

“Qualified by Your Excuses”

Rev. Daniel D. Mayes

Sept. 16, 2007

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Today is the last time I'll stand before you in this pulpit and deliver the sermon. I'll be here next week, but I won't be preaching. So today I wanted to take this one last opportunity to talk to you about something that's really important to me and that I hope is important to you: Youth Ministry.

In a while you all will begin a search for a person to come on staff to have primary responsibility for working with the youth. I don't know exactly what kind of responsibilities or job description that person will have...that's for the Personnel Team to sort out. But in the meantime you all have some volunteers who've set themselves aside to work with the youth and keep things going.

Those people aren't going to have it easy. They're going to need some help. That's what I want to talk to you about today.

It's interesting how today's lectionary reading came about in a timely fashion. I'm always amazed at how the lectionary seems to do that.

The apostle Paul is one of those people we look back on as one of the heroes of our faith. We see him as a victorious evangelist, successfully spreading the Good News and starting house churches all over the Roman Empire.

And in today's reading we see a glimpse of Paul's private letters...so we begin to see a glimpse of what Paul was really like, and part of how he saw himself. He's writing this letter to Timothy.

Timothy seems to be someone close to Paul, someone who's spent a lot of time with him. And he also seems to be sort of an apprentice to Paul, learning his ways. We have a few of Paul's writings that combined to form the letters to Timothy that serve as his instructions on how to do ministry.

Today we find Paul sharing words of wisdom and life. These words can, and should, be a great example for us.

I find this passage of scripture particularly inspiring because of the way Paul's qualifications for ministry are addressed. He's described as “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” And these aren't mentioned timidly. These are qualities that we likely wouldn't respect in one of our own church leaders.

The negative qualities that Paul discusses are things he could very easily use as excuses. He could very easily say, “I'm not worthy of being an apostle because of these things that I've done.”

Instead, those things are seen as his set of qualifications. These things are seen as things

that God has redeemed. He is seen as an example of what God can do through Christ Jesus.

This is a train of thought that can easily make sense to us. Who better to counsel alcoholics than someone who's beaten an alcohol addiction? Who better to talk about the dangers of drug abuse than someone who's beaten a drug addiction?

Paul is someone who's been there and done that. And because of this he makes a perfect test case, a perfect example, of just what God can do. He doesn't let who he is or who he was serve as a stumbling block. He uses it as a tool for better ministry.

I've known and seen a few people like this. These people are sort of like Paul, who didn't let obvious obstacles to deter them from ministry. As I leave you today, I want to share with you some of their stories...the stories of some of the best youth ministers I've ever seen.

If you ever travel way down into the Southeastern corner of Tennessee, about three hours that side of Chattanooga, you'll find yourself right in the middle of the Appalachia National Forest. The steep cliffs of the mountains lined with dense forest provide some of the most beautiful land in this country. It's also some of the most unforgiving territory there is, too.

About 3 miles off the Ocoee River--the river where the movie "Deliverance" was filmed, lies a little community appropriately named "Ducktown." A few miles outside of town lies a little homestead where a man named Kenneth lives.

Kenneth is a mountain man in the truest sense. He grows his own tobacco, wears belts and boots made mostly from the skins of animals he's hunted himself. And Kenneth, being the mountain man that he is, is not really known for possessing social graces, especially since his wife passed away.

But what Kenneth lacks in social graces he makes up for in heart, and that's why he's one of the best youth ministers I've ever seen. He doesn't work for a church. In fact, he rarely ever goes inside a church building. He doesn't even go into town very much, but he knows every single kid there.

About two decades ago, word got out that Kenneth was a mighty good fiddle player. So people started coming out to his place to listen. And Kenneth began to notice how the music he played filled the kids with wonder. He watched as he set his fiddle down and kids would pick it up, awkwardly plucking at the strings, giggling and smiling as they made short disconnected sounds.

So Kenneth got an idea. He started offering music lessons to all the kids in town in the upstairs of his barn. They could come out, bring any instrument they wanted, and Kenneth would give them lessons, whether he knew how to play that instrument or not.

Kenneth had a neighbor who knew sign language, and he thought the kids might like to learn that, too. So he started inviting her over. And before long they had a full-fledged music and sign language group.

Kenneth and his neighbor didn't just teach sign language, either. They began to share their faith with the kids they taught, teaching Bible lessons and telling the great stories of the

faith. He even started donating his barn to outside church groups to use as a base for their mission trips. Occasionally, these two incredible ministries intertwined.

Many kids in Ducktown, one of the poorest communities in the US, even went on to college to study music or deaf education. A few even went on to become ministers.

And Kenneth's great big burly, hairy heart is to thank for it.

Did I mention that Kenneth didn't know how to read sheet music?
Or that he didn't know how to read or write, either?

The things that could have very easily stopped him and the things that could easily have disqualified him are the things that God used in him to make a great difference in the lives of young people.

