

“Guard Duty?”
2 Timothy 1:8–14 (NRSV)

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In the murky origins of St. Valentine’s Day there are several explanations for our observance of this as a special day for lovers and sweethearts. I have no intention of sorting them out and proposing a favored status for any of them, since none have a plausible, historical connection with romance. But one of the most commonly cited Valentine stories features a priest who was martyred about the year AD 269. Various sources referred to him as Valentinus the Presbyter. In the obscure reaches of church history, apparently an elder named Valentine ran afoul of Claudius II and the imperial ban on Christianity. Yet the presbyter persisted in defending his faith and his Lord, until it cost him... not only his freedom, but also his life. So now you can tell your loved ones that Valentine’s Day is a “Presbyterian Holy Day”, and that’s why you need to be at a meeting tonight! (No, that won’t work in my household either.)

Let’s hear from another who was known for his suffering because of the Gospel. Paul is traditionally credited with writing 2 Timothy, although the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles has been debated for many years. We will not extend that debate tonight, and for shorthand purposes I will refer to the author as Paul. Whether or not he wrote it, dictated it, or someone else assembled fragments of communication from him and penned the letter under his name, 2 Timothy claims to be from Paul. It was presumably composed while he was imprisoned in Rome in the final years of his life. After the salutation and the thanksgiving for Timothy and his mother and grandmother, Paul makes clear his purpose for writing – in chapter 1:8-14.

Paul recognized the power and activity of God, sending grace and good news into the world. This was first and foremost in Christ Jesus. But he also understood himself to be right in the middle of it as a “herald, apostle, and teacher” of the Gospel. And he was writing to Timothy, inviting and encouraging him to join in a demanding, costly mission.



2 Timothy 1:8–14 (NRSV)

8 *Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God,*

9 *who saved us*

and called us with a holy calling,

not according to our works

but according to his own purpose and grace.

This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus

before the ages began,

10 *but it has now been revealed*

through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus,

who abolished death

and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

11 For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, 12 and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. 13 Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

I don't know about you, but I've experienced shame many times. It's one of the primordial, basic human emotions. I've been ashamed after an unkind word to my lifelong Valentine. I've been exposed by an angry or inappropriate response to one of our children. I've been embarrassed by a pastoral lapse or an error in judgment. I've been ashamed of sermons here and there, now and again, more often than I care to admit. I've been disgraced by countless golf shots, including one that was so far out of bounds that the ball ended up on someone's back patio. The feeling of shame is wrapped up with guilt, regret, a sense of failure or unworthiness. And no doubt I have caused shame for persons close or connected to me.

Sometimes I have felt a shame by association. Perhaps it was something that was said or done by a member of our family. I've been on a team that competed so pitifully I was ashamed of the way we played the game. A word has come back to me about something shameful done by a person connected with Northminster. Or reports of clergy misconduct. Or some action of our denomination, government, or military I have felt shame at many levels. Sometimes I have been ashamed to be Jeff Hosmer, to be Presbyterian, to be American. But as I rummage through my memories I cannot recall ever being ashamed of the Gospel. I am not ashamed of Jesus Christ. I wish the reverse were also true, but I'm sure it is not. There are times when Jesus must be disappointed and ashamed to claim me as a follower or as a teaching elder!

His challenge recorded in Mark 8:38 weighs heavily with a degree of apocalyptic urgency:

"Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Paul the Apostle picks up on this in his opening to the Roman church.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

Then you hear echoes of that in 2 Timothy.

"Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner" (v.8).

Later: *"I am not ashamed"* (v.12).

Then in next chapter:

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

There is no shame in being a part of the purpose of God. The world may disagree and may want to cast shame upon the ambassadors of the Gospel. But there is no inherent shame in delivering the sound teaching or word of God. Paul saw himself in the middle of this: herald, apostle, and teacher for the Gospel. He declared there was no shame, but there certainly was conflict, struggle, hardship, and suffering! A dominant and sinful culture resists the good news of grace and lives transformed by the power of God. Paul would later add: *"Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"* (2 Timothy 3:12).

Make no mistake about it – from the Beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel to the Book of Revelation – the New Testament writers understood that following Jesus and proclaiming his love was a costly commitment. Being a disciple meant living in a manner that was distinctly different from the culture at large. And for some that testimony or “maturity” even meant martyrdom. So the older man who was in chains in Rome said to the younger man in Ephesus: “C’mon, in Timothy. Join me in this mission.” But of course he knew that he was also asking Timothy to share in suffering. There is no shame in this enterprise, but suffering? Yes! *“Join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God.”* Paul was a living example of the suffering that accompanies an agent of the Gospel. *“For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do”* (2 Timothy 1:11-12a). He beckoned Timothy: “Join with me in suffering.” This was more than a casual invitation to have sympathy. The Greek word is a very strong compound that inserts KAKOS – evil or affliction – into the middle of the summons. C’mon in, Timothy, and endure with me the affliction that I’m experiencing!

