

The Well-Worn Path
A Sermon on 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ October 16, 2022

I want to talk for a few minutes today about the path that we are on. We are on a path through a time of conflict and violence. We are on a path through a time when, in the words of 2 Timothy, some people are not putting up with sound doctrine, but are accumulating teachers to suit their own desires, and are turning away from the truth. As we journey on this path it will help to devote some attention to previous times when the world, and the Christian church were in a place of great turmoil. Let's take a few minutes to remember the time of the English Reformation.

Generally speaking, the English Reformation included repeated cycles of Protestant Reformers showing no tolerance and sometimes even killing Roman Catholics, and then Roman Catholics showing no tolerance and sometimes even killing Protestant Reformers. My particular story begins somewhere in the middle of the English Reformation, around the year 1553. Two events of the time are especially important for my story. The first is well known. Mary, known to some of us as Bloody Mary, was crowned Queen Mary I in 1553.

The years leading up to 1553 were a time of change and turmoil in the English Church. There were some good parts and some parts. The very first Book of Common Prayer was created by Thomas Cranmer in 1549. On the other hand, in some places religious zealots destroyed statues and stained-glass windows in churches and cathedrals. Church property was confiscated and sold. Then in 1553 the Book of Common Prayer was changed to remove any language that supported traditional catholic religious understandings.

When Mary was crowned as queen, one group of people in England was thrilled. Mary was Roman Catholic. Mary reversed many of the reforms that had been enacted in previous years. After decades of using English for worship services, many churches went back to using Latin as the language for worship. Two thousand married priests were separated from their spouses. Over two hundred leaders of the church, including Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, were burned at the stake.

The second event is less well-known. In the years of Queen Mary's reign, a young boy was growing up near Exeter, in Southwest England. The boy, Richard Hooker, was the only child of his unmarried mother. Richard and his mother lived in poverty, but Richard had an uncle who saw to it that he completed grammar school. Richard showed great promise in his studies. With some help from his uncle, Richard was admitted to Corpus Christi College in Oxford and studied to become a priest.

Richard was ordained in 1579, at the age of 25. He became fairly well-known as a preacher in London, and was eventually appointed Master of the Temple Church in London. This would have been a prestigious and somewhat difficult position for almost any priest at the time. The Temple Church was founded by the Knights Templar, a Roman Catholic military order. The Temple Church has always occupied a peculiar spot in the Church of England, because the building is not under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London, but the priest, or Master of the Temple, is appointed through normal church procedures. So Richard Hooker found himself serving as priest at this unusual, privately owned church. When Richard arrived at The Temple Church, he found he was working alongside a lay preacher, a man by the name of Walter Travers, who was hired by the men who owned the church building.

By the year 1590, many of the controversial issues of the reformation were beginning to be settled in a fairly bipartisan manner under the leadership of Queen Elizabeth. After decades of fighting and religious persecution, Elizabeth and the leaders of the church were attempting to find a middle way between the most extreme positions of the Roman Catholic partisans, on the one hand, and puritanical Calvinist reformers, on the other. This middle-way approach can be seen today in our communion service, where the priest describes the sacrament of communion using words that state the catholic understanding of communion, and also in words that state the protestant understanding of communion. We try to affirm both ways of understanding communion.

But inside the Temple Church in the year 1590, it was difficult for the members to accept a middle way that embraced both catholic and protestant understandings. There were two services each Sunday morning. Richard Hooker had the privilege of preaching at one of these services. At the other service, the lay preacher, Walter Travers, would deliver the sermon. Richard Hooker might have preached a sermon at the 8 a.m. service with a message that was similar to the words of today's closing hymn, "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea." Then at the late service, the lay preacher's sermon would proclaim in fiery tones that all Roman Catholics were destined for eternal damnation. The controversies and quarreling extended to all parts of worship. If Richard Hooker put candles on the altar for the celebration of the Eucharist, the owners of the Temple Church would remove them.

After a few years as Master of the Temple Church, Richard Hooker began to write a comprehensive treatise, attempting to address the roots of the conflict he was witnessing. His writing was eventually published as an eight-volume work, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Hooker took a rational approach to describing the foundations for the laws of the

church. Hooker was especially interested in delineating the authority of scripture, the authority of human reason and scientific understanding, and the authority of traditions in the church. Hooker's theology is the foundation for our teaching and practices in the Episcopal Church, even today.

Hooker observed that Scripture is the ultimate authority for Christians. Hooker also observed that, since the meaning of Scripture is sometimes not plain to see, Scripture requires one crucial partner. Scripture requires the use of human reason to understand and interpret the meaning of Scripture. From this foundation, Episcopalians have affirmed the crucial role of schools and education, and the vital role of scientific learning.

Hooker observed that there are a few things that are necessary for salvation, and that there are many things that are not necessary for salvation. It is necessary for us to love our neighbors. It is not necessary for us to wear certain types of clothes. It is necessary for us to practice forgiveness. It is not necessary for us to be in agreement about a precise understanding of communion. From this foundation, Episcopalians have developed a tradition of generosity and inclusivity.

Decades of conflict, death, and destruction during the English Reformation bear some resemblance to the conflict we see in our world today. Like Richard, we find ourselves in a situation of conflict that threatens the peace and stability of our nation, and the well-being of our people. Like Richard, we hear voices that threaten the human rights, the dignity, and the lives of their opponents, and yet claim to be following Christ Jesus.

Like Richard Hooker, the people who first received this letter called 2 Timothy were experiencing conflicts and divisions within their congregation. The people in this congregation had been led and taught by a disciple of St. Paul. The letter was probably written at least sixty years after the events of Holy Week and Easter.

By the time of 2 Timothy, the church was more established and had more structure and hierarchy than the early congregations founded by St. Paul. This brought a number of advantages. It seems likely that this congregation might have had access to written copies of the Gospel of Mark, to many of Paul's letters, and perhaps even to one of the later Gospels, such as the Gospel of Matthew. So this passage begins, As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. These are not words that could have been written by St. Paul, since there were no Christian scriptures when Paul was forming his congregations.

But more stability, organization, and structure also created new opportunities for conflict and division within the congregation. So the author urged the members to proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

For people in Richard Hooker's time, Jesus' directions for Christians to love one another were not enough. They wanted more. They wanted victory over their opponents. So they accumulated teachers to suit their own desires. For some people in our time, Jesus' directions for Christians to love one another are not enough. They want some sort of victory that is more immediately satisfying. They want victory over their opponents. So they are putting aside sound doctrine and are accumulating teachers who suit their own desires for power over others.

Like the people of England during the reformation, like the early Christians, like Jesus, we find ourselves in a time of turmoil and violence. As disciples of Jesus, our task is to double down on the sound doctrine, the core teachings of Christ Jesus. As disciples of Jesus, our task is to follow the well-worn path of love and truth.

One or two decades ago, I might have spent a lot of time addressing the obvious question, "How can I know what is sound doctrine for Christians?" After the last several years the answer is becoming more obvious to see, precisely because we see so many people who claim to be Christians, yet are clearly not adhering to the core teachings of Christ. Christians feed the hungry. Christians do not support launching millions of tons of missiles against a civilian population, as Vladimir Putin has done. Christians work for justice for all. Christians do not fight to overturn the will of the people in a democratic election. Christians seek the truth. Christians do not give their attention and allegiance to people who tell flagrant lies as a way of provoking conflict in our nation. Christians regard all people as equal and created in the image of God. Christians do not treat women as second-class citizens.

So we are making our way along a well-worn path. Sometimes the path doesn't seem easy or interesting. It doesn't help that someone gave it this sexy name, "The path of Sound Doctrine." But we walk with joy because we are walking together, you and me and millions of others. It is the same path taken by Dr. King. It is the same path taken by Sojourner Truth. It is the same path taken by Christ Jesus. It is the path of building relationships of trust. It is the path of respect for all people as ones created in the image of God. It is the well-worn path of love.