

To Comprehend His Art

^{NRS} Act 16:1 Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek.² He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium.³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.⁴ As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

1685 was an amazing year, the Jamestown colony was going strong in Virginia. And the pilgrims had figured out how to grow their own corn. And it was an especially great year in the world of music. George Friedrich Handel, of Handel's Messiah was born. Antonio Scarlotti, a fantastic Italian composer was born, and as if these two weren't enough, a man known as the father of Western music, Johann Sebastian Bach was born into a the large and talented Bach family of musicians who all lived in a central region of Germany known as Thuringia. Bach's grandfather, father, and all of his uncles were prominent musicians.

As a boy Bach remembered how his family would get together- and they would start off by singing a soft, beautiful chorale- a traditional religious piece of music. Bach and his family were devout Lutherans. But then, after they would sing this together, they would start to improvise together playing popular songs and getting the whole family up and dancing and laughing. And for Bach and his family there was no tension between the more religious music they played and the more fun, more lively, secular music. They took after Luther in this regard, who often set hymns to popular tunes famously saying, "Why should the devil have all the good music?"

When I read about Bach's family it reminded me of my own. Every summer on the 4th of July many of you know my family would gather at the home of my

grandmother on my mom's side. And we'd play badminton and this freakish version of croquet where we'd set the wickets up on hills and right on the edge of this big hill so folks would roll down the hill. The family slowed down over the years- but we had fun up until the end. But what I remember about that time is that before we were allowed to tap into the lemon blend and the baked beans and make our sandwiches, we would all sing the doxology together as a blessing. We would sing it slowly, and the family being mostly church people, we would sing it in parts. And I remember this very calm and peaceful feeling I would get as a boy hearing us sing this song underneath the cucumber magnolia trees on Grandma Cashdollar's lawn.

This beautiful, idyllic time in Bach's life- it was not to last. When he was just 9 years old his mother, Maria, died suddenly. And tragically his father, his beloved Ambrosius, who taught him to play the violin, the harpsichord, and taught him how to sing- he died just 8 months later. Bach, now 10 years old, was orphaned. He would never get to see the look of pride in his father's eye when he became the youngest organist the town of Arnstadt ever saw or the Kapellmeister in the Court of Weimar or the concertmaster for the entire city of Leipzig.

His older brother Christoph Bach took him in, but this double loss very nearly devastated the young man. Bach nearly dropped out of school and ran into discipline problems. The only thing that seemed to help was music, which he threw himself into with abandon. Although even here there was trouble. Christoph was an organist and had invaluable copies of music from famous composers like Pachelbel, of canon fame, and Frescobaldi. And in those days type could be set to print but not music- so music still had to be written by hand, making scores of music incredibly valuable. But in spite of his

brother warning him to touch these important scrolls little Johan Sebastian would wait until it was night and everyone in the house was asleep- and he would tiptoe down the hallway. And the drawer Christoph kept the music had slats in it just wide enough for the boy to sneak his hand into. And he would fold up the scores and then slip them through and spend the entire night poring over them and copying them. At some point Bach says that his brother discovered his thievery and yelled at him and hid them in a more secret location, but in spite of all this Bach said his main memory of Christoph was his incredible kindness and that he taught him to play the organ. But as kind as Christoph was- he would never be Ambrosius. He could never be Bach's father.

Now, there are a lot of ways of losing a father. Death is certainly not the only possibility, though. Fathers can leave home. Or even if they are around they may not be able to connect on an emotional level. Or they may be able to connect but have to work so hard just to make ends meet they don't have much left at the end of the day. There are a thousand ways of losing a father. And in Timothy's case, the young man we hear about today, his father just had a hard time putting his love for his boy ahead of his ideas about how the world was supposed to be.

