

Final Greetings

II Timothy 4:16-22

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Paul almost finishes with a flourish. In chapter four of the second letter to Timothy he writes of being poured out like a drink offering, and that the time of his departure has come. Any regrets? Doesn't seem like it. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness." (II Timothy 4:7,8) Having soared with rhetoric about the fight, the race, and the faith, his words of assurance we heard this morning seem to provide the perfect closing comment. "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen." If the ascription of glory for ever and ever wasn't clear enough, Paul leaves no room for doubt. This is the end. Amen. But then he says a little bit more.

I was leading a preaching class and a student was using this text for his sermon. I had been pushing him to be more personal in his preaching. This was an extremely intelligent man, moving from a career as a lawyer to studying in seminary. He had his exegesis and hermeneutics and his homiletics down pat. But he was keeping a safe distance from the text. In his sermon from II Timothy 4:16-22 he noted what a great conclusion Paul reaches in verse 18, "To him be glory forever and ever. Amen." And then he pondered why Paul messed up that perfectly good ending with a bunch of hellos and how are you's. As he put it, "Paul basically tells Timothy to say hi to the folks." From soaring rhetoric of fighting the good fight and running the race and God's rescue from every evil attack and glory forever and ever, say hi to the folks just kind of feels mundane.

And then in a few brief sentences this intellectual lawyer turned seminarian struck gold. He lifted up the importance of relationships. My summary of his words would be this: In Christ Jesus God was reconciling the world to himself. That means as humans we are reconciled to God. And by the grace of God humans are reconciled to one another. We are joined together as one body, bone to bone, joint to joint, marrow to marrow, ligament to ligament, flesh to flesh. We are brothers and sisters. When one weeps we all weep. When one rejoices we all rejoice. And names that on first hearing are mundane, even out of place after such soaring rhetoric, might actually be the most tender and important way to show that the gospel really does work. Through Jesus Christ we are not only set free to love others, but within the Body of Christ, that love is lived out in ways that are beautiful and binding.

Greet Priscilla and Aquila...those dear friends who made tents with Paul and who opened their home up for a house church. Greet the household of Onesiphorus. Paul has already told us about Onesiphorus in this very same letter. "He often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains." Apparently Paul was in prison and Onesiphorus stood by him. During one of those lonely times of imprisonment Onesiphorus searched for Paul until he found him. Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus had skin in the game with Paul. And Timothy, to whom all of these instructions are given, well Paul had no one like him. Timothy had served like a son with his father, and that service had led to such an intimate friendship that when they were separated there were tears. These names, seemingly an add-on after what appeared to be a perfectly good ending to the letter, were precious to Paul. These had served with him, they had suffered with him. Just the mention of their name was a witness to the power of Jesus Christ to bind hearts together in his love.

I don't know everything Paul felt as he mentioned the names that bring II Timothy to a close. But I think I know at least some of what Paul was experiencing. My letter might close with asking that greetings be given to some of the saints who opened their hearts and their homes and who shared their lives and their faith in the small church I grew up in Hanford, California.

There was Naomi, a faithful member of choir and a constant presence at the church. Single, her life always shined with compassion and kindness. And when she would say hello on a Sunday morning with her ever-present smile, I knew she was welcoming me into the family of God. I grew up and moved away from home. I was living several hours away when a package came in the mail. Naomi had wrapped up some pistachios and sent them to me with a thoughtful note encouraging me in my new beginning and letting me know the folks back home had not forgotten me and were keeping me in their prayers.

Ernie and Michi had our family over one Christmas Eve. They lived out in the country, and the car ride that Christmas Eve is forever etched in the annals of epic Eberly adventures. It was Christmas Eve, and I don't know who started it, but before we knew it we were singing Christmas carols. Seven of us crowded in an old Ford Fairlane 500, mom and dad in the front, five kids jammed in the back, we were letting the jingle bells rock. The herald angels were in excelsis because away in a manger in the little town of Bethlehem on a silent night Christ the Savior was born. Ernie and Michi never saw such a happy clan arrive at their door.

Lorna was our junior high school leader, a woman with children older than me but still getting down in the trenches in our dark and dank church basement, week after week teaching us about God and his Beloved Son who gave his life for us. One night a troublemaker got under our pastor's skin, the pastor tried to grab him, the kid climbed out the window, and I thought to myself, "Who would ever want to be a pastor?" More than ten years later I was standing in front of the church in Sacramento where I was to be ordained as a pastor, a Presbyterian Minister. Standing beside me was Lorna, participating in my ordination commission, a link in the long chain of faithful saints who had witnessed to me, by word and deed, about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When I tell you that the letter I write to my home church would end by asking the folks to greet Naomi and Ernie and Michi and Lorna, I really do believe there is a connection to what Paul was experiencing when he made sure to ask Timothy to say hi to all the brothers and sisters. Naomi and Ernie and Michi and Lorna were not only extremely influential in the lives of numerous young people just like me. They all were Japanese Americans. In 1962 a Japanese American Presbyterian Church in Hanford united with the First Presbyterian Church and they became one church.

Every one of those names that are so precious to me, every name of a Japanese American who was a Presbyterian, and more importantly a Christian, Naomi and Ernie and Michi and Lorna, all were either put in an internment camp during World War II, or they had family and friends who were put in an internment camp. Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor, we were in a war, and if you were Japanese American, you were under suspicion. Behind the walls in the internment camp these dear members of the Body of Christ were treated like strangers and aliens. They were treated like the enemy.

In 1962 these Japanese American Presbyterians joined with the Anglo American Presbyterians to form one church. They served side by side. They worshiped side by side. They studied the scriptures side by side. They prayed side by side. And when the table was set, when the bread was broken, when the cup was poured, they not only ate side by side, but they passed the bread and they passed the cup to one another and they said, "This is the body of Christ broken for you. This is the blood of Christ shed for you."

Paul writes about this world being divided by walls of hostility. When those two churches joined, there were not only Japanese Americans who had been placed in internment camps, there was a man who fought for the United States in World War II, who was captured by the Japanese, and who endured and survived the Bataan Death March. When those two churches joined, there was no question the focus could have been on dividing walls of hostility. But the gospel of Jesus Christ was present. It is the gospel message God entrusted to a missionary named Paul. It is

the gospel message Paul preached that said that because Jesus Christ had torn down every dividing wall of hostility there were no longer strangers and aliens. No, in Christ Jesus everyone had been brought into the household. Everyone had a place of honor and belonging. There was one family. The message Paul preached said that this simple ceremony we know as baptism has sacramental meaning, the old is gone and the new has come. In baptism we discover there are no longer dividing lines like Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. Instead of division there is unity. There is unity because there is one body and one Spirit and one Lord and one faith and one baptism and one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. When Paul tells Timothy to say hi to the folks, he is telling him to say hi to his brothers and sisters in Christ, his beloved friends.

There was another Japanese American member of our Presbyterian Church. His name was Maki. Maki and my dad were good friends, and when my dad was early in his sickness, Maki's heart was breaking. He would come and visit my dad and you could just see how his heart was torn. Maki was around when my dad moved to a wheelchair and when some loved ones built a ramp for that wheelchair at our house. Then Maki got sick. Then Maki was confined to a wheelchair.

My dad died eleven years ago on Labor Day Weekend. That Labor Day, the holiday on Monday, something really special happened that I will forever treasure. The services were over for my dad and all the relatives were getting ready to leave town on that Labor Day Monday. My mom, even though she was filled with grief, was thinking of others. She saw the wheelchair ramp that our house no longer needed, and she had my brother Danny call out to Maki's house to see if he could use it. Pretty soon we were loading the ramp into a pickup and heading out to Maki's house. My dad's brothers were all set to head to the airport, but when they heard there was a project they came along.

Sawdust was flying at Maki's house and hammers were striking nails and there was just a lot of excitement. Maki was there smiling the whole time. I watched. I am not gifted in any way, shape or form with tools, and so my brothers put me on the sideline while they all went to work. In no time at all the work was done and the ground was covered in sawdust. It is ironic that I never learned to use tools, because I used to hang out with my dad in his shop and watch him work. And even though I am worthless with any kind of building, carpentry, or home repair, I did have one job I could be trusted with. After sawing up a storm, the ground would be covered with sawdust. The smell of it even now catches me up short. Dad would finish his work and ask me if I would sweep the floor. As I would do the one job I was qualified for, he would sit there proudly and watch as I loaded dustpan after dustpan in the garbage can. Later he would say to my mom, "Wayne sure did a fine job sweeping up the garage." That sawdust left an enduring impression.

So there we were at Maki's house, the work was done, and there was a pile of sawdust on the ground. I asked Maki's wife if I could have a Ziploc bag. She had a puzzled look on her face but she got me a bag. I took the bag, grabbed a broom and a dustpan, and began to sweep up the sawdust. Maki's wife tried to stop me. She said leave it alone, she would clean it up later. As I kept on working I looked at her and said, "I'm not cleaning, I am collecting." That day I filled up a bag with sawdust and I keep it with me in a very safe and special place.

Now I know Maki did not become a part of the First Presbyterian Church in Hanford in 1962 just so that some forty years later I could sweep up a bag of sawdust in memory of my dad. But that bag of sawdust will be forever linked to Maki, and because it is linked to Maki it will be linked to Ernie and Michi and Naomi and Lorna and all those other fine Christians who not only believed that in Jesus Christ there was one body, they lived into the fullness of that unity.

And because of that I think it is entirely possible that forty or fifty years from now our kids who are with us now, our youth who are with us now, might have their own version of a bag of sawdust that will cause them to remember this church, at this time, and at this place. I hope when they find their version of a bag of sawdust they will say that we modeled that kind of faithful living, that we understood the gospel was so big that there was room for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord, that our experience of God's grace was so strong that dividing walls of hostility came down, that our understanding of baptism was so fundamental to our identity that we said there is no longer Jew or Greek or slave or free or male or female, but that all of us were together in Christ because he had made us into his new creation. And even if they never find their own version of a sawdust bag, I hope whenever they come to this table they will say, "The church where I grew up, they used to sit together at this table. They used to pass the bread and the cup to each other. They spoke words of grace saying the body of Christ for you, the blood of Christ for you." And they treated each other like they were family, like they were brothers and sisters in faith.

May we soar with the rhetoric of Paul, as we lift our praises to God and say, "To him be glory forever and ever. Amen." And may we be so overwhelmed with the beauty of the Body of Christ that we never forget to add on at the end, "And say hi to the folks. Say hi to all the folks. For truly they are my brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ."