

Guard the Good Deposit

Some of you hopefully remember the PBS show Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. The creator and star of the show, Fred Rogers, was often invited to speak at all manner of events, everything from private dinners to graduation ceremonies. When he was invited to speak, he would often do something very simple and very special. He would announce that he was going to give his audience the gift of one silent minute to think about people who had helped them get to where they were today. Whether it was a parent, or a sibling, or a coach, a mentor, colleague, minister, teacher, whomever it was, Mr. Rogers would just let it be silent for a minute to let people remember, with thanks, the people who had built into their lives. In fact, let's try it ourselves. I'm just going to give you thirty seconds, but the idea is the same. Just think back to someone who invested themselves in you, and be grateful. Here we go.

Fred Rogers was right, wasn't he? That is a gift, isn't it? I have seen people moved to tears by that simple act of remembering the persons who believed in them. What a great thing to do.

I believe if we asked Timothy, the recipient of the letter that serves as today's Epistle; if we asked Timothy to take a silent minute to think about the people who had poured love and support into his life, he would've named the apostle Paul as one of those people. After all, Paul begins this letter by calling Timothy his "beloved child," and mentions that he remembers Timothy constantly in his prayers night and day. He longs to see Timothy again, that reunion would give him great joy; he commends Timothy for his sincere faith, which had been handed down from Grandma Lois and Mom Eunice, and strongly encourages him toward greater faithfulness, saying "Fan into flame the gift of God," and reminds him that he has been given a spirit of power and love and self-control."

Do you feel the depth of the relationship here? To read this letter as theological position paper alone really misses the point. The point is: Paul loved Timothy like a son; he had trained him for ministry in Ephesus; he had built into Timothy with his time, his heart, real talk about serving Jesus Christ; there was a bond that had been forged by shared experience, sealed by the Holy Spirit. This is what it looks like to invest in someone else on behalf of/because of Jesus' sacrificial love. This is what is called for when you and I talk about the mission of God. Relationship. Caring for another person. Connecting to another person. Meeting their needs in appropriate ways. It's way more than just a slogan. It is finding one more person to love into the kingdom of God.

As a called and chosen child of God that makes your heart sing, doesn't it? The Holy Spirit is compelling you to enter into relationships with people; redemptive relationships; relationships that will be for their good and the glory of God. I believe he is stirring hearts right now to want this. But. As children of the world, born with a default setting that says "me first," this idea of entering into relationships scares us to death. Because we know that relationships can become complicated; relationships make us vulnerable; and on the best of days, relationships require an investment of time.

But think back to Mr. Rogers and his gift. Remember the people who helped you; who inspired you; who shaped you. I don't know exactly what they did to pour into your life; only you know that. But I'm willing to bet that the person for whom you are thankful made an investment of time in you. They had to have! They spent their time on you, and that type of spending is sacrificial in nature. Do you understand what I mean? They could've spent the precious resource of their time in any number of ways, and they chose to spend it on you. Building a relationship is always a matter of choice, of sacrifice, and of self-giving.

So how do we learn the art of self-giving? Listen to Paul writing to Timothy: "God...saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began..." Paul points us directly to Jesus. He says, that is from whom you learn the art of self-giving. He says, 'Remember how Jesus poured himself into your life by pouring himself out on the cross. Jesus did not just invest his time in you; he invested his very life in you. He spent his blood, sweat, and very last breath paying the price for you; to settle your debts to God the Father. Jesus agreed to do this; He chose to sacrifice; he gave of himself fully. Why? Because of the "joy set before him;" the joy of having you at his side today and forever. Can you think of anything more generous?

The more you soak this up, the more you'll have to squeeze out. The more you dwell on Jesus and what he has done for you, the more generous you will be with your investments of time. The more you fill up on God's grace in Jesus, the more fuel you will have for building relationships that change lives.

One group that understands this very well is the Lutheran Women's Missionary League. Down through the decades, they have raised millions of dollars to support mission work, which, as we've seen, is the act of building relationships with people through which God delivers his gifts. The members of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League and our own Women's League also live that out daily as followers of Jesus. You will hear more about their efforts in just a moment.

Tonight we will be gathering together volunteers who are interested in making an investment of time in our young people. 6:00 p.m. We need Christians who can be generous and self-giving to our sons and daughters. Will you be one of those people?

Jesus risked it all for a relationship with you. What are you willing to risk for him?