

"Rekindle the Gift"

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: II Timothy 1:1-14

The recent Session/Trustees retreat was held at the Atwood Conference Center, near the historic village of Zoar. I was fascinated to learn about this utopian community of the mid-19th century, established by a group of German religious separatists seeking freedom to worship according to their conscience. Motivated by the harsh winters of their first years in Ohio, and guided by their understanding of Scripture, the band of three hundred begin to practice a kind of communal life—allocating resources equally, sharing work responsibilities, and supporting one another in joys and hardships. Though eventually the communal nature of Zoar faded, it's clear even now the descendents of that experiment value their history, and appreciate the strength and goodness of life together.

There are plenty of characteristics that make living with other human beings difficult; but not one of us can make it through life alone. We simply can't. Our bellybuttons belie any claim to being "self-made." A newborn may have adequate nutrition and shelter, but will die if starved of human touch. On this day when we celebrate "world communion," we are reminded of the communal nature of our faith. We are not solitary spiritual pilgrims, but companions in Christ, journeying along God's way together. In a surprisingly personal way, the morning scripture text affirms that there are no "self-made Christians;" rather, it suggests that the faithful words and deeds of individuals wield enormous influence in making faith real to others. The letter may have been written from prison by the apostle Paul at the end of his life, to young Timothy who will carry on his work. He references those who have helped Timothy's faith thrive, and as we read this text, I invite you to reflect upon the persons in your own life who have helped kindle or rekindle your relationship with God. Listen for God's word in the reading from the second letter to Timothy, in the first chapter at the first verse. [II Timothy 1:1-14]

An African proverb says, *If you want to travel fast, go alone. If you want to travel far, go with others.* I wonder if you resonate with the perspective that our world has traveled faster better than farther. The wars that continue to divide and conquer us, the threat of ecological disaster that obscures the horizon, the walls erected by race and religion and economic status give evidence of the terrible toll taken by an individualistic view, be it of nation, generation, or ruling class.

Countering this reality is the vision of “communion”—a connection deeper than all that divides us, a truth that feeds us, a Spirit that enables us to hang in and hold on despite suffering and even death. I hope you thought of at least one person who has helped you experience “communion” personally. Maybe you thought of a parent, a teacher or mentor; perhaps you drew from that amazing cloud of witnesses of saints and martyrs and ordinary people who did extraordinary things. Maybe children—your own or someone else’s – have helped you see that divine love is universal, embracing “all the children of the world.” We know this, and yet we don’t. Today I simply want to tell three stories to remind us.

The first is one related by educator and author of many fine books on spirituality, Parker Palmer. He tells of a three-year-old girl, the firstborn in her family, confronting the birth of her baby brother. Within a few hours of the parents bringing him home from the hospital, the girl asked that she be alone with him in his room with the door shut. Her unusual request made her parents a bit uneasy, but they knew they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of this baby’s arrival; they realized they could let their daughter do this, and if they heard the slightest indication of anything amiss, they could be in the baby’s room in an instant.

So they let the little girl go into her baby brother’s room, shut the door, and raced to the intercom receiver. They heard their daughter’s footsteps moving across the room, imagined her standing over the baby’s crib, and then they heard her saying to her three-day-old brother, “Tell me about God—I’ve almost forgotten.” [*related in The Heart of Christianity, by Marcus Borg, pp. 113-114*]

The story suggests that the process of growth, of increasing self-consciousness and self-awareness, also involves memory loss of our origin and identity. We “fall” into ourselves and become separated from God. We forget the One from whom we all came, and thus become separated from each other as well.

The second story comes from the terrible days immediately following September 11, 2001. Stephen Jay Gould, Harvard professor and popular author described his family’s response to the tragedy, in which they joined hundreds of others to deliver needed items to the rescue and recovery efforts at Ground Zero in Manhattan; things like facemasks, hard hats, batteries. As they were leaving a hastily-created collection site to make one last delivery, a neighborhood restaurant owner suddenly appeared and handed them a shopping bag: “Here’s a dozen apple brown bettys, our best dessert, still warm. Give them to the workers.”

How meaningless, Gould initially thought; what is this, amid such enormous evil? Gould reflected: *I learned something important that I should never have forgotten—those twelve apple brown bettys turned into drops of gold, an offering among many offerings for the stomach and for the soul...we gave the last one to a firefighter, an older man in a young crowd, sitting alone in utter exhaustion on a short break. And he said, with a twinkle and smile restored to his face: "Thank you. This is the most lovely thing I've seen in four days, and still warm!"* [New York Times, September 26, 2001; quoted by John Buchanan in *Lectionary Homiletics, volume XV, Number 5, September 2004*] Broken body, poured out life: we eat this bread and drink this cup remembering how such sacrifice made possible human reconciliation with God and with one another. The love that will save us; the love that we are called to share, in everyday acts of kindness.

And one more story, from the Jewish tradition, the festival of Booths known as Sukkot, a seven-day season of rejoicing following the solemn observance of Yom Kippur. This holiday commemorates the forty years of sojourn in the desert, when the Israelites lived in temporary shelters. As observed today, similar temporary shelters are built, and decorated with dried squash and corn harvested during this time of year. Thanksgiving is made for God's protection and blessing throughout all their history. In addition, four other symbols are used in celebration: the branch of a palm tree, the citron, a fruit native to Israel similar to a lemon; three myrtle branches, and two willow trees braches. Each day except for the Sabbath, these four organic symbols are presented and shaken together. Over the centuries there have been different interpretations as to what these symbolize, but many congregations suggest these possibilities:

- *because palm trees give good-tasting fruit but have no aroma, they symbolize those who learn much of God's word but do no good deeds;

- *the citron, with its good smell and taste, symbolize those who hear God's word and do it;

- *myrtle bushes are fragrant, but produce no fruit, suggesting people doing good deeds without reflecting on their motives;

- *the willow branches portray and the poor and lowly;

Yet all are held together and shaken, because apart we are not whole. Just as the festival of Sukkot is incomplete without these four elements, so we are incomplete without each other. To this table, the Lord's Table, everyone is invited: the powerful and the weak; wise and the foolish; those who know much but do little; and those who know little but do much; little children without sophistication, older ones whose years of living have left them jaded, tired.

This is the joyful feast of the people of God; its vision is that adults, youth, and children will come from east and west, north and south and sit together. All for one, because God is for all. All for each other, because God is for all of us.

These stories reflect the story of our faith, of a God who loved the world so much God would stop at nothing to redeem. We take our place within that story by participating in the community of faith, by coming to this table together. Here we rekindle the gift of God within us, we find our lives illuminated by the light that has been passed from generation to generation. We catch a glimpse here, we get a foretaste of the way it will be someday, and we take up the sacred task of doing our part to hasten its arrival.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH FAR MORE ABUNDANTLY ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.

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