



**“On Fire, But Not Burnt Out”**

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2 Timothy 1: 1-14 (NRSV)***

A couple of weeks ago, Pedro Ramos-Goycolea, our Minister In Training, asked me, “Do you have to be Superman to be a pastor?”

I laughed, and said, “No, but it helps if you are.” Then I asked him to say more about what prompted his question.

Not surprisingly Pedro described the complex challenges that he saw in our community, and the things that he was hearing about from colleagues at school, and the broad range of knowledge, creativity, and energy required to successfully address these challenges.

I agreed with Pedro that the ministry is not for the faint of heart. I also allowed as how even experienced pastors can be daunted by the challenges of ministry and that such feelings are not new to church leaders. In fact, I explained, these are kinds of experiences that inspired The Pastoral Epistles from which today’s sermon text is drawn.

Today’s reading comes from 2 Timothy which is part of the biblical genre known as “The Pastoral Epistles.” 1 Timothy and Titus are also part of The Pastoral Epistles. These epistles (or letters) are grouped together because they deal with the same topics: church leadership and the challenges of congregational life on the Christian frontier.

All three epistles are thought to have been written in the early second century CE, roughly about 100 years after Jesus’ death. 1 and 2 Timothy were addressed to Timothy, a young apostle, and were written by someone borrowing Paul’s name—most likely one of his disciples.

Timothy’s ministry context was Ephesus, which was then in Asia Minor, and is located in a part of the world that today we refer to as Turkey.

The author wrote from his prison cell in Rome, where he had been abandoned by most of his friends, and was facing martyrdom.

Given the challenges of his new pastorate and Timothy's awareness of his mentor's impending fate, it's not difficult to imagine why Timothy would ask the older apostle some semblance of Pedro's question, "Do you have to be Superman to be a church leader?"

Today's scripture reading is his mentor's encouraging response to Timothy's questions and concerns about church leadership.

## II

One does not have to be a pastor to relate to Timothy's struggle. Many people struggle in the wake of their particular career and life commitments. Many have too much to do, while others have too little to do, and still others have plenty of work, but find little meaning in their labor, or do not receive a just wage in exchange for their work.

These kinds of experiences and the feelings that they invoke in workers have formed the foundation of modern political revolutions, trade unions, social science projects, and counseling careers. They are also feelings that inspired American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay to write "First Fig," which was published in her collection, *A Few Figs from Thistles*, in 1920. Here Millay writes the following:

My candle burns at both ends;  
It will not last the night;  
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—  
It gives a lovely light!

Today when we see ourselves or others "burning the candle at both ends," we worry about "burnout." Burnout is a term used in popular culture but borrowed from psychology to describe the results of long-term exhaustion and diminished interest in work<sup>1</sup> and/or interpersonal relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, burnout is the result of a person expending too much effort and having too little time to recover from that effort. Some research has shown that burnout may be more strongly correlated with some professions and personality traits than others. But overall, the social science literature suggests that burnout occurs in all sectors of the workforce, and in secular and religious environments alike.<sup>3</sup> So, none of us is immune to burnout.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burnout\\_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burnout_(psychology))

<sup>2</sup> See Herbert J. Freudenberger and Gail North's book, *Women's Burnout* (New York: Penguin, 1988), pp. 146-225.

<sup>3</sup> Here's a quick assessment tool on burn out: <http://www.mindtools.com/stress/Brn/BurnoutSelfTest.htm>.

Even church leaders are not immune to burnout. Recent studies summarized by Glenn E. Ludwig, in his book on long-term pastorates, explains that roughly 1,300 pastors across the U.S. leave the ministry every month; that most clergy leave the ministry within five years of ordination; and that 80% of pastors leave for a new church within two years after a building renovation or construction project is completed.<sup>4</sup>

I have to say, given these research findings, I'm relieved not to have become a statistic. And, I have wondered, periodically, and maybe you do to, "How do I—how do any of us—avoid becoming a statistic? How do we avoid burnout?" Or as the former president of my seminary alma mater, Dr. George Peck, once famously asked our seminary community, "How do we remain on fire with the gospel, and not become burnt out?"

#### IV

I suspect that the answer to this question, "How do we avoid burnout?" varies for each of us, but that any valid answer begins with an appreciation not only of the physical and emotional aspects of burnout—but also of the spiritual aspects of burnout.

In addition to the physical and emotional symptoms and descriptions of burnout that I have already summarized, it's helpful to note that spiritually speaking, burnout often results from the absence or the loss of a sense of vocation. It can fester as a result of an incongruity between one's personal calling and the work one does to make a living. It can also be born of a misalignment of one's calling with the mission of the organization with which one works. Or burnout can result from a combination of two or more of these factors—in addition to the others that social scientists and psychologists note.

Sometimes, the antidote to burnout is grounded in one's sense of vocation either as an employee or volunteer, or with one's alignment of values with the organization's mission, so that even tremendously hard work and long hours do not lead to burnout. Sometimes, really loving what you do, and deriving deep satisfaction from hard work is its own antidote to burnout, and that satisfaction usually comes from some of the characteristics of relationships and tasks that are spelled out in today's scripture. (In case any of you are wondering, a deep sense of vocation and a strong alignment of personal values with Eden's mission are, in part, what have sustained me all these years.)

In addition, there are several practices that, if implemented, would deter burnout and/or help people recover from it. Some of these practices are espoused by the helping professions, but they have their grounding in religious life, and biblical teaching. Eight examples are evident in today's epistle lesson. Let's take a close

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<sup>4</sup> Glenn E. Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul: Building Effective Long-Term Pastorates* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2002) 100.

look, spell them out, and consider which of these may be helpful to us in our efforts to avoid burnout, or to recover from burnout.

Please find the scripture reading in your worship bulletin and follow along with me as we take a close look at today's pericope.

As we review each strategy, think of times when you may have benefitted from one of these strategies, even if you didn't think of it in these terms, and try to imagine what trying out one of these strategies would look like if you were to take it up.

Paragraph one: notice who the letter is written from and to, and the terminology that is used which describes a close-knit relationship between the author and the recipient.

1. This letter and tone underscore the importance of developing and maintaining significant relationships that feed our souls. We all need and benefit from mentors, peer, and mentees in our professional lives and in our most important personal roles, such as spouses and parents.

Who are your mentors in your careers? Who are you mentoring? Whose marriage and parenting style do you admire? Who can you go to for advice and support? If you come up empty with examples, look around. Who could you begin a mentee relationship with? With whom can you share your experience and wisdom?

If these kinds of relationships aren't readily available, consider finding a spiritual director or counselor who values your spirituality and knows something about spiritual practices, and work with that person. Consider too giving something back through mentoring, either in your profession or maybe through an afterschool program. Helping yourself, and/or helping others may add a sense of meaning to your life and rekindle your sense of call.

Paragraph two: notice how the author tells Timothy that he is always praying for him, night and day; how he remembers his mother and grandmother; and how he encourages the apostle to remember his ordination/baptism.

2. The implied guidance in the apostle's letter is to practice a spiritual discipline. Say your prayers. Invite others to pray for you. If you're not sure you have a spiritual practice, or you want to try a new one, stay after worship today for the introduction to the labyrinth, and come back Friday evening or anytime when the church is open and walk the labyrinth at your own pace.

3. Remember your ancestors' example. Recall those who inspired you to hold true the values and vocation that you now practice. Maybe that's your mother and grandmother, as was the case for Timothy, or maybe the people who have inspired your faith are related to you more by spirit than blood. Whoever those spiritual ancestors have been for you, remember their names. Call their examples to mind. Reconnect with them. And if they have gone to God, consider how they would have handled the challenges that you now face, either through an imagined dialogue or a journaling exercise.
4. Remember your baptism. As Christians, we are all ordained by the waters of our baptism for our respective vocations. In times of difficulty, it may be helpful to remember that each of us is a beloved child of God, fearfully and wonderfully made, and that no matter how lost or alienated or exhausted we may feel God cares for us. This is the promise that God makes to us when we are born. It is God's promise which is sealed in our baptism. God never forgets—even if we do. Nurture a spiritual practice that helps you remember and experience God's care and concern for you.

Paragraph three: notice that the apostle sets the mutual hardships that he and Timothy are facing into a much larger context.

5. In essence, he says, "Nothing worthwhile is easy," so it should be no surprise that the ministry in which the first apostles were engaged were challenging, or that we experience challenges.
6. The apostle also urges Timothy to stay focused on the bigger picture. He says, remember that God has called us according to God's purposes, not according to our own purposes, or even to our abilities. God has called us by name, and claimed us to be a part of something bigger and grander than we can usually imagine.

Paragraph four: notice the phrases "hold the standard" and "guard the good treasure."

7. In a world in which the Timothy's teaching and values were constantly challenged, his mentor urged him to hold onto what he was taught and, in particular, to follow the example and teachings of Christ. In every generation, and in every challenge, it's helpful to know what our values are and to stick to them, as a means of maintaining our sense of identity and integrity in life and work. Sticking to our values does not mean that things will be easy for us, but at least we will be able to live with ourselves. Having a sense of integrity is one of the most important hedges against burnout, and can carry us through demanding work, and daunting obstacles.

8. Finally, the apostle urges Timothy to “guard the good treasure,” with the help of the Holy Spirit. In this case, the good treasure that the apostle is talking about is Timothy’s soul. To guard the good treasure means that Timothy should care for his own soul, so that he will have the capacity to care for others. Again, the specific ways that we need to care for our souls varies depending on our various personalities and contexts. I’ve tried to offer some general guidance on how to proceed and to reaffirm practices that many likely already have in place. Some discernment, experimentation, and time are needed on each of our parts to determine what the most helpful practice is for us at this point in time. And, as I mentioned earlier, if we feel stymied by the prospect of finding a helpful practice, seeking out a spiritual director can be an important first step on that journey for us.

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So there you have it—eight strategies for avoiding burnout from an early second-century apostle. These strategies aren’t rocket science. They aren’t bright and shiny new ideas. They are well-worn, time-tested practices that have served our ancestors in the faith well for many centuries, and they may serve us well, too. There is no substitute for attending to these practices. Ask me how I know. Amen.