The main thing we know about Timothy's background is that he came from a mixed family, his mother Jewish and his father Greek. Now today these don't seem like that much of a problem, but it wasn't all that long ago that even in America it wasn't just unacceptable for people of different races to marry- it was illegal. Last week on June 12th marked the anniversary of Loving Day, which sounds like hallmark gone amuck, but it's actually named for Richard and Mildred Loving. Richard, a white man, married Mildred

a black woman were convicted of miscegenation by a Virginia court, and in 1967 in a landmark ruling for civil rights, the Supreme Court struck down this law. 1913 Seaborn Roddenbery introduced an amendment to the constitution banning interracial marriage saying on the floor of congress: "It is contrary and averse to every sentiment of pure American spirit, no more voracious parasite sucked at the heart of pure society and moral status than the one which welcomes or recognizes the sacred ties of wedlock between Africa and America." The amendment failed- but not by much.

Now in the first century if anything the lines between peoples were higher. Jews were widely hated in the first century. While most minority religious faiths at least honored the gods of Rome, Israel refused. In fact they went to great pains to avoid this- the reason there were money changes at the temple for instance is that Jews didn't want to use coins declaring the emperor to be divine. And ever since the time the Jews came back from the Babylonian exile, marrying non Jews was strictly forbidden. The Romans hated this standoffish attitude, and the Jews suffered persecution. Philo Judaeus, who lived just a few years before Jesus, described a terrible attack on the Jews in Alexandria where thousands died. The church talks a great deal about martyrs and Christians dying for their faith under persecution, but we often forget that Jews were persecuted in the same ways long before Christians were, and they suffered far worse after Christianity came to power than before.

So it's no small thing that Timothy's mother was Jewish and his father was not. It wasn't a relationship acceptable to Jews or Greeks. And young Timothy was caught right in the middle. He was considered Jewish because of his mom- but he was never circumcised, which meant he couldn't participate in much of anything in the life of Israel,

even with table fellowship. This must have been tough, but not being circumcised allowed him to spend time in his father's world and to have a connection with his dad.

But when Timothy responds to his faith and he wants to follow after Paul and the other disciples- even this fragile bond is severed. Verse three is so short here, so matter of fact: "Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek." Paul's motives make perfect sense- he can't be going to synagogues and breaking bread with Jews if his associate pastor isn't even circumcised- he wouldn't even get in the door. But this was no small thing, not as small as Luke makes it sound- Timothy was a young man, not an infant. And after Timothy was circumcised, it would take an amazing amount of courage on his father's part to cross this line and love him even though his was becoming more fully Jewish, and remained a Gentile. But, as far as we can tell, his dad just wasn't able to get his head around this. This is the last time we ever hear about Timothy's father in all of scripture.

Many of you know my brother is gay. Soon after he came out our family became very involved with PFLAG- parents and friends of lesbians and gays. It's an organization formed by a Presbyterian woman whose son, Bobby, committed suicide right here in Portland after his family and his church were unable to accept him. The point of the organization isn't political but to support families who are trying to figure out how to care for their children when it feels like the world has been turned upside down. At every meeting there was a man who came and sat off to the side, and he just sit there the whole time with his arms folded up and a scowl on his face. All he would give his is name. He wouldn't say another word, and you could just feel the anger coming off him

in waves. But he came. He came and he sat. He did this for about a year- the group just made room for him, not really knowing what else to do. Finally, one summer night, he showed up, and he looked just awful. And that night, he talked for the first time about why he was there. His son was gay. And this was not OK with him, and no matter how he thought about and turned it around in his mind it just was not ok. He told the group how two years back he had cut the boy off from his life- that he didn't know what else to do. Well, this last year his son became very, very sick. And he thought about going to see him, but he just couldn't. And that week his son died. He said he was just now beginning to understand that even though he couldn't get his head around who his son really was, his heart loved his boy. But now this beautiful young man was gone- and it was too late to tell him this. Well this man kept coming, and he turned into one of the most faithful, helpful people in that group, giving young people some perspective on how hard it can be for parents, and always telling them not to give up.

