

Called to Set an Example

We have many identities and many associations as we make our way through life.

Some of them are identities and associations that stay with us from the time we're born, until the time we die. Take our genetic make up for example. The 23 sets of chromosomes that define who each of us is, stay the same across our lifetime. It is becoming quite the rage lately to discover what is hidden within the genetic code that each of us has, with web services that specialize in just that.

Some of them are identities and associations placed on us along our life's path. One such identity that is much in the news in our nation these days is citizenship and immigration status. Depending on where you were born, or where you live and how you came to live there, results in such an identity. This is not just a US issue, but one that is playing out in many places across the globe.

Some of them are identities and associations that, while we may have for a period of time, are later on shed or given up. The identity that we have as a result of our chronological age is one such identity that is placed upon us and then shed along life's path: infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, older adulthood and the golden years. While attempts may be made to hang onto one of these identities longer along the way, or get to one of them sooner, eventually we have no power over which of these identities we have, simply as a factor of our chronological age.

Some of them are identities and associations that we aspire to along the way. Education is a great example of these identities and associations. While one can be a student at any age and across a lifetime, various educational benchmarks result in particular identities: high school graduate, technical apprenticeship leading to certification, college graduate, and becoming an academic after earning advanced degrees. Whether or not we choose to display these particular identities, they are nevertheless sealed for us in the academic and occupational transcripts that follow us.

There are some identities and associations that are placed on us along the way that we may find ourselves seeking to modify or change. One of these is the all-important credit score that is assigned to us by some faraway computer algorithm. While ideally such a score is accurately reflective of our reality, there are too many cases where identity theft has resulted in an inaccurate score. Many times, those with low scores are on a journey to do what is necessary to raise those scores to a higher level.

There are some identities and associations that while we admire in others, we may never be able to adopt or achieve for ourselves. With the Winter Olympics about to get underway in South Korea, we will likely find ourselves in awe of athletic prowess that results in becoming Olympic Medalists—something we may truly desire, but recognize that we'll never realize (at least for those of us here today over a certain age).

And finally, there are some identities and associations that we aspire to as a life-long project. So while we may strive and aspire to a life in total harmony with the rest of the world around us, we know that we're still leaving some form and size of footprint in our wake. Environmentalists may call this our carbon footprint.

So when it comes to our identity as disciples of Jesus, as Christians—where does it fit into these various categories? Well this part of our identity can be looked at in various ways.

Having just celebrated the baptism of one of the littlest and youngest in our church family this morning, set before us a great reminder that we belong to Jesus Christ forever. Little Brooks was presented for baptism by his parents who are celebrating the gift from God that he is, as well as celebrating God's claim on him through Jesus. Brooks, who is less than a year old, did nothing to achieve this identity. It is an identity given to him by God and recognized by his parents as well as by those of us in this family of faith. Furthermore, Brooks made no promises or commitments of his own today. While his parents made promises and we made promises to share the glorious good news of Jesus with Brooks over the coming years as he is raised in the Christian faith, the grace that is bestowed on him today is just that—grace pure and simple—a total and complete 100% gift from God. With this event of baptism today, we can say with confidence that the identity as Christian as clearly seen in Brooks is simply a part of who he is, and who we are.

Infant baptism, while not practiced in all Christian churches, has a strong biblical basis for it in the New Testament stories when whole households were welcomed into the church, when all were baptized, adults and children alike—again a testimonial to the idea that our being Christian is a given. Related to this, is the fact that in the Christian church, there is no such thing as re-baptism. Even in a case where a person who was baptized as an infant and in the course of growing up falls away from the Christian faith and perhaps even leads a life in opposition to Christian values, ideals and practices, would not be baptized again in the event that she or he returned to the church. Rather that baptism that occurred in infancy would be celebrated through a renewal of the covenant that had been broken not by God but by the individual. When this happens it is a celebration of the sufficiency of God's grace bestowed in baptism.

