



Although Da Vinci depicted the Apostles as men of varying age, Scripture indicates most of them were teens.

It's intriguing that scholars debate whether the Sanhedrin stoned Stephen, or whether the mob did. Either way, they didn't have the legal right to do so. You may remember that in Jn.18:31, the Sanhedrin need Pilot to carry out Jesus' Crucifixion because according to their law, the Sanhedrin don't have the authority to do it.

Jesus said "You will know a tree by its fruits (See Mt.7:15-20). And crowd who stoned Stephen was passionately stirred up by their religious convictions. But then look where that took them. I am always concerned when I see someone shouting passionately about something. It makes me wonder: Is all that shouting passion for The Lord, or someone else? I always tend to take a closer look. Because, Ol' Scratch, he just loves to get people angry and stirred up. Yes indeed, you will know a tree by its fruits, and so often you can tell a person's motives by his methods.

Ah, but that wasn't Stephen's way now, was it? In his dying breath, he actually asked God to forgive these murderers for their actions. And this 20-something year-old Zealot Saul of Tarsus was there, too. Stephen was absolutely forgiving in his suffering (In verse 59 he actually repeats two of the final prayers of Jesus). I wonder how much this episode was responsible for the prevenient grace of starting Paul on the experience he would finish along the road to Damascus. Even though he was a Jewish Benjamite Zealot, at this precise moment, maybe this young man was also willing to observe quietly the world around him. In that instant, could Saul-who-would-become-Paul have been willing to let go some of his preconceptions? Could witnessing the calm, forgiving, peace-filled way in which Stephen was martyred struck a chord somewhere deep in Paul's soul that would later come to the surface when he faced the question along the Damascus Road, "Saul, Saul, how long are you going to keep kicking against the goads."

The Psalm this morning contains counsel for the youth for keeping their feet on the path of Godliness. There are in this section all the usual words that you find when talking about the Covenantal faithfulness of the Old Testament: Law, testimonies, precepts, statues, commandments, rules. But, it is really interesting that this passage from the Psalter begins and ends with the declaration that more than anything else, the best way to remain on The Way of The Lord is to guard yourself in and to forget not The Word. Amazing advice, since according to our belief as people of the Episcopal tradition, the Old and New Testaments contain everything necessary for salvation."

With 1Tim4:9-15: In v.10, Paul reminds Timothy of the only thing truly worthy of complete sacrifice, which is Love's Lord Jesus. Worldly ambition is but a pale imitate. Our hope is set on the living God, who is offered to all as Savior, and blessed are those who do not reject the gift. In verse 12 of this morning's Epistle, Paul says famously to Timothy, "Let no one despise you because of your youth." What a wealth of meaning!

Yes, it is an encouragement not to let one's youth be an impediment. But it is even more an encouragement to live as one beyond their earthly years in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity.

Oh, and one other subtext going on here is that when Paul says, "Let no one despise you because of your youth," you can also read this as a caution to Timothy to not succumb to emotional immaturity. And oh, how important this is, because I have to say we are in such need of Godly, convicted, stable, humble, mature young people in the leadership roles of our culture today – and this critical need is felt nowhere more deeply than in the church. Oh how we need Godly young people in our churches!

Paul reminds Timothy of the marks of true leadership that he has been given which are by prophecy (that is, from God) and by the laying on of hands by the elders (the church). A young person of true leadership-quality will present both attributes. We read in verse 13 that Timothy has been given the Spiritual gifts of exhortation, evangelism, and teaching. And Paul gives him the advice to "immerse himself" in these gifts. The consequential people of this life are the ones who fully explore and devote themselves to their God-given gifts. Paul's final advice to his young friend in verse 16 is to keep a close watch on what he does and says, for in so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. This is the responsibility of Christian witness, who is responsible not only for his own salvation but for the salvation of others. Remember people are watching (and they watch pastors with particular focus!).

The Gospel passage (Mt.17:24-27) is interesting from several perspectives. The reason I have chosen it for Youth Sunday may not be apparent to you now, but I hope soon will be.

The Temple Tax mentioned here of ½ Shekel a year (2 days wages) was established in the Law of Moses. In Exodus Chapter 30, vv. 11-16, God sets forth this requirement for the upkeep of the Tent of Meeting – so, for maintaining the religious institution of God. Jesus makes clear here that the Son of the King and by extension the heirs of the King – that is you and me – are not under the Old Testament obligation to The Torah. So, you and I saved by grace through the faith in Christ are no longer under the crushing burden of The Law. But, interestingly, Jesus none-the-less instructs Peter to go fishing, "And when that first Spot Tail or Striper hits your lure, Peter, you look in that fish's mouth and you'll find the where-with-all to pay up when the plate passes."

Now, as mentioned, this passage is interesting from several points of view. It seems to indicate that Jesus, though clear about being free from the Old Testament legal requirements is none-the-less prescribing that the Christian still has an obligation to the upkeep of the institution of God's House – so yep, we all bear part of the burden in this place for keeping the lights on and the roof dry. Secondly, it's really intriguing that is the only miracle in the Gospel which is left to the imagination. All of the other signs and wonders Jesus performs are clearly spelled out as how they end up. Only here, in Matthew 17 are we are left to wonder just how the story really did finish, and just what Peter would later relate to his friends about that fish. Maybe, Jesus knew that since Peter was a fisherman, he would never really tell the truth about the particulars of just how big that fish was anyway, so he left it up to us to speculate. ☺ At any rate, it's the only miracle in the Bible where you and I get to finish the story.

One last thing about the Gospel passage – and this is the reason I've chosen it for Youth Sunday. The Temple Tax as understood in Jesus' day was owed only by male Israelites who were 20 years of age and older. And the coin that Jesus instructs Peter to go fish for was just enough to pay the temple tax for two people, that would have been Jesus and Peter himself. What this means is that everyone else in Jesus' inner circle, all those 11 other men that we call "Apostles" ...well they were all teenagers. Now, ain't it grand that given the right leadership, a band of teenagers ended up turning the whole world upside down!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 5/25/17