Oh there are a lot of ways of losing fathers. But, and this is the good news in the book of Acts- even when one father isn't able to be everything we need him to be, there are so many others who can step in.

This is how it was with Bach. After living with his brother his family for four years, Bach traveled over 250 miles on foot to attend school up near Hamburg, the largest city in Germany at the time. The young man excelled in everything, but more importantly he came into contact with a whole new world. Before this, the Bach family all lived pretty much in and around a fifty square mile part of Germany. They were the

big musical fish in that pond. Had his father Ambrosius been alive, he most likely would have just done his apprenticeship work under him or one of his uncles and become an organist in a local town just like his brother. But his father wasn't alive, and Bach was free to do something different, go somewhere different. And what he found in Hamburg was an entirely different level of music and learning with musicians from around the world, and not just there to learn the classics like his family knew so well, but to experiment with new forms and new ideas. And Bach made a connection with one of these musicians, Dieterich Buxtehude, that would change his life.

After graduating from school at 17, Bach went back home and became the organist in a town named Arnstadt. He was incredibly young for this position. One of his duties was to work with the student choir with most of the students being in their mid 20's. But things were frustrating for Bach back at home- he missed the atmosphere of Hamburg, and he resented working with people who really weren't very serious about music. His students were a particular challenge- especially since they were older than he was. They did not appreciate either Bach's position over them or his superior attitude. One day when Bach was heading home a young man named Geyersbach, blocked his path and hit him with a stick. Enraged, Bach actually pulled out his dagger, his short sword and probably would have killed the young man, except the rest the young men standing around separated them. While Bach always defended himself saying the other young man started it. The consistory records, which we actually have, say that Geyersbach fell into a rage after the young and rather imperious Bach told him to get out of his way, calling him a *zipfel faggotist*, which roughly translates into being a "lame wad bassoonist." When asked about this Bach replied that no one could prove he said it.

Just after this Bach asked for some time off to go back to Hamburg and study with the man he felt such a connection with, Dieterich Buxtehude. The church reluctantly gave him a month off without pay expecting him back for the huge Advent and Christmas season. And the young Johann Sebastian walked the entire 250 miles on foot, at least a 10 days journey, to visit Buxtehude and hear him perform. And when he arrived, he found even more than he had dreamed, and he ended up saying not one month but two months missing all of Advent and Christmas, writing the church at Arnstadt that they could fire him if they liked, he was spending time with the man he called his musical father, merely telling the church when he got back home that he went to “comprehend his art.” And while I’m sure this was true, I’m sure Bach did go to learn more about music- but I’m guessing the reason he stayed so long was his musical father’s love and willingness to pass on all that he knew. Were it not for Buxtehude, we wouldn’t have the Brandenburg concertos, the well tempered clavier, St. Matthew’s passion, the mass in b-minor and the thousand other works that reshaped musical history.

I think it’s the same reason Timothy traveled so far and so often with Paul. Not only did Paul accept him, not putting him down for his background or his lack of understanding, but Paul considered Timothy as his own son. Paul would end up writing two letters to Timothy and writing these amazing words in his letters to the church at Philippi. “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the

work of the gospel.” (Philippians 2:19-22) Timothy’s worth you know- how like a son with a father he has served with me. Can you imagine what that must have sounded like to Timothy?

You know, none of us get the father we absolutely needed. They all fall short in some way- they’re human. And this true even when other fathers, fathers like Buxtehude and Paul show up. And maybe this is why Jesus makes such a point to remind us maybe we don’t get the father we need here- but this is ok, since our fathers here are not the only fathers we have. For each of us has a father who art in heaven, a father who knew us before we were born, a father who is standing even now on the horizon searching for us, and searching for us- and when he sees us, even before we have a chance to mumble our tired excuses about where we’ve been and what we’ve been doing that even we don’t believe anymore, he has already called out for the robe and for the fatted calf and taken us in his arms. **Amen.**