

The word of God is not in chains

2 Timothy 2:8-15

October 10, 2010

Is the glass half empty or half full?

Both statements are true. Both statements accurately describe the amount of water in the glass. But the two statements represent two very different ways of thinking about the same set of facts: thinking about what you don't have, or thinking about what you do have.

You can say what you want about the glass of water, half empty or half full, but if you were thirsty ... If you were thirsty, would this half glass of water do you any good? You bet it would!

This Sunday is Access Sunday, the first day in a week designated Disability Awareness Week. The intent of the designation, of course, is to raise awareness and draw attention to the particular concerns and needs of a part of our population that is sometimes overlooked or underserved.

And yet, when Tyler Greene, our worship leader this morning, put together his Eagle Scout video project, he chose not to speak about disability awareness, but about ability awareness. He chose to look at the same set of facts from a very different point of view, not focussing on what this or that person cannot do, but on what each and every person can do.

In the same way, it is true to say that from the moment we draw our very first breath, we begin to die, and that with every breath we take, we move that much closer to death. And yet, it is also true to say that from our very first breath, we begin to live! And with every breath we continue to take, we continue to live!

We celebrated Robbins Fischer's memorial service in this sanctuary yesterday morning. After a devastating childhood illness, breathing never came easy for Robbins. The experts didn't expect him to live past the age of thirty, which age Robbins reached sixty-one years ago! But look at what he did with each and every breath God gave him! As long as he had breath, he lived and worked and loved and dreamed and made a difference -- a tangible, measurable difference -- in this world. Robbins chose always to see the possibilities, not the obstacles.

Faith is a way of seeing things, a very different way of looking at the same set of facts. Jesus said faith can move mountains, and I believe it can, but, first of all, faith is a different way of looking at things as they are. We may see our lives, as they are, we may see this world, as it is, through the eyes of faith, or through the eyes of despair.

Do you see a world on a slippery slope to hell? Or do you see a world where the power of resurrection is already at work -- healing, reconciling, enlightening, transforming?

Do you see yourself fast using up the days allotted to you? Or do you welcome each new day as it comes with thanksgiving, embracing the opportunities that one day provides for seeing new glories and singing new songs, for making new friends and for simply breathing in the goodness of the life God gives?

Timothy faced such a choice: the choice between faith or despair, the choice between keeping on with the work he was called to do or giving up because of all the difficulties that beset him.

This was Timothy's life. This was Timothy's world. His mentor, Paul, was in jail, imprisoned for doing what Timothy was now doing, proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Just being a Christian increasingly meant risking the ill will and iron fist of the Roman Empire.

There was turmoil around and about the church, and there was turmoil within the church. There were teachers, many of them, talking up the people of the church in Ephesus, intriguing them with new ideas and fascinating stories, offering them a different way, a more attractive and socially acceptable way, of thinking about their faith. They challenged Timothy's authority and they belittled Paul's reputation.

Timothy was beleaguered, overburdened, always on the defensive, and, with Paul in prison, almost all alone. He must have felt like Elijah did when Elijah cried out in the wilderness: "I am the only one left!"

But, as God reminded Elijah that day: It's not just about you! It's not just about Timothy and it's not just about Paul. Paul is in chains, yes, but the word of God is not in chains! Elijah may be on the run for his life, but the word of God is not on the run! God is going to do what God is going to do!

It's not just about Timothy. And it's not just about me. And it's not just about you.

Sometimes I feel like Elijah. Sometimes I feel like Timothy. It is tough enough being called to speak the truth of the way of the Lord in the midst of a world that is disinterested at best and hostile at worst. It is tough enough to be one voice competing with so many other voices offering their own versions of the way to the good life. But what is especially hard for me, what is especially painful for me, is to feel isolated and alone, like a voice crying in the wilderness, even among those who also claim the name "Christian."

On the one hand, you have folks like the leaders and members of the Westboro Baptist Church, now arguing their case in front of the US Supreme Court. They're the folks who stage demonstrations at military funerals, carrying signs that say: "God hates fags" and "Thank God for IED's" and "Thank God for dead soldiers" and "God hates your tears."

There are few Christians or Christian groups who would align themselves with these sentiments, and yet there are many Christians and many Christian groups who espouse a similarly ungracious and even hateful message, though expressed in subtler and more persuasive forms ... Christians who, in the name of Jesus, actively oppose immigration reform and actively oppose increased environmental regulation, Christians who call for an end to all social welfare as we know it and for the reinstatement of the death penalty.

OK. Let's see. Welcoming the stranger, serving the poor, providing good stewardship of the earth, and showing mercy are unchristian? What book are these people reading? Not this one!

On the other hand, on the other side, you have Christians and Christians churches that seem almost too afraid to mention Jesus' name for fear of offending somebody or of seeming too religious, Christian and Christian churches that seem to think Jesus' message was "I'm OK, you're OK."

We do say, "Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here" -- and we mean it! But we also expect you to be changed here, because we expect to be changed here! We live in a world that is broken and hell-bent on dying, a world that needs to be healed, not coddled, a world that needs to be resurrected, not placated.

Sometimes I feel alone. Sometimes I wonder where all the people are who speak and live a gospel of transforming love. People who reach out to a wonderfully diverse and often alien world with open arms and a consistent message. People who have something to say, something God gave them to

say to a hurting world. People who have something to do, something God gave them to do, to touch hurting bodies and thirsty souls with God's love.

You have the Christian Right and the Christian Left, soldiers of truth and servants of love, but where are the Christian Christians? Where are the followers of Jesus bold enough and humble enough to speak the truth in love?

In my most disillusioned moments, in my most despairing moments, I wonder if that message, the message that holds truth and love together, that honors and values the gifts both Left and Right bring to the church without being co-opted by either the Left or the Right -- I wonder if that message will die, when I and others of like mind die.

It's not about me! It's not about you! The word of God is not in chains! It is out loose, on the move, fulfilling its purpose, winning hearts and minds, saving people from death, saving people for life!

You and I -- the future of the gospel is not in our hands. We are simply called to be faithful servants, in this moment, right here and right now, to be workers not ashamed of our work, but boldly and correctly teaching the message of God's truth.

We are called to see the possibilities, not the obstacles, to focus not on what we cannot do, but on what we can do, not to mourn the loss of what we might have been or wish we were, but to celebrate what we are, what God has made us to be, and to take up eagerly the work God is calling us to do!

Is the glass half empty or half full? Is the Christian gospel on the brink of extinction or on the brink of a new revival?

Tell me, what do we have? We have the word! We have the word of God, and the word of God is not in chains! So get on and hang on, if you're ready. It's going to be quite a ride!