Whoa! If I’m Tim, I’m not sure if I’m all in.

Why would you possibly subject yourself to those conditions and consequences?

Only if you are relying on the power of God, the one who has saved us and called us to a holy calling. Only if you are connected to Christ Jesus who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light. Only with that kind of conviction and trust are we then willing to put it all on the line for the Gospel. Perhaps that’s why we Presbyterians have not done so well in recent years. The Church cannot thrive with a dithering and withering version of the good news.

Paul wrote to Timothy: *“Hold to the standard of sound teaching (logos) you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”* And further he charged him:

“Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us”
(2 Timothy 1:14).

This reiterates and intensifies was written to him in 1 Timothy 6:20a:

“Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you.”

Is this imperative addressed to Timothy also a summons for us to guard duty? And if so, what is the good treasure that is worth risking our reputation and our lives for? The scriptures speak of temple guards, palace guards, and bodyguards. Each had a specific role or responsibility. Even shepherds understood their role to guard the flock. And the psalmist prayed: O God, “guard my life” (Psalm 25:20). We want the Lord to be on guard at all times! What is our assignment?



Several years ago I was in China for a mission trip in conjunction with the Presbyterian Outreach Foundation. The leaders arranged for a side trip to the Great Wall where I spent several hours climbing and exploring. At one of the guardhouses above the visitor center there was a display of the weapons used by those who stood guard at the Great Wall. As I passed by, a sturdy young Chinese tourist posed in front of the weaponry, perhaps trying to imagine what it would have been like to stand guard in the remote stretches of the kingdom. He actually stirred a bit a trouble when he tried to pull out one of the lethal weapons to wield it for a photo. Maybe he could picture himself as a valiant soldier defending his land, people, and tradition. There would be no shame in that guard

duty, but it would have been cold and bleak and ripe for suffering. However, you would hold the line and hold the station if you believed that you were called to do so.

What is the good treasure entrusted to us that we are called to guard with our best efforts? I will not presume to answer for all of us, but for myself the answer is clear.

For me the good treasure entrusted to us is ...
not some historic wall to be defended,
not denominationalism or Presbyterianism,
not polity or a particular form of government,
clearly not a political affiliation or a single issue
or a social justice agenda.

What's the good treasure?

Not property or a property clause that stipulates to whom
church buildings belong,
not some regulatory agency or fiduciary responsibility.

When I hear that rising to a top priority, I am mindful of a cartoon someone shared with me. A man with a tight grip on his dog's collar is explaining: "He's been trained in guard duty, attack, and litigation." You will not be able to enlist me for that kind of guard duty on behalf of the church.

If there are leaders and congregations who want to leave the denomination, I believe the gates should be opened with grace. Yet I have told our staff and Session at Northminster, friends and colleagues around the denomination (including many who are choosing to leave), that I have no intention of leaving my post in the PCUSA or encouraging our congregation to do so. For me there is no shame as long as Gospel remains in the church to which I have vowed my service. I remain in the conviction that the good treasure entrusted to us is still in our grasp: the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the one who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light. And with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us, we face whatever shame and hardship the world dishes out. I shall attempt to hold to the standard of sound teaching, however unpopular that may be. Some in this room may even be ashamed by association with the standards of biblical authority and interpretation I represent.

Sisters and brothers, let's face it candidly. We affirm in the Nicene Creed that we believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Yet what we experience is more often:

Not one, but fragmented,
Not holy, but acculturated –absorbed in the world's values,
Not catholic, but parochial – narrow in scope and mission,
Not apostolic, but apathetic – quite indifferent to what we have received and how we deliver it to others.

Yet, as Presbyterians, we are not futilitarians. We are a people of hope based on the sovereign love of God, who is able to make something new out of us. We come to presbytery not to experience more shame and torment from each other, but to stand guard with each other in the name of the One who was willing to undergo all humiliation and suffering for us. We commemorate His grace with this sacred meal, far better than any Valentine's dinner! Here there is good treasure for us, and he wants us to receive it, and guard it, and to pass it on to others.

To quote Paul one final time: "*I know the one in whom I have put my trust.*" And I hope you do too.

