

Pastor Joe Polzin
Titus 1:1-9
“God’s Trustworthy Word”
Year A – Feast of St. Titus, Pastor and Confessor
January 26, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Today, we celebrate the feast day for St. Titus, Pastor and Confessor. In the Lutheran Church, we observe these feast days, commemorating faithful Christians because it’s a good, Godly thing to do. We remember the faithful Christians of the past, especially those in the Bible, but also those from our own lives, who demonstrated to us faithful lives in Christ.

We know all people are sinners in need of the righteousness that comes by grace through faith in Jesus, so we aren’t holding these people up as somehow more holy than we are, or more of a saint than we are. We are all God’s saints, his holy ones, and today we remember Titus, a pastor and confessor of the faith, who received God’s grace and responded faithfully. This encourages us, and comforts us, as we see God use ordinary people for the extraordinary things He accomplishes through them.

So, who is Titus? Well, when you think of pastors in the early Christian Church, the ones we hear of in the Bible, most people probably think first of the Apostle Paul, maybe Peter after that. We also often think of Timothy, a young pastor who was taught the faith by Eunice, his mother, and Lois, his grandmother, and who often accompanied Paul on his travels. But I doubt too many people think of Titus, or know much about him. And that’s also why days like today are important, to spend a little time learning about or becoming reacquainted with these important people.

Titus was a loyal companion of the Apostle Paul. In fact, if you read how Paul refers to him throughout the New Testament, and what Titus was assigned to do throughout his life, you get the impression that Titus was the guy who Paul went to when he had a really challenging task, and needed to make sure it got done, especially when Paul couldn’t be there himself.

Titus was a Greek, not a Jew, who was likely converted to Christianity by Paul. He was with Paul at the Jerusalem Council, where it was decided Greek converts like Titus didn’t need to adhere to Jewish customs before they could be Christian. Titus was also the one who brought Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, and was his man on the ground during all the chaos and strife there in Corinth. While he was in Corinth, he also organized the offering to help the saints in Jerusalem who were suffering. Titus may have even been with Paul during his final imprisonment in Rome.

But the final assignment given to Titus, his major task, was the one we hear about today in Paul’s letter to Titus. It shows Paul’s ultimate trust in him, as he left Titus on the island of Crete, so that he could bring order to the Christians churches that were left badly in disorder. Titus, acting as a bishop over the whole area, was to appoint elders, which were the pastors, also known as “overseers,” in every town on Crete.

Now, to understand the importance of Crete, all you have to do is look at a map. Crete is this giant island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea that almost looks like a bridge between the continents of Asia and Europe. It was an important location in the ancient world, critical for sea trade. It was a nexus of people, cultures, and goods. If Christianity was going to spread in these early days of the Church, Crete was a lynchpin. No wonder Paul recognized its importance. And that’s why he sent the person he would most trust to organize the Christian churches there. He sent Titus.

Now, Titus faced opposition from all sorts of people and groups who were trying to stop the spread of the Gospel. The biggest threat came from a group called the “circumcision party,” whom

Paul goes on to address immediately following the end of our Epistle Reading (1:10). These were the people who said a Greek must first become a Jew before they can become a Christian. People had to be circumcised, follow dietary laws, and observe strict Sabbath worship before you could be considered faithful. Paul told Titus to “rebuke them sharply” (1:13) so that people wouldn’t turn to their own works to save themselves, but only turn to the grace of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Titus was working hard against the culture on Crete. The great Roman speaker Cicero once said that Crete is so backwards, they “regard robbery as honorable.” And the Greek philosopher-poet Epimenides, who himself was from Crete, called Cretans, “Liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons.” Paul even quotes that phrase in verse 12 of this chapter to Titus. But this was Crete’s reputation. To be from Crete meant that you were considered a person living contradictory to anything moral or good. And this is the setting for all of Titus’ work. It makes sense, then, that the majority of the rest of Paul’s letter to Titus was filled with detailed instructions for Godly living for all the Christians living there.

You can appreciate this monumental task Titus was given. To spend all his effort addressing this backwards and debased culture, not to mention dealing with all the enemies of the Gospel. And he began by organizing the churches and appointing pastors to faithfully shepherd the people.

To help guide Titus, Paul gives him a list of qualifications for the pastors he’s supposed to appoint, a list we still consider important for pastors today: he must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, his children are believers, he is sober, subordinate, he is God’s steward, not arrogant, or quick-tempered, or violent, or greedy for gain. Rather, he is to be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. And most of all, a pastor “must hold firm to the trustworthy Word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (1:9).

