**Sunday 24th May 2020**

**Glynde Lutheran Church**

**2 Timothy 3:10-17**

**Theme: “Identity is Dialogue”**

**Part 4 of the Growing Young series**

*by Pastor Henry Martinez*

We have been staying at Kim’s mother’s house for nearly two months, though it feels much longer than that. Now that we have so much time at home our boys have been going through boxes and discovering toys from over 30 years ago — getting introduced to artifacts from another childhood. The other day they found some professional wrestler figurines that belonged to Kim’s brother. Even though these weren’t my toys I recognized some of the characters right away. The boys must have seen me reliving a bit of my past because their questions started coming: What’s this guy’s name? Was he a good guy? What did he do? I had to look up a lot of the names and before I could catch up they are off incorporating these relics into their world. They knew I was familiar with these wrestlers but they also knew that it wasn’t something important in my life. When they finished their play, it was on to something else. That little encounter with the past is endearing when it’s just toys.

And this got me thinking, when it comes to the formative stuff, that which is central to our identity, I hope I’m doing a better job to keep it in the present. Imagine if they found something not only from my past but something that was still important to me. No doubt they would be curious and want to know what it means to me, but I couldn’t just expect that the importance would just transfer over, that it would mean something to them. Similarly, we can’t just say: here’s this religion. Here is a set of beliefs, they are important so find a way to fit them into your life. That isn’t typically how identity is formed. Instead I need to pay attention to their world and what questions are coming from it, whether the stories and values I want to pass along are fitting with their reality or if we need to slow down and struggle a bit together. Recently I’ve realized that identity is something dynamic. Identity is not so much constructed as it is dialogue.

I am reminded of the importance of dialogue when I look at both the Growing Young material and the reading in 2nd Timothy. The reading from Second Timothy we heard today starts with Paul offering some reassurance for Timothy to trust the way he has been shown. He tells Timothy:

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance,persecutions, sufferings…

In hopes to give Timothy some guidance and encouragement, Paul invites Timothy to search his life and his story. His teachings and his character. He is reminding Timothy that even though they may not be together now, Timothy can be in dialogue with his past.

Dialogue is pretty fundamental in these Growing Young principles too. The authors highlight the importance of dialogue with one another, and with young people, but also a collective dialogue with our past, our traditions and with scripture.

Continuing on with the reading in Timothy verses 16 and 17 read like this:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The image that is so often associated with this passage is that scripture is a tool. Something that has a very practical function. Tools have a function— saws cut wood. Rulers make straight lines. Multi-use tools have different parts for different purposes. So if scripture can be likened to a tool, we can imagine it has different functions as well. The functions named in this passage are: teaching, rebuking, correcting and training. These all point to a dynamic kind of activity. An activity that is less like following blueprints or a recipe and more like a shaping activity— one where dialogue matters, where relationship and trust matter. So yes, while it is helpful to think of scripture as a multi-use tool, we are asked to approach it differently. At the beginning of this verse we read “all-scripture is God-breathed.” That calls me to imagine a different relationship to scripture than I would have to say a hammer or any other tool. It is less utilitarian and more vitalized. Less precise recipe and more story. More dialogue and wonder. Some depth is added.

And it’s worth pointing out because as you can imagine, there are so many ways that tools can be misused. So it should come as no surprise that scripture can be misused. One of the ways I’ve seen this is when scripture is used to try to win an argument or make a point. Online discussions are some of the worst places where the abuse of scripture is on display. It is too easy to find an opinion you don’t like, throw some scripture at it and claim that you’re using it to rebuke or correct an error— that error of course being someone else’s interpretation that you might not have liked before it even arrived. You don’t have to know the person. You don’t have to try to understand them, their questions or their story. And therein lies the problem. If you are only concerned with how to wield a tool, you don’t need to care about someone.

But if we believe that scripture is God-breathed, and the same breath of God has enlivened us and sustains us daily, shouldn’t we give more attention to how God is speaking into our lives today than keeping track of the points we need to prove or the arguments we need to win?

In the Growing Young book the authors make an interesting observation about how evangelism has changed among young people today. In the past evangelism was presented to young people almost as a game — leading someone through a series of mental exercises or questions until they realized their need for a savior. Then along came relational evangelism which taught us to earn the trust of non-Christians before making them an object of a conversion project. Instead of relying on these older models, this study found that young people today are more interested in being honest about questions and struggles. The authors suggest “perhaps it’s not certainty that makes young people better evangelists, but honesty.”

Less certainty, more honesty. This actually gives me a great deal of hope, and I think it presents an opportunity for all of us to grow young in our faith. Young people are being vulnerable enough to share their struggles and questions and they are attentive to the ones their peers are asking. What does this look like? One of the book’s authors shares about a time he sat in on a class with 17 and 18 year old students who were given an assignment. Each student was challenged to have at least 3 conversations with someone who identified as a non-Christian or non-churchgoer. They had to ask if that person would be willing to share which Christian beliefs or Bible passages they found most troubling to them. Then here is the crucial part: instead of offering an alternative viewpoint, or dispute what the person was sharing the students were asked to only listen, then thank the person for sharing. They could then choose which question or problematic topic to explore. That strikes me as a very meaningful activity for both parties. The person sharing their questions and struggles has the opportunity to share those without worry of rebuttal or correction. Sometimes talking things out is helpful in itself for their own processing. And the students have an opportunity to practice genuine listening. The kind which seeks to understand and learn what it means to walk alongside someone. Even more, it gives them permission to deal with the questions and struggles of their own lives.

If 7 out of 10 high school students have significant doubts about God and their faith but less than half talk about them with faith leaders and peers that should be concerning. In too many faith communities doubts or significant questions about the faith tend to be treated as something people just need to get over or deal with on their own.

This willingness to journey with folks through struggles and questions and not settle for easy answers is more than a helpful evangelism strategy. I think it is valuable as we reflect on how we walk alongside others in the faith. Over the past few years I’ve been able to hear from young adults who have reflected on the Christian faith passed down to them. As these young adults share about their faith and who has been influential to them I’ve noticed that the ones they are excited to share about are the ones who have tried to understand them — people who have taken the time to listen and not people who just tried to teach them lessons.

There is a beauty in seeing our Christian faith as more than just something to pass down to the next generation. We’re not merely giving them something to inherit, but we’re sharing stories from the trails we’ve walked. And God-willing they’ll let us walk alongside them. Now I don’t know exactly what ministry will look like post-pandemic. A lot has obviously already changed. Connecting with one another seems so vital, especially now. What an opportunity this is to realize that so many people are struggling in multiple areas of life, struggling with faith and questions about God included. Even though we aren’t physically gathering, the church can show up. Thanks be to God.