

COME BEFORE WINTER

September 27, 2009

Texts – Psalm 90: 1-6, 9-10, 12, 14
II Timothy 4: 6 - 22

He calls him “*my true child in the faith*” (I Timothy 1: 2), “*my beloved child.*” (II Timothy 1: 2) He says, “*I thank God . . . when I remember you . . . in my prayers . . . I long night and day to see you, that I may be filled with joy.*” (1: 3-4)

The letters of Paul which are addressed to Timothy in our New Testament are full of words of friendship – poignant, personal, intimate words. The vast majority of Biblical scholars today question whether Paul actually wrote in their entirety what we now call the “Pastoral Epistles” (1st and 2nd Timothy and the Letter to Titus). The theological content within them is so strikingly different from what we find in Paul’s other writings that it is hard to imagine him having done so. There is widespread agreement, nevertheless, that the autobiographical material which is scattered throughout these short letters actually comes from Paul’s own hand. It is simply too intimate and personal to be anything but the genuine article. That is especially true of the Letters to Timothy.

“*I am reminded of your sincere faith,*” Paul says for instance, “*a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and (which) now, I am sure, dwells in you.*” (II Timothy 1: 5) These two men have a shared history and a bond of friendship deeper than words can express.

Donna and I have a “sampler” hanging in our bedroom at home that my great aunt made eighty years ago. You know what a sampler is – a handstitched piece of embroidery which young women of an earlier generation used to demonstrate their skill in needlework. The one in my possession was framed by my mother and father many years ago as a family heirloom. Mabel,

the woman who made and signed it in 1930, was my Dad's mother's sister. She embroidered on it a bit of philosophy that still characterizes the Lee Family genetic "pool." "Friendship's a name to few confin'd," it says, "the offspring of a noble mind; a generous warmth that fills the breast, better felt than e'er expressed."

It's an old-fashioned idea, isn't it? Certainly it's different from the philosophy so prevalent in much of our world. You meet somebody at a party or a business meeting and right away you're supposed to be fast friends. "Let's do lunch," you're expected to say. Weeks later you run into the same person at the grocery store and they run up to you and say, "O-o-o-h, it's you! How are you?" And all the while you can see them running through their mind saying, "Where'd I meet this guy?"

"Friendship's a name to few confin'd," the old sampler says; "a generous warmth that fills the breast, better felt than e're express." It's a different kind of philosophy; one which fits Paul and Timothy.

When I read the letters of Paul to Timothy, I am struck not only by the bonds of friendship which tied these two together, but also and especially by the loneliness of Paul at this point in his life. He is coming to the end of his journey, and there aren't many left with him. Demas has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica, he says (4: 10). Crescens has gone to Galatia; Titus to Dalmatia. Tychicus has gone on to Ephesus. "*At my first defense,*" he writes (and remember he's writing from prison in Rome), "*no one took my part; all deserted me.*" (v. 16)

This is a lonely man, writing what we now know to have been his last letter to his best friend. He appeals to him to leave Ephesus, where he is serving, and to come and be with him at Rome. "*Stop at Troas,*" he says, "*and bring the cloak I left there, and the books and, above all,*" Paul says, "*bring the parchments,*" which is to say, bring my copy of the scriptures. Most of all, however, Paul wants Timothy to bring himself. "*Do your best to come to me soon,*" he

pleads (v. 9); “*do your best to come before winter.*” (v. 21)

Why before winter? Because when winter set in the season for navigation closed in the Mediterranean and it was dangerous for ships to go out to sea. If Timothy waits until winter, he will have to wait until Spring; and Paul has a premonition that he will not last out the winter. “*For I am already on the point of being sacrificed,*” he says; “*the time of my departure has come.*” (v. 6)

So he pleads: “*Do your best to come before winter.*” Before winter or never!

There are some things in life which will never be done unless they are done “before winter,” aren’t there? The winter will come and the winter will pass, and the flowers of springtime will deck the breast of the earth . . . and the graves of some of our opportunities, perhaps even the graves of some of our dearest friends. There are golden gates wide open on this last weekend of September which next year at this time will be forever shut. There are tides of opportunity running now at the flood; next October they will be at the ebb. There are voices speaking today which a year from today will be silent. “*Come before winter,*” Paul pleads; before winter or never.

