

“Rooted in Generosity”

NT: 2 Timothy 1:8-14
Mt, Mk, Lk, Jn- Joseph of Arimathea

Multiple times throughout Paul’s writing to Timothy, just like we read a few moments ago, Paul tells Timothy “Guard what has been entrusted to you.” What do you think Paul means and what would that look like if we were to apply that charge to our lives today? “Guard what has been entrusted to you.”

Individually what has been entrusted to us could include a family, siblings, husband, wife, children, pets, a home, a job, an inheritance, a legacy. Communally, as Christ’s church, what has been entrusted to us includes a family of brothers and sisters in Christ, not just here but everywhere, a beautiful church and school building and everything in it and around it, and a staff to walk with us and encourage us. How about our relationship with God, the love and forgiveness of God through Jesus our Lord and Savior, God’s promises and providence, God’s blessings and prosperity, God’s peace and joy? Haven’t these also been entrusted us?

We have been entrusted with a lot of precious things. To guard them is not to place them on a shelf to simply look at. To guard them is to be good stewards of them, using them faithfully, respectfully, and responsibly. To guard them is to care for them, provide for them, protect them, teach them up in the ways in which they should go, and honor them. I want to turn now to a story shared in all four gospels. I have combined all variations to make one story. I encourage you to listen for how Joseph guards what has been entrusted to him.

“The Burial of Jesus”- Joseph of Arimathea

Before- Jesus had been to trial, mocked, flogged, and hung on the cross to die... **And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph, who was from the Jewish town of Arimathea, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus.**

Now, Joseph of Arimathea was a respected member of the council, the Sanhedrin, but had not consented to the council’s purpose and deed with Jesus. Joseph was known as a rich man. He was also known as a good and righteous man. Joseph of Arimathea was viewed as a secret disciple of Jesus. Secret for fear of the Jews, mainly the other council members, and disciple of Jesus because he was looking for the kingdom of God. (Joseph of Arimathea was like a double agent)

Having asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, Pilate wondered if Jesus were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether Jesus was already dead. And when Pilate learned from the centurion that Jesus was dead, Pilate gave Joseph leave and ordered the body to be given to him.

Joseph went and took away Jesus' body. Nicodemus also, who had at first come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight. Joseph bought linen shroud, that is cloth, and taking the body down, wrapped Jesus in the clean cloth with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

In the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb hewn in the rock. The tomb was thought to be Joseph of Arimathea's as no one had ever been laid there. Joseph laid the wrapped body in the tomb and rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and departed.

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus, who had come with Jesus from Galilee, followed Joseph and saw where the body of Jesus was laid.

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

The testimony of Joseph of Arimathea burying Jesus is about the relationship of human response and the character of God. The motivation for living a faithful life, from a biblical standpoint, is the same as the motivation for any other good work that Christian people are moved to do, the Gospel. John writes in 1 John that God loved us first, and because of that, we too can love and know how to love. How has God shown love to you? According to the gospel, we are loved by God unconditionally, despite our deserving, because that is who God is. No stronger example exists outside God's sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to forgive our sins and make a way to eternal paradise for all who trust and believe in him. Through Jesus, we are taken off the road to eternal condemnation and placed on the road to eternal life. Having received God's love in this way, how can we do anything else but love God back? We talked a few weeks ago about God's peace, that of well-being, reconciliation, and prosperity. God is the source of true peace in our lives and having been the recipient of such peace, how can we do anything else but be peacemakers for God? We also talked a few weeks ago about God's grace, that of forgiveness and mercy. God is the source of our wholeness and it is only through God that we experience and receive God's grace as a gift. Having been the recipient of such grace, how can we do anything else but be gracious and forgiving toward others?

We can do these things because God is the source of each and we are the vessels, instruments, and prisms, allowing God to work through us. Kathleen talked about this last week regarding our call and strength to be served and serve others. When we are served by God in such a powerful way, we are in turn able to serve others in a powerful way. Today, there is another expressive fruit of the spirit blossoming out of God as the source. In all things, I believe God has been abundantly generous. God has given us all so much: love, joy, peace, grace, Spirit, gifts and talents, and opportunities to serve. All that we have, we proclaim as a church, is a gift from God. God has indeed blessed us all with so much. Amen? Having been given so much by God, how can we do anything else but be moved to a Spirit of generosity toward all that which has been entrusted to us by God?

God loves us, so we can love others. God gives us gifts, so we can serve others. God is generous to us, so we can be generous to others. When we love each other, the world knows the love of God. Generosity is an expression of the love of God. After listing the fruits of the Spirit, Paul declares something very freeing and inviting, just in case we begin to think there are limits to these. Paul says, "There is no law against such things (Galatians 5:23)."

Let us return to Joseph of Arimathea. What we find out is that Joseph was the right person at the right time with the right ask in the right place talking to the right person in the right way. As the story reveals, Joseph is a respected elder and rich man, on the council- Sanhedrin (70 elders); the same team given to serve with Moses (70 elders) was the same team that voted to crucify the Son of God. To be clear it was a different group of individuals, but same council, and Joseph was on this council.

