

1 Timothy 4:1-10 - New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later^[a] times some will renounce^[b] the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. They forbid marriage and abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer. If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant^[c] of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with profane and foolish tales. Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and suffer reproach,^[d] because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

Good morning! As you may have read in this week's newsletter, as our Worship Committee began to consider this fall season, we began with our "heartstrings" in October, wondering what we are most passionate about. As we asked different folks to speak during this season, Doug Miller and Todd Davis both said yes - both interested in speaking about our earth. We realized that our commitment to caring for creation was one of those deep passions at UMC, and it seemed like a natural transition from heartstrings to creation and thanksgiving.

We care and appreciate our earth - both in its physical beauty, often highlighted in our Glimpses of the Divine segment of each service. But we also care for our climate, adding energy efficient improvements to our building and supporting organizations that advocate and care for creation. We also belong to this complicated human race which inhabits this earth, and we strive to be a congregation with all generations serving God and the world together - one more way we are thankful for creation.

This week Laura Litwiller shared an article with me written by Mennonite Church USA Denominational Minister, Rachel Ringenburg Miller. In the article, Rachel relayed a story from 8th Street Mennonite where she attends in Goshen, Indiana.

"They're not coming back" a distressed congregant said to Rachel one morning following their worship service. Inquiring more, Rachel learned that a couple had been attending their church in search of a new place to worship. But bothered by how much noise the kids of 8th Street Mennonite had made throughout the service, they informed this person that they would not be returning. Apparently the sounds of children were not a worshipful experience.

Kids were present at 8th Street Mennonite, but at least for this visiting couple, their sounds were not appreciated.

What aspects of creation we celebrate and give thanks for is different for each one of us. This morning, the aspect of creation that I want to talk about is people. Our passage this morning from 1 Timothy contains this line, *For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving.*

1 Timothy is one of the pastoral epistles - 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus - books in the New Testament that offer guidance and instructions on early church leadership. This short book or letter is traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul and addressed to his protégé, Timothy.

Timothy was serving in Ephesus (remember Paul's letter to the Ephesians?), which for its time was a significant city with a diverse population and an apparently growing Christian community. As this Jesus movement was taking shape, church leaders felt it was their duty to offer guidance so that things didn't get out of hand. 1 Timothy is Paul's attempt at offering specific advice on worship, the roles of elders and deacons, and the conduct of believers within the church, all while emphasizing the importance of sound doctrine and godly living. And for 2000 years, churches have been looking to this short letter for guidance and wisdom.

Receiving with thanksgiving... It's such a challenge sometimes to do this, because what we receive isn't always what we expect. We probably all remember a moment where we received a birthday gift that wasn't what we expected. But it goes beyond the receiving of actual physical gifts too.

For those who have vocations serving people, we know that there is a wide spectrum of interactions that are possible whether we're serving in education, healthcare, social services, retail environments, or even faith spaces. It's hard to be grateful when the person in front of you is acting out of anger or frustration. Those who have worked with refugee resettlement know the anxiety that comes with trying to prepare for a new person's arrival. And who shows up isn't always what we anticipate or prepare for.

And we'd be remiss here on this All Saints weekend if we neglected to reference the length of our lives, knowing that none of us are ever sure of how many moments we get to live out. As I put together our slides remembering those who have gone on ahead of us, I felt the weight especially of the lives of those cut short. It's hard to be grateful when we see a life that ended too early.

As Jasiel has already noted, there is also something beautiful about being thankful for uncertainty. It is counter to our human tendency to want to know the outcomes. We want to be certain about our future goals, plans, or health. We want to know how things will unfold, and it's hard to embrace the unknown.

In her article, Rachel Ringenberg Miller reflected that when it comes to our communities, we have to think intergenerationally. She writes, "At its core, intergenerational worship is about shared experience. It's not a "children's service" tacked onto an adult agenda, nor is it a silent expectation that kids will mimic adult behaviors. Instead, it's a way of weaving generations together so that grandparents, young adults, teens, and toddlers each find a place and a voice."

We only ever arrive at that place of deeper meaning not when we cope or put up with our reality, but when we do as Rachel suggested - weaving generations together, experiencing things in community, and perhaps drawing on 1 Timothy to receive what we have been given with a posture of thanksgiving.

