was actually written by him and how much was added by a later editor or editors. But there seems to be a lot

of advice given, some of it almost without doubt given by Paul himself to Timothy. There is also a lot of encouragement and a bunch of succinct sayings, easy to remember.

Many scholars believe that some of the verses in our Sermon Lesson this morning are words to an early Christian hymn from which Paul is borrowing. In our Bible Study on Paul's Letter to the Colossians, our group encountered the same thing. Those magnificent verses about Jesus Christ being "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" et cetera were also likely a popular hymn known to the early Christians (Colossians 1:15). Quoting hymns was a strategic way for the early believers to remember important tenets of their faith.

You know how it's easy to remember a jingle. That's why television advertisers use them. That's how we remember their products. Jingles or tunes stick in our head. Every so often Miss Linda hears me singing a tune that I learned in the first grade, the first grade! And I still remember the words! That's the power of music! Ask our Youth Group or our Sunday School children what they remember about Vacation Bible Camp from past years. They probably have forgotten the lessons, but they still remember the tunes.

The apostle Paul is alone in prison, except for his faithful friend and

co-worker, Luke. He knows that death awaits him as the tyrannical Emperor Nero, having already wiped out the Christian population of Rome, is saving the best for last, the execution of the despised religion's chief proponent. And so, Paul is eager to make sure that the fledgling faith continues in the world after he's gone. After traipsing about most of the empire preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, after establishing congregations in many of the cities and towns where he traveled, after guiding those congregations in proper faith and lifestyle, Paul wants to pass along some final words of wisdom to one of his protégés, Timothy.

We cannot help but feel sad as we read this letter, for the whole tenor of it sounds like the revered apostle knows that this document will contain the very last words he will ever write. Toward the end of the letter, Paul says some things that make a fitting epitaph: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

If you were to write your own epitaph, what would you say about yourself? And what would you want to pass on to others to remember? Those are the things occupying Paul's mind as he sits in his prison.

This confinement seems to be different from the original dwelling when Paul first arrived in Rome. Then his dwelling seemed to be

somewhat comfortable where he was allowed to receive guests and to preach the Gospel to all who would come to visit him. The only inconvenience seemed to have been the soldier guarding him 24 hours a day. It sounds like it was some sort of house arrest, with the guard, perhaps, even staying outside, so that Paul had a certain amount of privacy.

Paul's housing situation seems to have changed, though, when he's writing this letter to Timothy. His confinement sounds almost as if it were a dungeon, since he asks Timothy to bring him a cloak and to try to visit before winter arrives. It was probably dank and cold. Tradition tells us that Paul right before his execution was housed in Mamertine Prison, consisting of a vast network of dungeons under Rome's main sewer. If you have read some of Paul's earlier prison letters, he seems to be optimistic that he will be released. By the time of 2nd Timothy, however, he's no longer confident that will be the case. What has changed? Probably Nero's persecution of Christians following the great fire of Rome, which took place in the summer of 64 AD. With rumors that Nero himself started the fire, and the fact that thousands were still left homeless when the calendar turned to 65 AD, the people were ready to revolt. Nero had to find a scapegoat for the fire to get the heat off himself. The scapegoat

became the local Christians, already unpopular because they believed in a Lord greater than Nero.

And so, Paul may have been moved from his house arrest to a dungeon-like atmosphere as the leader of this religious movement now blamed for destroying much of the city. The incarcerated Paul makes it a point in this letter to emphasize that he may be “chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained” (2 Timothy 2:9). No, the word of God cannot be chained. Paul refuses to keep quiet about the Christian faith, though he knows that it’s not in his best interest to keep talking about it. All his preaching is doing is reminding the Romans that he’s a Christian, one of that hated group who tried to burn down the great city of Rome. Not only does Paul keep talking about Christ, but he’s encouraging others to talk about him.

The apostle, or at least those who edited this letter decades afterward, uses mottoes and slogans in this letter to help Timothy or future Christian leaders to remember what’s important about the faith. These basic teachings can then be passed on to new followers of Christ so that the basics of Christianity can be learned and carried forever in their minds and hearts.

My alma mater, Calvin College, has a motto, *Cor Meum Tibi Offero*

Domine Prompte et Sincere, “My heart I offer to you, Lord, promptly and sincerely.” The motto has its origin with, who else, John Calvin, the great Protestant reformer and theologian. He first wrote this phrase in a letter to a fellow pastor, William Farel, in August of 1541.