I like all the seasons. I like Winter with its clear, cold nights and the stars that are like silver-headed nails driven into the vault of heaven. I like the Spring with its green growth, its flowing streams, its promise of new life. I like Summer with its warm gentle breezes swaying the trees, its long evenings and the sounds of its song birds. But best of all I like the Autumn. I look forward from today to the mist and haze, the cool morning air, and the kaleidoscope of color that is Fall. How glorious it is, but how quickly it passes. It is the perfect parable of all that fades. One day not too long from now the forests will be ablaze with color, but the next . . . The rains will fall, the winds will blow, and the trees will be stripped and barren.

Every returning Autumn brings home to me again, therefore, a sense of the preciousness

of life's opportunities – their beauty, but also their brevity. It moves me to want to “live now,” for surely there is “*a season for every matter under heaven,*” and those seasons do change.

So taking our suggestion from this message of Paul in prison at Rome to Timothy in far off Ephesus – “*Come before winter*” – let us listen to some of those voices which now are speaking to us so earnestly, but which a year from today may be forever silent.

To begin with, let us suppose that when Timothy received this letter, he said to himself, “Yes, I shall start for Rome, but first I must clear up some matters here at Ephesus.” And let us suppose that those “final matters” delayed him to the point that when he finally did reach Troas and inquired when he could book passage to Rome he was told, “No ships for Italy until April; the season for navigation is gone.” What a miserable winter that would have been!

All through it we can imagine him reproaching himself for not setting out at once and wondering how Paul was faring. And then, in the Spring, catching the first ship and hurrying as quickly as possible to Rome, we can imagine him approaching the prison where Paul was held, only to be turned away by the guards. Then he goes to the house of Claudia or Linus or Pudens or one of the other Christians there and asks of Paul, only to hear: “Are you Timothy? Don't you know that Paul was beheaded last December? Every time the jailer put the key in the door of his cell, Paul thought you were coming. His last message was for you: ‘Give my love to Timothy, my beloved child, when he comes.’” Oh, how Timothy then would have wished that he had come before winter.

Before winter or never. “*The poor you always have with you,*” Jesus said, “*but you do not always have me.*” The occasion was when the disciples complained that Mary's costly and beautiful gift of ointment might have been spent on behalf of the poor. “*But you do not always have me.*” That is true of some of the friends we love now, isn't it? We cannot name them today, but next September we shall know their names. With them, as far as we are concerned, it is

before winter or never.

This came home to me many years ago as I was talking with a friend whom I hadn't seen for a long time. Something he said alerted me to the fact that he was in the market for a job change. "Looking to move on?" I asked, and implicit within my words was the assumption, "Looking to move up?"

"Well, yes, I am looking to change jobs," he replied. "Fact is, I'd kind of like to retire or at least cut my hours way back."

That surprised me. He was in his prime "earning years," as they say. "How come?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "my brother is six years younger than I, and he's got cancer, and he's not going to make it." Looking at his wife across the room, he added: "I want some time with her. We haven't had enough yet. She deserves better and so do I."

Come before winter, my friend is hearing; before winter or never. I left thinking: "They're lucky, and they're wise."

What voices are calling to you this weekend which a year from now will be forever silent? What loved one have you now for whom it is "before winter, or never?" What opportunity is open to you now which a year from today will be forever shut? Do you know?

Some of you have young children – infants and toddlers, terrible two's and fearsome fours! I know you can't wait for them to grow up. I know it is hard and exhausting and trying and exasperating. But I hope you can hear in these words of Paul to his beloved friend, Timothy, that you ought not hurry them along too fast. Enjoy them now; love them now; hold them now. They'll grow up soon enough. Before you know it, in the twinkling of an eye, they'll be too big to hold, or play with, or read to. Do it now; enjoy them now. Come before winter.

Finally, revisit that sampler with me –

“Friendship’s a name to few confin’d,
the offspring of a noble mind;
a generous warmth which fills the breast,
better felt than e’er expressed.”

There’s a great deal of truth in it. For the Apostle Paul, as perhaps for too many of us, friendship was “a name to few confined,” and yes it was “the offspring of a noble mind.” But mark it well – it was not for him something “better felt than e’er expressed.”

Whether Timothy made it to Rome in time or not, we do not know. What we do know is that the generous warmth which filled Paul’s breast was not only felt but was also lovingly expressed. Why can it not . . . why should it not . . . be the same for us as well?

What voices are calling to you on this weekend which a year from now will be forever silent? What loved one have you now for whom it is “before Winter or never?” What opportunity is open to you now which a year from today will be forever shut? There are such for each of us.

Soon the haze of autumn will descend upon us. Soon cold winds will strip the leaves from the trees and send them swirling over the fields. Soon the snow will lie on the uplands and the meadow brooks will turn to ice. Let us heed Paul’s plea. Come before winter.