So with this baptismal seal we are identified as Christ's own—as Christians. But our identity doesn't stop there. It starts there, when the journey truly begins. . . . or begins anew.

In the first century of the Christian church, that is when the eye-witnesses to all that had happened in the life and ministry of Jesus were reaching old-age, Christians came to be known as people of the Way. It was a reference that pointed to the dynamic nature of following Jesus. On the way has a moving and growing feel to it. And as the people of the Way continued in their ministry of sharing the good news of this new Christian faith, there arose a whole body of texts and traditions about what it meant to follow Jesus. Much of what we call the New Testament, after the gospels themselves, are writings that speak to this staying on track as well as becoming more mature in faith.

The first letter to Timothy is one of three little such New Testament books, the other two being Second Timothy and Titus. One of the notable things about these three books is that they are some of the later writings that made it for inclusion in the Bible. As a result, we can read in these books that a lot of what is said is to refute other ideas that were cropping up and trying to work their way into Christian theology and practice.

What we know about Timothy is that he was a young leader of part of the people of the Way—the Christian church. And because he was so young, it was advantageous for the older and wiser and more experienced Christian followers to call on Timothy, and other younger leaders of the church for that matter, to hold fast to the way that had been handed to them. What we have in these letters are very helpful reminders of basic and fundamental Christian truths that should be followed and maintained by those who were part of the Christian church.

The section that we read in part of the 4th chapter includes just this kind of reminders that are as relevant today as they were in the first century. Presbyterian pastor and theologian Thomas Long in

writing about this part of the letter to Timothy points to four main things of which Timothy is reminded here—what he calls “strategic patterns of good ministry.” (*1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: a theological commentary on the Bible*, © 2016 Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press, pp. 127-138)

First, he says, “When the people are being fed spiritual junk food, give them something solid (4:6-7a).” (*ibid.*, p. 127) This is contrasted with “profane myths and old wives’ tales.” (1 Tim 4:7) Our faith grows not with new ideas that are added from outside the faith, but rather by holding to the tradition that has been handed down from those who have gone before, the faith that is anchored in Jesus Christ. We have so much we can learn and receive from those who have been on the Way as long or longer than we have.

The second strategic pattern of good ministry Long points to is, “Train yourself in the same life of faith and discipleship that you expect of the rest of the community (4:7b-10).” (*ibid.*, p. 130) The word train here is, as in the athletic training that is undertaken to maintain physical health and athletic prowess. It is important that those in the Christian community witness their leaders, their elders, engaging in regular and intentional practice of the faith and training in godliness.

Long says the third pattern is, “Set a public example in the way you speak and the way you live (4:11-12).” (*ibid.*, p. 136) In this reminder, Timothy is to embrace his young age as a powerful influence in maintaining the faith of the community for many years to come. It’s here that we hear the call to be an example as we speak God’s word, as we conduct ourselves with faith and purity.

And finally, Thomas Long says, “Focus on the central realities of the church’s life: worship and formation (4:13-16).” (*ibid.*, p. 137) Here we’re reminded to keep the main thing the main thing. In our worship of God we focus on God as we sing our praises, as we confess our sins, as we proclaim God’s word, and as we pray for the world. It is an awesome privilege to be entrusted with maintaining the ongoing worship life of the church. And when he speaks of formation, we’re reminded again that our Christian faith is not static and unchanging, but rather is dynamic and growing in depth and maturity.

So our identity as Christians is both a gift and a journey. We are immeasurably blessed with God’s grace, given in Jesus, to come into God’s presence as followers of Jesus. And at the same time we’re called to follow the example of Jesus as we ourselves in turn become examples to the world of God’s amazing good news of love and grace.

As we continue to live out our faith in this 21st century context, may we be inspired by the words written to Timothy so long ago, to be an example, to display what it means to be a follower of Jesus, the one whom God sent as a gift to the whole world.