This is not work to be done lightly. In fact, at times it can be incredibly difficult. There is a powerful interview between Stephen Colbert and Anderson Cooper, in which the former talks about how he has worked hard to have gratitude amid grief. Colbert shared;

"It's a gift to exist. And with existence comes suffering. There's no escaping that. But if you are grateful for your life. Then you have to be grateful for all of it. And so, at a young age I suffered something so that by the time I was in serious relationships in my life with friends or with my wife or with my children, I have some understanding that everybody is suffering and however imperfectly, acknowledge their suffering and connect with them and to love them in a deep way that makes you grateful for the fact that you have suffered so that you can know that about other people. I want to be the most human I can be, and that involves acknowledging and ultimately being grateful for the things that I wish didn't happen because they gave me a gift."

Thanksgiving for all of creation, even when it hurts. And let me be clear - this is not something we can force on anyone - even ourselves. And I say this as a Blue Jays fan still in denial about the outcome of last night's game. It is hard to be thankful - it takes time, hurting and healing, to ever arrive at such a powerful and meaningful space as Colbert. And sometimes our trauma makes arriving at that space impossible.

Several years ago, when I was helping some Penn State students form Penn State's first official LGBT Christian organization, one of those students chose the name

Receiving with Thanksgiving based on this particular scripture verse. It wasn't done because we had arrived at a moment when our society was thankful for LGBT Christians, but because it was something we were still striving for. And when that student lost their life to suicide, I couldn't help wondering how their life might have been different if the Christianity they had grown up in had fully embraced this incredible person.

This month, as we shift from our October heartstring series, and as we move toward the Thanksgiving celebration at the end of the month, we have the opportunity to reflect on all of creation and planet earth. This is also part of our heartstring story, reflecting on our home and our place in it.

The created universe gives us many opportunities to receive with thanksgiving. From the food that springs from our earth, to the natural beauty that surrounds us, we have a choice to see this space with gratitude or not. And especially when we see the impact that humanity has made on this precious planet, and the trauma of our world, it challenges us to return to a posture of trying to embody God's call to care for all of creation - even in its brokenness.

And perhaps that is what can guide our hearts as we turn now to the communion table. We know that we live in a world still bearing the weight of injustice and longing for more peace. And we are called to live thankfully for this messy human existence, despite all that weighs on us today.

It is not easy, nor is it always something that sparks joy. But we gather together to try and make sense of beauty amid brokenness. Of sorrow and joy. And perhaps it is in this posture to join together in the act of communion once again.

And so as you are able, I invite you to join me in a confession, found in Voices Together 936, as well as here on the screen.

Introduction to Communion

At the table of Christ,

we eat this bread and drink this cup

to remember the life and death and resurrection of Jesus,
to be united with Christ and with one another as the church,
and to look toward a time when all will be one.

As we eat and drink with thanksgiving,

Jesus Christ is present with us

and we are empowered by the Spirit

to follow Jesus' way of love

as the body of Christ,

broken and blessed for the life of the world.

We remember that Jesus called his disciples to join the Spirit's movement in our world. And despite their brokenness, and the state of their world, Jesus called them to compassion. His words challenged those in power, and spoke justice and peace in a context that was also fearful of the state of their world, but also welcomed and gave thanks for those who society had rejected.

On the night of his arrest, Jesus shared a final meal with his disciples. A meal of breaking bread and sharing the cup, a symbol of a new covenant, a radical act of love and solidarity in the face of impending betrayal and injustice.

And so as we prepare our hearts for the communion table, I invite you to join me in prayer:

God of creation, we come to this table striving to receive with thanksgiving. We acknowledge the struggles, the injustices, and the pain in our world, and we also give thanks for the glimmers of your presence and the ongoing work of your Spirit. Strengthen us through this table, to be agents of your peace, to be thankful for the experience of being part of this created world. Amen.

I invite the communion servers and our special music folks to join me up front.

Friends, the table is open and welcome to all. This beautiful challa bread was made by Bethany. It does contain eggs. There are crackers if you need a gluten or egg-free alternative. Please take your bread and cup back to your seat, and I will invite us to share together.

And so on the night he was betrayed, Jesus broke the bread, shared it with his closest friends, and reminded them, whenever you break bread together, do so in remembrance of me.

Again on that night, Jesus took the cup, poured it out for those gathered, and reminded them, whenever drink of this cup, do so in remembrance of me.

Friends, we've shared this meal not only in remembrance of Christ, but as an act of faith, that despite our pain and suffering, God gives us many opportunities to receive with thanksgiving.

And we move from this moment, sharing in each other's lives. I invite Gloria to lead us in our sharing time this morning.