

# Keepers of the Faith

## I Timothy 4:9-16

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady  
Pastor

July 31, 2011

San Marino Community Church  
1750 Virginia Road  
San Marino, CA 91108  
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185  
*www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com*

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

For the past four years, Noel and Heidi (and in this last year their children Jude and Hazel) have been part of this congregation and part of our lives. We celebrate this milestone of ordination today but there is also a twinge of sadness for many of us because it means we are about to say goodbye to the Snyder family. While we may want to hang on to you Noel, God has prepared you for greater tasks!

And so for today's worship, this passage from I Timothy 4:9-16 seemed fitting. Timothy, a young colleague of Paul's, was beginning his ministry as a pastor after working closely with Paul in the work of the Gospel. These instructions might be helpful to you as they no doubt were to Timothy and many ministers through the years.

Noel completed the basic degree for ministry at Fuller Seminary and is working on a doctorate in homiletics, in preaching. Preaching is an art that takes time and experience to develop. And to become a capable preacher it requires feedback from a real congregation. Not all feedback is helpful. Bishop Melvin Wheatley tells the story of preaching a sermon on suffering in the Christian life. At the conclusion of the service he was greeted by one of the members at the door who said, "Bishop Wheatley, I never knew what it was to suffer until I heard you preach!"

Now I know some here today may have wanted to say the same or similar things to me. Some sermons just never quite get off the ground and some weeks it is just more difficult to write and preach than others. Paul knew it too. That's the reason that his instructions to Timothy have less to do with measuring success and more to do with self-understanding in ministry. We are called not to success so much as faithfulness. Our motivation is to be faithful preachers of a Word that does not belong to us, because it is a Word from the Lord. "For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior . . .!"

When I graduated from seminary, the speaker at commencement was a pastor who told of an early experience in ministry that shaped his self-understanding. He moved

to his first congregation and into a home next door to an elder in the church, a retired U.S. Army general, who eventually became like a second father to him, a source of wisdom and encouragement. On a hot August Sunday in Hinesville on the coast of Georgia, this young pastor preached a magnificent sermon, duly footnoted, properly exegeted on “The Bodily Resurrection of Christ.” Being unable to exhaust his wisdom on the subject in the sermon, he had also prepared a 28 page paper on the bodily resurrection of Christ which the ushers distributed to the congregation as it left the sanctuary. As people passed by the young pastor at the door he remembered that they nervously shook his hand, while clinging to their papers as they hurried by.

That same afternoon, General Frazier called and asked his pastor to join him for breakfast Monday morning at the Georgian Terrace Café. They met and as they ate the general was very encouraging. He said, “Hinesville had never seen such a hard working preacher”, and everyone was so proud and pleased that he had come to their town as their pastor. The young pastor thanked him for his kindness, thinking privately it was obvious why he was a general. He was so perceptive and wise! The general went on to say, “In my judgment, in my lifetime I have never heard of a smarter preacher.” Again, the young pastor thanked him for his kindness and wished he could add another star to his friend’s rank. Then the general said, “I want to talk to you about your preaching. We don’t need all these alternatives you’re giving us.”

Now consider the scene here: a twenty–five-year old preacher is about to give this sixty-five-year-old, three star General a piece of his mind. The young pastor said, “General, I have the courage of my convictions and as long as I am your pastor I am going to make people think.” The general put down his fork and knife and looked him straight in the eye and said, “Son, let me put it to you in another way. You are boring us to death!” That message cut right through his defenses – and it transformed his ministry. Sensing the general was really a friend, the young man asked, “What do you think I should do?” “Well,” said the general, “I would not presume to tell you what to do but I have a suggestion. You remember yesterday in worship when you preached that the Caines family, Willard, Margie, and their four children were seated on a pew right down in front? You know Willard runs the filling station just across the courthouse square. I would think when you stand up to preach that you ought to ask yourself the question, ‘Will what I say today help Willard Caines pump gas on Monday morning?’”<sup>1</sup>

1 An illustration from *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, (1988)

That young preacher learned that the Gospel of Christ can and must engage real life, life filled with joy and pain, uncertainty and struggle, success and failure, discouragement and difficulty. He went on to serve several more churches and at the time of his death was the pastor of the largest church in the Presbyterian denomination. Rev. Dr. Frank Harrington was the pastor of the Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta GA.

What matters today at an ordination service and what matters most is how we see ourselves in ministry. “For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior . . .”