Now, back in this part of the country, there was Bob. His name was Bob, but most people called him "Coach." Coach was a very big man. I think he played college football in his younger days. But when I learned of him he was a teacher in his early sixties.

He was a teacher who taught only two subjects: Weightlifting and Detention.

Coach was a fierce man. He was known for his ability to intimidate. And he had a bit of a temper. Well, it was more than just a bit of a temper. There were a lot of people in that school district who thought he had no place teaching. There were a few others who thought he was the best teacher in the world. Those were the detention kids. I know...I was one of them.

Bob had the opportunity to work with the toughest, most problematic teenagers around. In a school system that had open districting policies, he got to work with kids who had been kicked out of all the other schools. What a privilege!

One thing about Bob's nature was that the ferocity with which he approached life was the same ferocity with which he approached detention. He commanded respect and the detainees gave it, partly because they were scared, and partly because they respected him.

Coach was a respectable man. He wasn't always so intimidating. He tried hard to do the right thing, always. And he was a very good listener most of the time. He had a very hard shell on the outside, but a very soft interior. He loved the kids he worked with, even when they gave him headaches.

He would go out of the way to give a pep talk to someone who had been publicly ridiculed. He would call home to kids who were sick and wish them better health. He would tutor kids on subjects they struggled at, even when he was bad at the subject, too. I came to realize that one reason Bob taught weightlifting and detention was because he didn't have the ability to teach science, math, or English. But that didn't matter.

And Bob never missed an opportunity to remind kids that he was praying for them. He told us this even when the school board reminded him that he wasn't supposed to. He even invited kids who were struggling with difficult issues to attend church with him.

Coach was a very unqualified teacher in the academic sense, but he was an extremely well qualified teacher in the rabbinic sense.

You see, Coach was someone kids wanted to become. They wanted to be like him because he was the one who cared for them more than anyone else. Coach was the teacher that one girl, petrified to tell her parents she'd become pregnant, confided in. Coach was the guy that motivated some of the toughest kids to stay in school and make something of themselves. He was the guy that you could see every Sunday morning, in the back row of the United Methodist church, with a whole row of teenagers whom everyone else had given up on. Many of those kids are great teachers, in the rabbinic sense, because of him.

A man in his sixties...

Who lacked proper qualifications...

Who had many personality flaws...

And whom many discounted...

Touched more lives than can even be counted...

And then, just up the road a few hours from here, there was Dale.

He was a well-known community figure. One year at the all-sports banquet the local football team gave him an honorary letter jacket. On the back was embroidered "number one fan."

Dale could always be seen around town. You could go to the burger joint and see him hanging around with all the kids, talking to them. Then you'd see him at the sporting events, telling all the kids on the team how great they played, even when they lost by fifty. He even told the band members how great they did.

Dale went to several different churches in town. He'd go to one for a few weeks, then attend a different one, then a different one.

But when Dale was at church there was one thing you could always count on. He'd be hanging around with the kids, talking with them, praying for them and praying with them, and telling them he thought they were special because God made them special.

There were a few people in town who made fun of Dale. I think he made them a bit uncomfortable. It was partly because he was mentally challenged. Some people are uncomfortable around people they don't understand.

But I think Dale also made them uncomfortable because of what he stood for. Dale lived out the gospel better than any person I think I've ever seen. He showed more unconditional love to the teenagers of his community than they knew what to do with. No, he wasn't perfect. He'd get lured into the bar by people who wanted to make a spectacle of him. They thought getting a retarded man drunk was funny.

But I'll tell who didn't think it was funny, and who didn't get uncomfortable around Dale. The teenagers of his community.

You see, as our society grows more and more disconnected, the youth of our nation grow

more and more disoriented, distracted, and disconnected every day. The experiences of love, friendship, compassion, and acceptance are getting harder and harder to come by. And kids these days, are starved for the type of love and acceptance that Jesus stood for.

And Dale offered it to them.

He wasn't a professional at anything.
Sometimes he was a laughing stock.
But he would always be your friend.

And every kid in this world needs a few more friends like Dale.

I hope you get it, but I'm going to be gone, so I'm going to say it again in a different way. *You* are the right person to offer yourself to God, as ministers to our young people. You don't have to be twenty, with a goatee and a guitar. You don't have to be young, or cool, or even gifted or talented. You can be as old as you want, as untrained as anybody else, physically or mentally challenged, whoever it is you are. Be yourself. Offer yourself. just as you are, and the Holy Spirit will do the rest.

May you become great youth ministers....

May you become like the Apostle Paul, able to see God's example in your every fault.

May you become like Dale, able to offer unconditional love to a generation that truly needs it.

May you become like Coach, great teachers of life and faith, in spite of yourselves, to the most desperate of kids.

And may you become like Kenneth, able to pour out love and compassion and all sorts of great gifts, even when you're not technically qualified.

And may the young ones of this congregation and this community come to experience the boundless love of God made known in Jesus, through your witness and ministry.

Amen.