

No Excuses
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Cascades Presbytery
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Mark 11:12-14
II Timothy 4:1-5

“Preach the word. Be urgent in season and out of season.”

I remember a conversation I had some years ago with one of my mentors, the pastor with whom I had served in my first call. He was in his prime—mid-50s, a 30-year veteran of the parish in three separate congregations. He told me, “Jim, I’m just getting to the point now in my life and my ministry where I feel like I have some wisdom to offer. But I’m not sure anyone wants to hear it.” I think he may have felt as though he was “out of season.”

That same thought may have been in Paul’s mind when he penned his second letter to Timothy. Paul was at the end of his life and ministry. He was anticipating his own death, probably as a martyr. And as he writes to Timothy, his young protégé in ministry, Paul is reaching, I think, for all the nuggets of wisdom and “Is he ready to hear what I have to say? Will he take heed? Or is this the wrong time to say these things? Might there be a better, more opportune moment?”

Paul may have had second thoughts about speaking his mind to Timothy, but in the end, he heeded his own advice. “Preach the word. Be urgent in season and out of season.”

Jim Moiso, twice a graduate of SFTS and esteemed pastor here in Cascades Presbytery, has used the same benediction at the end of every worship service throughout his ministry, the words of Henri Frederic Amiel:

“Life is short and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are travelling the dark journey with us. Oh be swift to love, make haste to be kind.”

Words to live by, in season and out of season.

Last spring, I had a conversation with a minister who had just retired from active service. What she said broke my heart. “For the last 40 years,” she said, “I have not felt able to really say and do what I believed about the Gospel and the church’s ministry. I’m hoping that in retirement I can take up the issues of social justice and peace that I felt I had to put aside for the sake of keeping the church together.”

I don’t know her and I don’t know her ministry. I’m guessing that she was a bit hard on herself in terms of her witness across all those years of service as a minister of word and sacrament. But it is an object lesson for all of today: we should not have to wait for some golden moment to preach the word, as we believe it.

We pay attention to lots of seasons: seasons of the year, sports seasons, political seasons, liturgical seasons, seasons of our lives, seasons of the heart, seasons of history. But Paul’s point is simple: it doesn’t make any difference what season it is, the circumstances of our lives and our communities. We’ve got to proclaim good news, even if it sounds at first like bad news for some. We’ve got to speak the truth in love, even when people would rather believe something else.

David Brooks wrote a column in the *New York Times* that became an overnight sensation on the Internet,¹ titled “The Moral Bucket List.” Brooks contrasted two sets of virtues, the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. “The résumé virtues,” he said, “are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy

¹ David Brooks, “The Moral Bucket List,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2015.

virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral — whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?

“We all know that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé ones. But our culture and our educational systems spend more time teaching the skills and strategies you need for career success than the qualities you need to radiate that sort of inner light. Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career than on how to build inner character.”

Of course, we recognize this difference, even if we don’t articulate it the same way Brooks does. Our focus on eulogy virtues is what called us to ministry and brought us to the places of service where we now live. So Brooks’ point is not my word to you. Rather, I want to remind you that as ministers of the gospel, whether a teaching elder or ruling elder, you are called to preach these eulogy virtues to a culture and a church that is captured by résumé virtues.

The Church has a unique calling, a distinctive role in society and human life. This work of ministry is not just a job. We know this. It’s not just about running an organization. It’s not just about budgets and committees and meetings ... and meetings and meetings... It’s about life and death, hope and despair—the big things.

And what people are looking for—whether they are Millennials or Baby Boomers—is **authenticity**. Rachel Held Evans, a blogger and author, had a column in the *Washington Post* called “Want Millennials Back in the Pews? Stop Trying to Make Church Cool.”² She wrote, “When I left church at age 29, full of doubt and disillusionment, I wasn’t looking for a better-produced Christianity. I was looking for a truer Christianity, a more authentic Christianity.” She quotes David Kinnaman of the Barna Group, “Millennials ‘are not disillusioned with tradition; they are frustrated with slick or shallow expressions of religion.’”

² Rachel Held Evans, “Want Millennials Back in the Pews? Stop Trying to Make Church Cool,” *Washington Post*, April 30, 2015.”

Another blogger put it this way: “At church I do not want to be entertained. I do not want to be the target of anyone’s marketing. I want to be asked to participate in the life of an ancient-future community.” →Preach the word. Be urgent in season and out of season.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem in the final week of his earthly life, the first thing he sees, according to Mark’s Gospel, is a fig tree in leaf. But the fig tree is empty of figs. It had no fruit on it.

And Jesus curses the tree, and it withers and dies.

Curiously, the text says quite explicitly: “it was not the season for figs,” meaning the tree had an excuse for not bearing fruit. But Jesus curses it anyway. **Jesus was accepting no excuses.**

And neither should we. The call to bear fruit in this day and age is a call to urgency. The Church has important work to do – to address racism and reduce violence; to bring good news to poor and hungry people; to free the captives; to bring hope and courage to a world groaning under the weight of unsustainable policies and practices that are threatening the very survival of the planet. We must bear fruit so the world can bear fruit. We must bear fruit for the sake of the world God made and God loves.

“Despair,” said Reinhold Niebuhr, “is the fate of realists who know something about sin, but nothing about redemption.” But we, my friends, know about redemption, so we should not give in to despair.

So don’t be shy. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be anxious. Don’t hesitate. Preach the word. Be swift to love. Make haste to be kind. Work for justice. Preach the word. No excuses.