Defining ourselves clearly at the beginning is not only helpful, it is essential. Because there will certainly come a time when we will wonder what all this is really about and whether all the toil and struggle is really worth it. Paul always begins by setting forth a definition. One’s understanding of the ministry may involve all sorts of things that are tied to particular ministries or tasks, to certain competencies or affinities, but these are not the heart of the matter, not the orienting center. As a servant of Christ, you go out with various skills and capabilities in pastoral counseling, worship leadership, relationship development, conflict resolution, committee organization, but none of these are the reference point around which ministry is understood.

For Paul and for Timothy, they understood themselves first and foremost to be under orders. Like the pointing finger of John the Baptist in Matthais Grunewald’s famous painting (an altar piece) of the crucifixion, all our gestures in preaching, all our offered hands in ministry, all our arms lifted in prayer, point in one direction, to the One who has called us into service and under whose orders we go forth into the world. We are under direction, “slaves” Paul says, of Christ, under orders from our Lord and directed by his Word.

There are many thing one does in ministry, but all of them are tied to the mysteries of God, to speaking and preaching and acting that point to the One who has made us, in whose hands our lives are cared for, and who calls us to the life that does not end. In those moments that mark human life – birth, baptism, marriage, children, and all the daily provision of life that each of us receive, you will help your people, your students, your families, find and discern the work of God. In those moments which sting and

cripple and sadden and destroy our lives, you will bring the strong comfort of God. You will point to a source of strength that is there when all human strength has finally fallen into nothingness.

Paul writes, “Don’t worry about being young, your youth will pass.” Instead focus upon being faithful! When you lead in worship or walk into the pulpit, you are one under orders. Every time you visit a sick bed of any sort, you are a steward of the secrets of the living God. When you lay your hands upon a child in baptism and say “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit” you are a servant of the mysteries of Christ. When you stand over a grave and say, “I am the resurrection and the life” and speak to the ones whose loss is beyond bearing, you are at that moment entrusted with God’s great mysteries – providing comfort and strength, hope and love that go beyond human understanding. “Pay close attention to yourself and your teaching” because it is not really about you at all. It is not about your youth or your talents or lack thereof – it is about the living God who in Christ heals our wounds, re-makes our lives, redeems what has gone wrong, confronts our wrongdoing, restores our identity, resurrects what has died. You have some powerful stuff in your hands through ordination. We all do!

Several years ago I had the pleasure of working alongside a gifted and dedicated elder of the church, a woman who played violin for the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. On one occasion, I arrived for a meeting and Judy was seated at the table with a violin case across her lap. Apparently she had just finished instructing some young aspiring artist before the meeting and so she brought her violin with her and clutched the instrument throughout the entire meeting. I found myself intrigued. My curiosity at the conclusion of the meeting prompted me to inquire about the violin.

With a glint in her eye (the kind someone gets when they’re talking about something for which they feel passionate) she related the story of completing her graduate studies on the east coast at the Peabody Conservatory of Music. She was offered her first job performing with the Mexico City Symphony. The Concert Master had a violin that produced the most beautiful sound she had ever heard but he only used it infrequently. She approached him to find out whether he would consider selling it. Since he was less fond of the instrument than she, they soon came to terms and she became the proud owner of a 1764 Stradivarius violin – built when Mozart was just a boy. It had

recently been appraised at \$35,000. Then I understood why she kept it on her lap. It was her practice to never put the instrument down someplace where she might walk away and forget it.

She then made this memorable comment, “Most treasures that you buy – you hang on a wall or put under a glass. Rarely do you use them as a tool, working with them and sweating over them, as I do this violin. But a great instrument like this has the ability to shape the artist because it can do so much more than the violinist who plays it.” Some treasures are more useful than others because they produce value in us. They bring out our greatest potential.

Faith in Jesus Christ is such a treasure. And those who express their faith have often created treasures in art and music. The object of our faith – Jesus Christ– is also the subject drawing us forward, shaping the believer, inviting us onward, deeper, and leaving us forever transformed in the process. That which we treasure is also that which we sweat over. Like a Stradivarius violin, faith is to be used and beckons us onward, producing new value in us, because our faith can always produce more in us than we can imagine. Even the most broken life can begin to make music again with a beauty and majesty that belongs to God.

God in Christ can do so much more than we ever dare ask or imagine! We are merely the artists who play and interpret the music written by another. And yet what a privilege it is to take into our hands and upon our lips the music and the mysteries of the Living God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord.

It is “because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior . . . that we toil and struggle.”

Noel, it has been a joy and a privilege to have you with us here these past four years. Thank you for your faithfulness and your many gifts shared with this congregation. We will all take great delight in your ministry from afar. May the Living God equip you and direct you through the years. “May goodness and mercy follow you all the days of your life, and may you dwell in the house of the Lord forever!” Amen