The background to this famous phrase that would define Calvin’s life was his being a young 32-year-old pastor at the time. Farel was his mentor who had previously worked with him in Geneva in furthering the Protestant Reformation. Calvin had fled from Geneva to Strasbourg under duress. He had acquired the position of pastor of a church full of French refugees. We must remember at that time that it was dangerous to be a Protestant. They were viciously being persecuted by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Calvin was content in Strasbourg, doing important ministry there, such as teaching Bible Study each day (imagine if we had Bible Study every day instead of biweekly), preaching two sermons a day (imagine if we had two worship services daily), and studying and writing as well. Farel, however, wrote to Calvin to try to convince him to return to Geneva as soon as possible to take up the mantle of the reformation once again.

The exchange of letters between the two was passionate. Calvin was reluctant to return as he was quite content to pastor his small

congregation in Strasbourg. He enjoyed his nice little church and was establishing a good life for himself, ministering quite effectively. And most importantly, he was safe in Strasbourg, out of the purview of the vigilant Roman Catholics. His life was not being threatened there, as it would be if he again took a commanding position to champion the Protestant Reformation in Geneva. Eventually Calvin relented and accepted the call by means of the aforementioned letter that he wrote in August, 1541. He signed the letter with the dedication, “My heart I sacrifice to you, Lord.”

And so, Calvin followed God’s call away from safe Strasbourg back to tumultuous Geneva, making it clear that he was dedicated to serve God wherever God wanted him. He was willing to forfeit everything, even his own safety, for the sake of the Gospel. The phrase, “My heart I offer to you, Lord,” would become a motto for Calvin from that letter onward. He would sign all future correspondence with variations of this phrase. October is the month that we celebrate the Protestant Reformation and Bruce Wells, who will be preaching for me on the 27th when I’m on vacation, will be talking about Wittenberg, having visited there. Wittenberg, Germany, of course is where the Protestant Reformation was launched on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to

the castle door there.

And so writing letters amidst turmoil took place for both the apostle Paul and John Calvin. Both of them used catchphrases to remind followers what needed to be remembered about the Christian faith. Since it was a critical time for both, as Christians were being relentlessly persecuted, there was a sense of urgency to make sure that the faithful would remember key doctrines of the faith that would provide comfort and assurance to them during those difficult times.

What catchphrases would the apostle use? Our Sermon Lesson this morning begins, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead” (2 Timothy 2:9). Yes, that’s the heart of the Gospel, Jesus Christ raised from the dead. I tell my Confirmation students that if they remember anything about this class and take it to heart, please remember and believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That’s the heart of Christianity. The apostle Paul knew that and every Christian facing persecution and difficulty knows that their Lord conquered death itself. Whatever trouble we find ourselves in, Christ can help us, because he overcome the greatest enemy of all, death, and promises us who believe in him that we also will conquer death through him.

Once Paul is gone, the leadership of the church would fall on the

shoulders of those like Timothy. Like his mentor, Timothy also would undergo hardship and tribulation. What would he rely upon? What kind of hope could he give to congregation after congregation experiencing vicious persecution? The suffering of the Christians would continue even after Nero kills himself in 68 AD, for they would be caught in the chaos of the destruction of Jerusalem a couple of years later. When the Roman armies of the Emperor Titus march into Jerusalem destroying the Great Temple and emptying the city of its inhabitants, the Christians also were forced to flee or be killed. They too suffered being uprooted from their homes and becoming refugees searching for safety elsewhere.

Recall what I said last Sunday about the meaning of the word, *remember*. It doesn't simply mean to call something to mind. It has layers of meaning. It could mean putting something back together again, that is, re-remembering. Remembering also implies a call to action. When we remember something, we don't just recall a bunch of information that stays in our heads. To remember something means to adjust our lives so that what we remember continues to have significance. Remembering Christ during the sacrament of Holy Communion means renewing the commitment to follow Christ in all that we do.

Paul wants Christ's followers to remember the basics of Christianity

to help them to live faithful lives. And so, he picks language that will stick in Timothy's mind. He uses catchphrases such as, "If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him if we are faithless, he remains faithful--for he cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:11-13). Pauls links the Christian's suffering and struggle with God's ongoing faithfulness. God is always present and faithful in the midst of any distress or affliction we experience.

Do you have any favorite catchphrases of the faith? If not, I encourage you to adopt some. You will find it a great comfort when you are undergoing difficult times. Amen.