

Timothy's tears (2 Timothy 1:1-14)

How did we get from here to “boys don't cry”?

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As Christian nationalism runs rampant in our culture of late, it's driven in part by a sense that Christianity has become too weak—some might say *feminized*—and what we really need is a brawnier, dominance-based theology. Russell Moore, speaking to NPR a couple years ago, described pastors getting pushback for such gospel stalwarts as “turn the other cheek.” Angry parishioners ask indignantly, “Where did you get those liberal talking points?”

“In most of these scenarios,” Moore says, “when the pastor would say, ‘I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ,’ the response would not be, ‘I apologize.’ The response would be, ‘Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak.’”

Even empathy itself is under assault, with various books and podcasts decrying the so-called weaponization of basic human compassion by the left. Instead, we must get back to a (supposedly) hyper-rational adherence to “biblical truth.”

What would the author of 2 Timothy think of such things? I wonder as I read the letter's greeting in this week's passage. It follows the customary pattern of epistles at the time, including expressions of gratitude and thanksgiving for the recipients and other ecclesiastical throat-clearing. But we wouldn't be off base to imagine modern ears hearing these words as embarrassingly effusive, even gushing. Cringe, as the kids might say.

Paul—or an unknown evangelist trying to write in his style—says he longs to see the young Timothy and bask in his genuine, guileless, earnest faith. Timothy's faith has been nurtured not by a bunch of manly dudes but by women, if you can believe it: a mother and a grandmother. (At least one of the anti-empathy crusaders has argued that women are the compassionate sex, and that's why they should be barred from leadership.)

Timothy's faith is evidenced by his tears, invoked here as a laudable sign of the depth of the Spirit's work in his life. How did we get from here to “boys don't cry”?

And yet at the core of this text is something deeply muscular even as it is heartfelt: Attributes such as love and self-discipline are directly contrasted with cowardice. It is courageous, in other words, to embrace the kind of power that Jesus embodied, which is a self-sacrificing one and one that requires self-control lest our egos get the best of us. And it's courageous to feel love, to let one's heart break in compassion for the world God loves. Suffering, not strength, is a through-line here; the author reflects on his own suffering and invites Timothy into that same ethic, not as a boastful feat of personal toughness but as a reflection of the God who alone has the strength to endure such trials.

Some time ago during worship, an elder serving on our church's personnel team was sharing an announcement of appreciation for our congregation's staff. The speaker, whom we'll call Don, was recounting the experience of accompanying my pastoral colleague on a recent visit to provide communion to one of our elderly homebound members. As it happens, we had just found out before worship that the recipient of that visit, "Fred," had died during the night. As Don continued with what were clearly prepared remarks, written before Fred's death, his voice began breaking with emotion at the loss of his friend. For several long seconds, the congregation waited as Don tried to collect himself.

It's one of those unforgettable moments in church life. We might call them thin places, but I've always experienced these moments as thick, thick with the Spirit's power.

As the gathered people patiently and compassionately bore witness to honest and heartfelt emotion as Don grieved his friend, a thought came to me unbidden: *this is what true masculinity looks like.*

Or it could be. So much of what passes for power these days feels like a paper tiger, a weak person's version of strength. Thankfully, our faith lifts up a more robust vision of what's possible, for all people.