

## Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Nov 11th 2014

This reflection is really about and for elders....for people like myself. But younger people need to reflect on it too. I must say that the readings in Titus today were certainly culturally and historically situated in a very different time and place. The part about women being under the control of their husbands doesn't seem too relevant for most of us. But as an anthropologist, I can see the situational wisdom that we can extract from this very powerful lesson. Anthropologists pay a lot of attention to elders. It seems that our society so values youth that we often fail to see where the age and experience of older men and women can serve as valuable resources for younger men and women. But sometimes I think that the frequent failure of young men and women to honor their elders has as much to do with the fact that elders need to make sure they are worthy of respect. I am an elder and I accept what Titus says about being consistent with sound doctrines in our behavior such as the ones he identifies. No one disagrees that it is good to temperate, dignified, self-controlled, faithful, loving, chaste, enduring and reverent; nor should we be slanderers or addicted to drink.

But such standards are not just about our reputations. This modeling of good behavior, says Titus is "so that the word of God many not be discredited." It seems to me that if we want younger men and women to be self-controlled and models of good deeds in every respect, we need to model integrity in setting good examples. But the lesson is not about following the rules. Young people rebel from rule-oriented lifestyles because older people often hold up rigid standards as rubrics for passing judgment on them. Even if we hold up high standards for ourselves and others, we are going to have to accept some mistakes.

Over the years, here is what I have learned about adherence to high standards. I think that the opponent we can put to shame without anything bad to say about us is not our neighbor. This opponent is the devil who waits for us to shame each other. Being good isn't just about our relationships with each other. It is about our relationship to God. Shaming each other is the best way we can discredit each other....and God. If we want to be models of virtue, we have to uplift each other in our attempts to do so. Titus reminds us that we can't be models of godly lives without the grace of God, which saves and trains us all. We are not going to bring about the glory of God by policing each other. It is Jesus who gave himself for us and delivers us from all of our failures who delivers us. It is Jesus who cleanses us and makes us eager to do what is good. So when we try to shame someone into being good, we discredit God. I think it is a lot more loving to teach younger people to do good by trusting in the Lord rather than following rules. We elders should invite our youth to read Psalm 37.

I really do think the words of the Psalmist today were written for younger people. But they aren't going to mean much unless an older person gives testimony to them. We need to tell our own stories about trusting in God. That is the power of faith stories. Teaching younger people to do good instead of evil isn't going to work if we take credit for our own goodness by bragging about how we followed

the rules. We're just not that good and everyone has different challenges. But if we share that our goodness comes from recognizing that our salvation comes from the Lord, we become more human and more credible. And that should make us more humble. None of us has earned the right to shame other people because of our own goodness. I think Luke is trying to tell us that we are good because we are obliged to be, not so we can pass judgment on others to secure a higher place for ourselves. So today, I pray that each of us can find a way to share our experiences of trusting in the Lord during our own struggles with a younger person who is struggling to do good.

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