Now, I don’t know a pastor alive who doesn’t read that list and feel pretty small. We know pastors aren’t any less sinful than anyone else. Still, the standard to which pastors are called is high for a reason. They have an important task to complete, not for themselves or for their own glory, but in service to Christ and his Church. And the task Titus was given, one that we still face today, is to do God’s work in the midst of a sinful world. Therefore, pastors who hold steadfast to God’s Word are still needed to shepherd the Church.

Today, the Gospel still has opposition from all sorts of people and groups that try to dismiss it as backwards, simple-minded, or just plain fiction. Teachers from inside the Church teach false doctrine and preach what “itching ears” want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3). And from outside the Church, we live in a world and culture that tries to convince us we are our own gods, and therefore anything is permissible if it makes us happy.

And so the sober task of a pastor, and of the whole Church, is to “hold firm to the trustworthy Word as taught.” But what about when the Word of God conflicts with our culture’s notion of right and wrong? What about when the Word of God seems harsh? What about when the Word of God makes me personally uncomfortable, because if I take it at face value, then that means I have to change something about my life?

You see, that’s in part the burden of being a pastor, an “overseer” of God’s flock. I am not free to preach or teach what I think is right, what I think would make the most people like me or our church, what I think would get the most likes on Facebook, or what I think sounds the most socially-progressive. I am only permitted to teach what God’s Word says, and rebuke those who contradict it. But, when I do, although I pray that the Holy Spirit always works mightily through His Word in the hearts of his people, and he does, still, how many people do you know enjoy being told about their sin? Or enjoy being told they’re off-base? Or enjoy being told the ways the Word of God conflicts with their own personal belief system?

In my three-and-a-half short years of ministry, I've had numerous people, both from outside the church, but also inside the church, tell me how I could do a few things differently that would attract more people to our church. And you know what? For the most part, they're always right.

Trust me, my job would be a whole lot easier if I didn't have to preach and teach about the Biblical definition of marriage, about divorce, about cohabitation before marriage, about abortion and gender identity, about greed and wealth, about proper stewardship of finances, about the mission of the Church, about closed communion, about caring for a neighbor and raising a family well, about the importance but not the legalism of church attendance, about all sorts of things that if I didn't vow before God and before you, back when I was installed as your pastor, to hold firm to God's Word, my life would be a whole lot easier, and we probably *would* attract a lot more people. I could preach a Joel Osteen-type sermon every week, affirming you just the way you are and making you feel so good you wouldn't dream of being anywhere else on a Sunday morning.

But that's not my job. And that's not what you need. And most importantly, that's not what God's Word says. God's Word tells us that we are sinners. I am a sinner. You are a sinner. And we are *not* okay just the way we are. And because of that, we're always going to slip into thinking and acting in ways that are contrary to God's Word. And I, as humbly as I can, as your pastor, because I love you, will tell you the truth of God's Word, even when you don't want to hear it. Because that's the loving thing to do. And I hope you would always do the same for me.

God loved us so much that he refused to let us stay the way we were, which was lost in our sins and dead in our trespasses. And that's why he sent us Jesus, his Son, to die on a cross, rise again, and save us from ourselves. If we weren't sinners, we wouldn't need saving, would we? But we *are* sinners, and God knows that. And that's why he speaks to us through his Word, and through his pastors, and through fellow Christians, to call all of us to repentance. And when we repent, when we admit we need saving, God draws close to us, and gives us Jesus, time and time again. He is always there, forgiving our sins completely, and washing us clean.

And I would be remiss if I didn't also say that the best part of my job as your pastor is when I get to look you in the eye every week, as God's beloved people, and tell you with all certainty that your debt is paid for by the blood of Christ, and that he forgives you all of your sins. That's the beauty of God's Word, and of God Himself. Yes, he instructs and even rebukes us, which is a painful process. But it's never pain without purpose, like surgery cutting out the disease. Because then God supplies us with the healing, with the love and light of his forgiveness and grace, and the hope of eternal life. I have the joy and honor of sharing that with you as your pastor, and we have the joy and honor and sharing that with each other, as well.

So, here's what I would like you to remember about Titus today: he had the odds stacked against him, and so do we. The world is and always will be opposed to the Gospel. But, thankfully, the Gospel's success is not up to us. It's up to the power of God's Word, which is trustworthy. If it weren't, then Titus' mission on Crete 2,000 years ago would have failed, and there's a good chance our church wouldn't even be here today. But God's Word is trustworthy. And it is powerful. Titus worked well into his nineties, doing the Lord's work faithfully, remaining steadfast in the Word of God. We have this steadfast Word, as well, in a world that is constantly changing. God's Word is powerful, and it is always trustworthy. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**