Roman Crucifixion was about intimidation and display of power, so not just anyone could have been able to go to Pilate the way Joseph did, even in private. Joseph leveraged his position on the council to fulfill his conviction to care for Christ. Some of us might ask why Joseph did not say something sooner to prevent what happened or storm out and leave his position on the council because he did not consent? Maybe he did and was simply out voted, I do not know. Had he run away; we might be left wondering who would have taken care of Jesus' body after Jesus died?

Nevertheless, Joseph believed Jesus' body should not be left to the crows. He wanted to care for the body of God. It was an act of saving Jesus from the intended humiliation of Jesus' body being left to hang for 2 more days. We do not know whether Joseph intended to help Jesus all along or if it was something that struck him in time. What we do know is that Joseph stepped up to provide a need at a time no one else did. Perhaps we can insert here "guard what has been entrusted to you." For Joseph of Arimathea, he was guarding what had been entrusted to him. His responsibility. His status. His position of power. His wealth. His opportunity. His own tomb.

For Joseph to act in this way at this time, he had to humble himself, sacrifice himself and his reputation and contradiction, in front of Pilate, who was not religious and did not even care about the Jews. I can only imagine how confused Pilate must have been. Did he even understand what Joseph was asking? It did not matter to Joseph, he asked anyway, because he believed God wanted him to and he could.

Something else to think about. We do not have the answer in the text, but it is curious. Did Joseph buy the body of Jesus? Why else would Pilate have given over the body? We may never know but it is something to consider.

Joseph's willingness to ask is one piece of his response. The rest is just as remarkable. The day of Preparation before the Sabbath was held in strict honor. Sabbath was from sundown to sundown and there would be no work, no bodily burden, on the Sabbath. Everything for the Sabbath must be prepared on the day of Preparation. Therefore, once given the go ahead by Pilate, Joseph had 3 hours, between 3 and 6, to get it all done. He had to go get a cloth, take the body down, wrap it, get it to the tomb, lay the body, and close the tomb. A person of power can get things done. Joseph of Arimathea not only had the resources and status, he had the will and drive.

Here is why I share this story today in light of being rooted in generosity. I believe we have Joseph's in this congregation who can change the face of the church for the good; who can change the world for the glory of God. How? By guarding what has been entrusted to you. More specifically, by being rooted in generosity.

My friends, I want to humbly submit to you today that our regular, consistent generosity is the constant wind that fills our sails and takes us, as Christ's church, forward. This undoubtedly means our financial giving of our tithes and offerings, toward the church as a pledge or a designated gift to a mission or memorial, or a capital project. These gifts help us to be good stewards of that which has been entrusted to us as a church at this time. We shall not forget that the spirit of love, joy, peace, kindness, grace, and service are also the currency of generosity. True generosity is giving to give, without limits or keeping score, and without conditions or recognition. Or as Simone de Beauvoir says, "What I consider true generosity is you give your all, and yet you always feel as if it costs you nothing."

"Everywhere you look, the design and function of the world is circular. A seed is planted and the circular route of the sun shines down on it. The seed takes root and blooms, making more seed of its own. Then it dies back into the earth to reappear again in the circular nature of our seasons.

Giving, or generosity, is the same. As we plant seeds we always have a harvest. Not only that, we harvest what we have sown. Being generous makes others more generous to us as well. Giving encouragement enables us to reap armloads of encouragement from others. Kindness begets kindness. And, best of all is the deeply rooted satisfaction that generosity emits in our lives. Like a plant whose roots break apart even the hardest stone, we become vulnerable to all living things and thus experience the wonder of a truly generous life." (Nancy Cotterill, World Changing Generosity)

Steve Lindsley is a friend and colleague as pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, and he shared two quick illustrations once about generosity that stuck with me...

Perhaps you have been lucky enough in your life to know someone like Oseola McCarty. Ms. McCarty was a Mississippi washerwoman, born in the early 1900's. She had to drop out of school in 6th grade to help take care of her family. Oseola began doing laundry and ironing people's clothes for money – anywhere between \$2 and \$10 a bundle. She put all the money she earned in a savings account at the First Mississippi National Bank and never took any of it out. At the age of 87, after almost 75 years of washing people's clothes, the balance in Ms. McCarty's account stood at \$150,000 – which she promptly gave in its entirety to the University of Southern Mississippi for scholarships for needy students. When asked why she gave every bit of her money to a school she had no ties to whatsoever, Ms. McCarty responded that she wanted others to have an opportunity she never had herself. And when asked why she did not spend at least some of the money on herself, her answer was always the same: as far as she was concerned, she had.

Or maybe you have heard stories like the one Bishop McCabe used to tell. At the time, Bishop McCabe was leading a rather large congregation in the throes of a huge capital campaign – the goal of which was to raise a million dollars for a new mission's initiative. All the plans had been made, the campaign information sent out, the sermons preached, and now it was time to wait for the response. Each day Bishop McCabe received dozens of letters, some of them from disgruntled members who scoffed at the lofty goal. One day, though, he came upon a letter from a 7-year old boy in his church. As he opened it, out rolled a badly battered nickel. The letter, scribbled in handwriting only a child could appreciate, read: "Dear Bishop McCabe, I am so glad you are going to get a million dollars for missions. Here is a nickel. It's all I've got now, but when you need any more, call me!"

May we all guard what has been entrusted and be rooted in generosity, this day, and every day. Let all God's people say... Amen.