

## God, Gravity, & Grit

delivered by the Rev. Dr. Don Longbottom, July 12, 2009

A few years ago I had the privilege of preaching the ordination sermon for my son Joshua. It was a powerful occasion. Josh's mother was there, my mother was there, all of the brothers and sisters were there and the two grandchildren were there. My beloved daughter-in-law was there as well. It was a grand occasion.

Following the ordination service Josh's Senior Minister Peter Luckey and I got together for pizza and a bit of libation. Peter asked me how the day had been for me. Peter is a close friend and his question was genuine...so I pondered the past 30 years. There was marriage to a beautiful young woman with 2 children, seminary, more children, the death of a four month old son, doctoral work, a new denomination, the rearing of teenage children, and divorce from a spouse I loved. As I reflected I found deep emotions welling up within me. Like all human beings I had done some things right but interspersed were plenty of mistakes, things I would still do differently given the opportunity.

Here is the point. I do not believe there are any charmed lives. We all travel, in some form or another, essentially the same terrain. We only succeed by learning from our mistakes and adapting. It is truly all about the journey. Life is not a sprint...it is a marathon and it seems like we are always running uphill. Uphill is difficult because gravity is always there. Does anybody know why God created gravity?

The second letter to Timothy is written to an early 1<sup>st</sup>. century church that is struggling to carve out space for herself in a pagan culture. It was actually a dangerous place for Christians. Change is never easy and in that particular epoch one could easily lose one's life by upsetting the social and cultural equilibrium. The early Christian community was always in danger of persecution and violence. Life was difficult and dangerous and it leaves me wondering, why is life so uphill?

II Timothy is written to a young and relatively inexperienced leader who is having second thoughts about his calling. Timothy is finding that ministry is not for the faint hearted. We are not clear exactly what it is but he has some sort of situation going on and Timothy appears to be hoping to find an easy way out. His confidence and self-esteem must have been at a low point. Timothy was struggling. There is a clear message here for us all. Male or female, young or old, clergy or lay, we are all Timothy. We have all been in situations where our mettle is tested. Parenting is not for the timid. Growing older is not a primrose path. Relationships will get rocky at times. Achieving your goals is never a sure thing. Leadership is seldom easy. Transitioning churches is difficult for all involved. You know, I still don't understand why God made gravity.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if life was like rafting...downstream and climbing uphill was always easy. The reality is however that most worthy goals in life are upstream and uphill. Like it or not, life is seldom easy and there are no free lunches. Timothy's calling and ministry are destined to be difficult. Being God's church is difficult. I just don't know why God made gravity but I have a pretty good idea why God made grit.

The author of II Timothy offers three keys to life. This is about your life, church life, and leadership in general. The first of these is "enthusiasm." The root of the word is "entheos" which means "in God" or "God filled." Some translations speak of "being urgent" which is to say, "have some fire in your belly." Have you ever been around someone who is filled with enthusiasm? They are infectious. The opposite is equally infectious...like the flu. Have you ever experienced a retail person, sleep still in their eyes, who really does not want to be there? There they are talking to another sales clerk not 10 feet away. All the body language, the look, the attitude, is communicating a lack of enthusiasm. Finally, you walk over and ask to be helped. Contrast that experience with encountering someone who is highly motivated and believes in what they are doing. It is night and day. So I say to you, be urgent and be enthusiastic. If you cannot be enthusiastic about what you are doing—you are in the wrong job. So let me ask you about your life in the local church. Are you critiquing or encouraging one another at this critical time? Look around this room and think about those not here. Think as well about those who are here. We are called to encourage one another. Are you critiquing or encouraging?

Sometimes having the right attitude is simply not enough. The second key is to endure and to be persistent. The road not taken always seems to beckon. This is because the road taken in this life will inevitably contain potholes, detours and sometimes roadblocks. I have heard it time and time again, "If only we have called someone different." "If only I had married the other one." "If only I had chosen another path in life." The road not taken in retrospect frequently seems smooth and easy. But this is an illusion for there is no important journey that can be traversed without serious and sustained effort. Real life is a climb, it is uphill and it requires grit. Whatever the activity be it relationship, raising children, succeeding at business, professional achievement, or growing a church it requires grit. When you have set your course and you are convinced of its rightness, let no one dissuade you. Hang in, hang on, and overcome. Adapt if necessary but don't give up.

The scripture says to be steady and ready to endure suffering because real life is not easy. Life is not a sprint but it is a marathon. Have you ever seen anyone in the final third of a marathon smiling? Probably not, because there is a reason why it's called an endurance run.

The third key is exemplify. The letter to II Timothy says "Carry out your ministry fully." The author writes, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." High and mighty rhetoric uttered with the finest eloquence will not make you successful at life. What one believes, one's priorities, one's highest principles are seen most clearly in our actions. The Book of James states, "You say you have faith, I'll show

you my faith by my works.” Leading by example is pretty much uphill all the way. I don’t know why God made gravity but I have a pretty good idea why God made grit.

You may understandably ask the questions: Why climb the mountain? Why swim upstream? Why don’t we all just float with the current? Enthuse, endure, exemplify—“come on Reverend”—why not just enjoy the downstream float trip? The answer found in the Bible is clear, that which endures, that which make a real difference, that which truly matters...such things are always upstream and against the flow.

We have lots of work to do here and it is important work. FCC has tremendous potential but it won’t realize itself. Let’s swim together upstream. Let’s work together for the good of FCC and the UCC. Together we can do it!

Albert Schweitzer is pretty much my favorite historical person. By the age of 30 he was a scholar with doctorates in philosophy and theology. He was an ordained minister, a professor, a concert organist, an authority on Bach, an expert on organ building and a prolific writer. At the age of 31 he wrote a classic still held in high regard today, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Albert Schweitzer’s life should have been a float trip but after all of this Schweitzer went to medical school and then to Africa where he established a hospital in the jungles of West Africa. He died there in 1965 at the age of ninety. Here is one of my favorite quotations from a great man of faith.

*“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side; He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”*

Schweitzer understood that life was a marathon and not a sprint. Let us run the race set before us. Let us swim upstream together and in so doing, learn who Jesus truly is...Amen.