

Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
September 22, 2013

2 Timothy 1:1-14  
"Thanksgiving and Encouragement"

Suellen and I were at the opening last Thursday of the 2013/14 Berkeley Symphony season. The final piece was Sergei Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. It was a brilliant piece played brilliantly by pianist Alessio Bax.

The first performance of the concerto was on November 9, 1901, in Moscow, with Rachmaninoff as the soloist and Alexander Siloti conducting the Moscow Philharmonic. We were blown away by the concerto.

The program notes had a paragraph that caught my attention because Leo Tolstoy was mentioned and I have spent much of the last few months reading and loving Tolstoy and it was the perfect lead into my sermon today.

Here's the paragraph: "Ironically, it was through the medium of the piano concerto – and specifically the composition of the Second – that Rachmaninoff himself worked his way out of a long episode of debilitating depression triggered by the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony in 1897. Rachmaninoff's attempts to regain his sense of confidence only backfired when he subsequently paid a couple of visits to the elderly Leo Tolstoy, seeking advice from the sage. Then in full ascetic mode, the writer made no effort to hide his disdain for the vulnerable young composer's music."

Come on, Leo, cut some slack for Sergei! Rachmaninoff is as brilliant and gifted as you are and you put him down. It doesn't matter how spiritually rarefied you have become and it doesn't matter what your musical opinion of this young man is at least thank him for his music and affirm him and encourage him to aspire to better things. By the way, it might be good to reread the elder Paul's words to young Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:1-14.

That's the lectionary passage before us today.

I called this sermon "Thanksgiving and Encouragement" because that's what Paul does in the text just read. The idea for this beautiful title came straight out of my paperback version of this Bible. After the salutation of verses 1 and 2, it headlined the remainder of the text "thanksgiving and encouragement."

A mature and learned Paul thanks young Timothy for his sincere faith that first lived in his mother and grandmother. Paul is grateful to the whole family. He loves that the faith has been faithfully passed on from grandmother to daughter to son.

It reminds me of Klara; and my mother who took me to Sunday school when I was a small boy. As a family, we were in and out of the church but a seed was planted and that's one of the reasons I am here today. My mother returned in earnest to the church in the last 10 years of her

life. It was the best thing she ever did. She had gone through rough times and the church provided excellent help and healing. She was a voracious reader and devoured the Bible.

We heard from a member of our prayer support group last week that she spends much of her day in prayers of thankfulness. I mentioned that Meister Eckhart said that if all we did in life was to be thankful, if every prayer contained just thankfulness, it would suffice. John Calvin said more holistically that prayer is thankfulness and intercession. I agree with him and affirm a more comprehensive approach to prayer but that's another subject.

Paul is not praying here. He's affirming a young disciple and he affirms with thankfulness and encouragement. What more do young people need? If we thanked them for who they are and encouraged them, they would not go wrong, especially if we encouraged them with the spiritual energy of Paul.

This goes for all of us. A young person about Rachmaninoff's age when he visited Tolstoy and probably the age of Timothy spoke to me this week of a difficult situation at work where a new contract employee was a royal pain, a person who snubs you and ignores when you try to speak to him. The person I spoke with was really upset but realized that he should exercise restraint, back away, observe and maybe pick up skills from what the person was doing jobwise. However, work is more than typing on a computer, banging nails or sitting around a table. It's relational.

I wrote to the person and affirmed him in a decision he had made on another subject and added: "I'm happy to hear that you are not letting that difficult individual get to you. Instead, you are observing and learning from what he does on the job. Keep doing that and pray for the guy. He needs it."

I must have hit the mark on the affirmation/encouragement front because I received an appreciative reply.

Paul flies higher. He affirms the gift of God in Timothy. He points to his holy calling according to God's purpose and grace. He says: "Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us... I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

These are wonderful words for World Communion and Peacemaking Offering Sunday. Words of thanksgiving and encouragement are not far behind us for in the weeks leading up to this day we had Peacemaking Minutes for Mission shared by Ani, Jan and Suellen. In each case we heard thanksgiving for our denomination and the marvelous work it is doing to affirm peace with justice and we heard encouragement for all of us to jump on board with our actions for peace and justice and if we could to contribute financially to the denomination's peacemaking emphasis.

We hear again and again that the church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.

We heard the story of Jessica Collins who at age 10 saw the “The Blind Side” – a movie about a family helping a young man living in poverty. She was moved by the fact that the man didn’t have a bed. She couldn’t imagine the pain of not having her own place to sleep.

With funds from by the Peacemaking Offering, she began a program through her church to provide beds to those who don’t have any. Her grandmother, Lynn Whittaker, in true Pauline style writes: “She wanted to give somebody a bed that doesn’t have one, so we asked the school if anyone needed help, and they handed us a list of six kids.” At age 13, Jessica has helped 167 kids with the support of her congregation through the Peacemaking Offering.

The Peacemaking Offering encourages churches to find areas of need in their communities and to contribute 25 per cent of the offering towards those needs. We have contributed to a variety of Marin enterprises such as the Center for Domestic Peace (formerly the Marin Abused Women Shelter) and the Canal Ministries supporting low-income families in the Canal Area of San Rafael.

We too are thankful for the Peacemaking Offering and encouraged by the work we can do with the offering and by what the denomination does on other levels.

From a national perspective, we heard of a Peacemaking-funded program working to end gun violence in the Miami-Dade County. Nurse Mimi Sutherland felt anger and frustration as she treated increasing numbers of young victims of gunshot wounds. Her new God-inspired program shows youth the first-hand consequences of violent acts on pediatric victims and their families and mentors them on peaceful ways of living and encourages them to attend local churches. More than 600 young people have been positively impacted.

On an international level, the PC (USA) peacemaking program is in partnership with RECONCILE International Peace Institute in South Sudan that takes on ethnic conflicts, government corruption, child abductions, and land grabbing. With financial support from the offering, it teaches women to become peace-builders with their own communities. The women are thanked, affirmed and encouraged in this amazing work.

These stories are our stories because we are a connectional church but not only that. We are part of the world community, which God so dearly loves. World Communion celebrates this fact so let *us* be thankful and affirm our sisterhood and brotherhood with each other and everyone out there, especially the poor and hurting. We touch them and encourage them with our lives and our offerings to the church and to the special offering for peacemaking today. Amen.