

To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.
(Phil 3:1)

I do wonder whether the apostle ever tired of speaking and writing the same things, time and time again. For that is precisely what he did, is it not? Paul's apostolic vocation was to be the bearer of a message, a herald of glad tidings, a tireless teller of the same old, old story. And for that reason, his ministry was one of constant repetition. He spoke the same things, he taught the same things, and when he was away, he wrote the same things all over again.

But it mattered not. To write the same things was no bother to him, nor was he ashamed of his own endless repetition, for he knew that the gospel that he preached contained the power of God and could bring about the healing, reconciliation, and renewal sought by every man and every woman, both Jew and Gentile alike (Rom 1:16).

Pastoral ministry is not so simple anymore, is it? There may have once been a time when pastors could content themselves with repeating the same things and telling that old, old story week after week, but the world in which we live has grown more complex and with it, so has the task of pastoral ministry. At least that is how many pastors feel. Perhaps that is how you feel as well, that along with the call to preach the gospel in word and sacrament, you must also be a savvy cultural analyst, a productive organizational manager, and an effective therapist, just to name a few.

I do not doubt that you are asked to perform many tasks in your work as a pastor. But I write to remind you, as Paul reminded his own charge Timothy so long ago, not to neglect the primary task that has been entrusted to you. Your primary vocation as a pastor is not so different from that which was given to Paul. He spoke tirelessly of the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins. You must do the same, even to a people who have already heard it before.

But perhaps your hesitance does not come from a desire for novelty in your work or the widely diverse expectations of those to whom you minister. Perhaps it comes from a doubt that this gospel is still the power of God for the salvation of broken people and fractured societies in the twenty-first century. In which case, let me say a word about your message and its relevance.

That America is a nation of individualists is hardly a new observation. Alexis de Tocqueville noted as much nearly two hundred years ago, writing of Americans even then that they "owe no many anything and hardly expect anything from anybody" and that "each man is forever thrown back upon himself alone." Little has changed since. We live amidst an epidemic of loneliness and isolation, perhaps more pronounced and widespread after Covid than ever before. And it isn't just loneliness. For we are also a nation of meritocrats, individual achievers and underachievers who imagine our successes and failures to be nothing more than the products of our own individual

performances. Of course, as Michael Sandel and Robert Franks and numerous others have argued, the real story behind the winners and losers within our modern meritocracy has little to do with the individualistic story we tell ourselves. But that doesn't affect the power of the story, nor does it lessen its toxic effects. We are an anxious and lonely people, fretting over personal performance and individual success, owing no man anything and hardly expecting anything in return.

Given this emphasis on individual competition and the corresponding loss of social obligation, perhaps we should be unsurprised that we are also a nation of bitter divisions and mutual contempt. Neighbors have long disagreed with one another's political parties. Now, however, we do not disagree; we despise one another. Now we do not think of political rivals as mistaken, but as malevolent. Solzhenitsyn said that the line separating good and evil runs not through states nor classes nor political parties but through every human heart. Today, it seems, we could not disagree more. We have found the wicked, and it is not us.

In the face of such social dysfunction, your confusion over the task of pastoral ministry is understandable. But as I said, the complexities of the world in which we live have not changed our calling or the healing power of the gospel that Paul handed down to us.

How might we preach the gospel of God's grace and the forgiveness of sins today? By reminding our people that the story of individual achievement and personal success that we so often live by is a false story. Moses warned the Israelites that they would be tempted to believe a meritocratic lie—that their prosperity was nothing more than the product of their own hard work (Deut 8:17). Paul recognized the same temptation and preached his gospel message to counter it. By grace you are saved through faith (Eph 2:8). Christ became poor that you might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). What do you have that you did not receive (1 Cor 4:7)?

To a world that believed that justice consisted in giving to each what they deserve, Paul preached that the justice of God consists in granting mercy to sinners and in Christ's dying for the ungodly. To a world obsessed with honor and merit, Paul never ceased to repeat his simple message that all is gift. If it seems strange that he said the same things to the same people time and time again, that is simply because, like us, he lived in a world of powerful myths that were difficult to escape.

The same can be said for his constant reminder to those whom he pastored that they are sinners in need of forgiveness. Although the language of sin may have grown rare, its reality is still a constant presence in our minds, though it is not our own sins that we dwell upon, but the sins of our rivals and ideological opponents. They are the guilty; they are the ones worthy of our indignation. Or so we often feel. Which is why we and our people are in such great need of Paul's message. Before we can become merciful, we must remember that we are those who have been shown mercy. Before we can

become patient with those with whom we disagree, we must first be reminded of the patience upon which we have depended.

Why should I tell you this? None of it is new to you. None of it is something I have not told you before. Nevertheless, to write the same thing to you is not troublesome to me, for I know that you are inclined to forget, to forget that you are not self-made, to forget that there is nothing you have which you did not receive, to forget that your future is dependent not on your performance but the grace of God, and to forget that you are a sinner in desperate need of mercy.

I know that you are inclined to forget this because so were the people of Israel. So were those early Jewish and Gentile Christians to whom Paul wrote. So are the people to whom you minister. And so am I. We, all of us, are inclined to forget and in our forgetfulness to fall back into the same patterns of meritocratic individualism and mutual contempt that so bedevil our public life and undermine our common good.

That is why you must never neglect your calling as a pastor. You will be asked to perform many tasks. You will feel the pressure of many different expectations. And you may find that to pastor well requires you to embrace a variety of responsibilities. But never forget that you are first and foremost called to a ministry of repetition. To people who have already heard but are inclined to forget, through word and sacrament, through counsel and conversation, never hesitate to speak the gospel of God's grace and the forgiveness of sins, for it was and still is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

And never forget that this same gospel applies to you as well. For as Paul himself said, *The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost* (1 Tim 1:15).