

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Psalm 137 (Choir)  
2 Timothy 1:1-14

First United Church of Christ, Northfield  
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October 7, 2007

### Power and Love and Self-Discipline

When I was in a spiritual direction group with our friend Lois Lindbloom, she would read us a scripture passage and ask us to notice which words *shimmered* for us. This is a variation on the classical spiritual discipline of “lectio divina,” or “sacred reading.” Methods like this invite us to listen intently to scripture as though it was addressed specifically to us, and to discern what message these ancient words might carry forward to us today. Although I am not in a group at the moment, I continue to read scripture this way – paying attention to which words and phrases demand my attention in a text.

This week the answer was clear for me: *“For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands, for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”* [2Timothy 1:6-7] What took longer was clearly hearing what these words were saying to me – and perhaps also, to you.

As you can imagine, this month before my sabbatical begins is a very busy one. Each of the Sundays of October has something special, I think, plus I want to have my work – and my office – in good order before I step away for three months. I have easily fallen into a kind of mental and spiritual overdrive, putting a few too many things into each day, and feeling somewhat disappointed every evening when my to-do list seems to have as many new items added as old items crossed off.

And so I hear Paul saying to his friend Timothy: *“...I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands,”* and I realize that this is the message I have been longing to hear: the reminder to rekindle the gift that is within me. “Rekindle” is a wonderful word; it calls to mind the picture of a fire that has burned down to embers – not extinguished, but not aflame. To *rekindle* is to stir up what has died down, to give it new fuel and fresh air, all so as to have a fire again.

Yes, that’s it: I am looking forward to my sabbatical as a time to rekindle my gifts – to stir up what has died down, to gather new fuel and breathe fresh air – all so as to restoke the fire of my ministry. So even though the author of this epistle (who was almost certainly not Paul of Tarsus) wrote two millennia ago, his words provide a vehicle for the voice of the Holy Spirit, calling me towards my time of rekindling.

It is not just my unique situation that calls for this refreshment and restoration. Every one of us faces the challenge of keeping up our spirits, our enthusiasm, our productivity, and our faithfulness in the face of the demands of our families, communities, jobs, hobbies, and assorted crises and emergencies.

Sometimes the rhythm of the year is enough to help us with that rekindling. The combination of the weather cooling (except maybe for today), school starting, and church “homecoming” all conspire to nudge us back into energy and enthusiasm. Sometimes we are inspired by an event or person that gives off the spark that we need (going to a good quilt store does that for me!). And sometimes we respond to our own internal cycles of energy and rest, work and Sabbath, and find ourselves (more-or-less naturally) moving back toward more energetic engagement with the world.

What is interesting about this letter (which, by the way, was also probably not actually written to Timothy ...) is Paul’s further reminder to his friend: “...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

If a person unfamiliar with Christianity were to see these words, I am afraid the impression would be that Christians can, by their own efforts (that’s the self-discipline part) become powerful and loving. For those of us in the faith, however, the backstory of these words is far more humbling.

As Christians, however, we believe that power, love, and self-discipline are not accomplishments of our own, but rather gifts from God that are intended for the service of others. To have power, we have learned, one must be a servant in the service of others. From our faith perspective, power is the resource that fuels us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, heal the sick, and reconcile those who are estranged from one another and from God. Power comes, not by defeating others or ignoring their hopes and needs, but rather from attending to precisely those hopes and needs. Power does not always enhance us, sometimes it drains us. And so power needs rekindling from time to time.

Love, in this context, is likewise not easy. Moreover, it is not a sentiment, not a feeling or emotion, not even a longing or attraction. Love is the decision – made again and again – to extend oneself for the good of other people, the good of the community, and even the good of all creation. The intensity of that intention is more powerful than we can sustain by ourselves. Christian love – like human love – needs to be rekindled from time to time.

Self-discipline follows the same pattern. It is not an accomplishment of will power; it is a gift that makes it possible for us to exercise other gifts with wisdom, forbearance, patience, and strength. Curiously, becoming self-disciplined requires that we be less focused on ourselves, not more. Self-discipline grows as we become genuinely humble – not insincerely modest about our gifts and accomplishments, but genuinely clear about our place in the world. We are not the creators, not the rulers, not even the elite. We are the servants, the caregivers, the stewards.

Good stewards, then, are faithful people who receive these gifts – power, love, and self-discipline – and return them in kind. Good stewards are people who nurture and develop the resources that provide the power to minister in the world; good stewards are people who tend and feed their own souls so that they can, in turn, tend and feed

the souls around them; good stewards are people whose humility makes it possible for them to use themselves as instruments of healing, reconciliation, and peace.

I hope, of course, that we rekindle our faith every Sunday when we worship together. Indeed, I hope that we rekindle our faith every time we gather, whether for worship, meetings, chores, or food. One of the great strengths of Christian community is that it provides many opportunities for us to inspire and refresh one another.

One of those opportunities begins today, as the members of our Stewardship committee set before you the opportunities and challenges of our life together as a faith community. It is easy to think of this time as just another fund drive; I hope you won't.

Instead, I hope you will read the materials that are coming to you with the same eye that we read sacred texts: looking for the words or phrases and or ideas that shimmer for you – the ones that come off the page and demand your attention and your action. And I hope you will read the materials with the conviction that God has already richly provided for you: power, love, and self-discipline. With those gifts comes the calling – the vocation – to be a steward.

I shall more to say about our vocation of stewards, of course, but today I leave you with these concluding words of today's lesson: *“Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.”* [2 Timothy 1:14]

Amen.

Prayer for October 7, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

Holy One, we pray this morning for our friends.

We thank you for the blessing of having friends: people to share our lives with, who know so much about us, who tolerate our foibles and shortcomings and celebrate our gifts and talents. We are grateful for their help and encouragement and for their humor and companionship; we are grateful, too, for the ways they surprise and challenge us.

Forgive us, we pray, when we are reluctant to invest in our friendships, and when we let other activities crowd out the time that we might spend with one another. Give us a deeper commitment to quality time, and the resolve to set aside distractions that divert our attention.

We also pray today for the wisdom, courage, and persistence to be good friends to others. Open our ears so that we can be careful listeners, and open our hearts so that we can hear the stories behind the stories and the longings behind the laughter. Help us to cherish the friends who come into our lives, comfort with us when we mourn the ones who leave.

We remember that Jesus taught us that we are his friends, and so we pray for the capacity to be worthy of that friendship. Help us to commit to our divine friendships as fully and delightedly as we enter into human friendships, and to share the delights and demands of these divine friendships with one another.

Make this the day, we pray, in which we rekindle friendships that have lapsed, and in which we remember with tenderness and gratitude the friendship of those who have passed on. Grant us the grace to carry their virtues, their stories, and their spirits into the future as a legacy of our relationships.

All this we pray in the name of the one who calls us into relationship with you and all of your creation, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ..