2-10/11-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Eph 3:14-21, 2 Tim 1:3-7 Empowered Scout Sunday

..When Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished. As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

"Excuse me," Governor Herter said, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?"

"Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person."

"But I'm starved," the governor said.

"Sorry," the woman said again. "Only one to a customer."

Governor Herter was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around. "Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the governor of this state."

"Do you know who I am?" the woman said. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister."

 -Bits & Pieces, May 28, 1992, pp. 5-6. Sermonillustrations.com:authority

That church lady was confident in her authority as the lady in charge of the chicken. Have you ever worked on a project where you were empowered to complete it within certain parameters, yet with freedom to do it your way? Or has your experience been more often than not you are given a project without parameters, or with unspoken expectations, or with unrealistic assumptions?

One of the reasons I support scouting is how often I see young men and young women empowered through scouting to learn to speak up for themselves. Parents cannot complete their rank assignments for them. Parents are not present to assist scouts in their boards of review. Scouts are encouraged to ask questions, offer ideas, support one another, and learn how to do their best while being respectful and helpful to others.

Miss Kim, as the preschool kids call her, is also all about empowering our children to do more for themselves. Preschoolers are taught to use their words and to assist in clean up. Elementary kids are taught to order for themselves at a restaurant when *God Squad* or *Kids Who Care* go out to eat. Our younger youth are challenged to claim a faith that is their own, not their parents or youth leaders. Our older youth are encouraged to begin to think how faith can influence every part of their lives.

I must confess, that there are times when I am still “that mom”, still wanting to do for my kids

instead of empowering them to do for themselves, or help out more around the house. Sometimes it is easier and faster to do it myself. Sometimes I just haven’t taken the time to teach them. Sometimes I want to know more details than they can tell me about an event and I don’t want to wait until they get up the courage to ask questions.

With my oldest now in junior high, I am beginning to learn to let go and empower Nathan to do what I know he is capable of doing, even if he doesn’t want to do it or him learning to do it may take twice as long.

Consider the challenges of making or tending a campfire. Are scouts still taught how to make fire on campouts? [*yes*] I am not talking about the easy way to start a fire, with a self-starter log or a can of lighter fluid. I am talking about the proper way to make and tend a campfire.

Gathering the right type of wood. The importance of tinder. The challenge to not start too small, nor start too large, so that the fire can grow at a manageable pace.

Think about what is needed to turn a spark into a campfire. How much effort goes into tending a fire so that it gives out flame and not just smoke, then stays strong and doesn’t burn out.

The Apostle Paul reminds us today that our faith lives are much like the flame of a campfire.

Often when we come to faith, when we catch the wonder of Jesus’ love for us, we are like a roaring fire, all excited to share with everyone we know the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We are excited to participate in worship and study and service and anything that will grow our faith.

Then, as time goes on, our faith slowly burns low, like a New Year’s resolution by Valentine’s Day. We want to keep going, we want to live by faith, yet it is harder to do so than we thought it was going to be. The danger occurs when we allow the spark of God’s love and call upon our lives to dwindle down to smoke.

Today, Paul says to us, in words he told his young friend Timothy long ago,

“rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” (v6)

That gift is the gift of faith, that was passed down to Timothy through his grandmother, his mother, as well as the Apostle Paul. Even though Timothy was a young man, he claimed the gift of faith for himself, and became a leader in the early church.

We are not sure what happened to Timothy prior to these verses. Maybe word had reached Paul that Timothy was backing away from his call. Maybe Timothy was being challenged by those who didn’t like the Christian faith. Maybe Timothy thought he was too young to serve.

Whatever the case may be, Paul encouraged Timothy, “rekindle the gift of God that is within you.”

There are times when our faith will waver, and Paul reminds us in those times to remember who and whose we are, who has encouraged us along our journeys, and what gifts God has gifted to us for the work of ministry in this world.

Rekindle the gift! Revive what is within you! Keep that faith ablaze!

How do we grow in faith, day after day, amid the challenges, struggles and opportunities of each day? What keeps us going? Our passages today remind us that it is God’s Holy Spirit within us that keeps us growing in faith day after day throughout the ups and downs of life.

The Holy Spirit reminds us of who and whose we are. We are God’s beloved sons and daughters, called to follow Jesus and Jesus’ ways in the midst of daily life. We are not alone on this journey of faith. We are called to travel it together, with other followers of Jesus, learning from and encouraging one another, supporting and nurturing one another, all being led by the Spirit of God. And thankfully, we are not all the same. We have different skills and abilities, different experiences and passions. God has gifted each one of us in different ways, and the Holy Spirit reminds us of our giftedness and assists us in working together for the glory of God and the mission of the church in this world.

“Rekindle the gift of God that is within you,” Paul declares.

Then he goes on to say, “for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (v7NRSV) “God didn’t give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.” (v7 CEB)

Have you ever stepped back from doing something, or trying something new, or reaching out to someone you don’t know well, because you were afraid? Maybe you don’t want to learn to ride a bike because you are afraid you will fall. Maybe you are afraid to ask for a raise because you dread your boss’ reaction. Maybe you are afraid to talking to someone new in class, at work, or in your neighborhood because they are different. Maybe you are reluctant to bring up a new opportunity for ministry because you are afraid no one will support it.

Fear will rule our lives if we let it, limiting what we do, cutting us off from getting to know others, holding us back from being who God calls us to be.

Yet God did not give us a spirit of fear. God does not want fear to hold us back. God also did not give us a spirit of cowardice. God does not want us to be shy around others.

One of my favorite movies is *A League of their Own*, which tells the story of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League during WW2. Girls from across the country were recruited to play baseball while the men were overseas, and the league actually played primarily in the Midwest for 12 years. Not only were the girls to play baseball, they also had very strict etiquette rules off the field they were required to follow. In the movie, we are introduced to Marla Hooch, who was homely, timid, and extremely shy, although a very strong ball player.

When the charm school leaders gave up on Marla, her teammates never did. As Marla was empowered to claim her strength and inner beauty, she was transformed from shy to confident, and from timid to loving.

God’s Holy Spirit seeks to transform us.

Since the beginning of the year in worship, we here at First UMC have been reminded through God’s Word that we are God’s beloved sons and God’s beloved daughters. No matter what others may say about us, no matter how little authority we are given in our lives, no matter if we struggle with a big ego or with low self-worth, God looks at us and says, I love you. I love you for being you. Everything I have done, everything I do, is based on my love for you. God’s love is not based on any sort of requirement checklist. God’s love is not based on anything we do. Everything we do ought to be in response to God’s great love for us, not to earn such love.

For we cannot earn God’s love. God’s love reaches out to us not because of anything we do,

but simply because of who we are. We are God’s beloved sons and beloved daughters.

During these first six weeks of the year we have been reminded that because of God’s great love for us, God knows us and claims us. Then out of such intimate knowledge God calls us and sends us forth to live as disciples of Jesus, sharing God’s love with others. As we are sent forth to live as disciples, we do not go alone. God is with us. God encourages us and empowers us.

Through God’s word. Through God’s presence. Through God’s people. Through God’s Holy Spirit.

When Jesus died, the disciples were crushed. They did not know how to go on living. Then Jesus was resurrected from the dead, and spent time encouraging the disciples to continue his ministry. Acts 1 reminds us that before Jesus returned to heaven, he empowered them with these words, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

They were not to continue on in ministry under their own power. The Holy Spirit would be with them! And then, they would be witnesses not only in Jerusalem or the Galilee, but to the ends of the earth!

Timothy is continuing that same ministry, with the same power of the Holy Spirit encouraging him and empowering him. So Paul reminds Timothy, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice,

but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (v7NRSV) Don’t be ashamed of the gospel, but live it, proclaim it, and share it!

What Jesus said to his first disciples, what Paul said to Timothy, God also says to us today.

Trust the Holy Spirit, God’s presence with us in this world. And remember you, too, are empowered with a spirit of power, love and self-discipline.

God’s spirit of power is not power as the world gives. The world’s view of power is control, abuse, domination, intimidation. The world’s view of power is so often winner take all and does not care who is hurt on the road to more power.

God’s power, on the other hand, is the power of relationships. God’s power cares about others.

And there is no greater power than God’s great love for us, a power that redeems our sins, restores us to right relationship with God, and even defeats death! That is the power you and I tap into when we live lives of faith!

God’s power is rooted in God’s love for us. And God’s love is nothing like human love. Human love can be fickle, as we fall “in and out” of love, as we choose who to love, who to tolerate, and who to hate. Human love can offer us glimpses of God’s true love, yet only God’s love can reach beyond all our borders and boundaries and manmade divisions. Is it easier for you to think of whom you love or whom you hate? Remember that God loves them all! God loves the saint and the sinner, God loves those who claim the name of Christ and even those who reject Christ. Nothing we do makes God love us less. Yet we are all called to respond to God’s love with our love. We are all called to not only love God, yet also love our neighbor.

Someone once wrote…

What is love?

It is silence--when your words would hurt.

It is patience--when your neighbor's curt.

It is deafness--when a scandal flows.

It is thoughtfulness--for other's woes.

It is promptness--when stern duty calls.

It is courage--when misfortune falls. -Source Unknown. Sermonillustrations.com:love

One of the joys of watching the Olympics every two years is to see the comradery that builds between athletes from all over the world, even those who aggressively compete against one another. If they can live by respect and dare I say love for one another, why can’t we in the midst of our everyday lives? Or are we so entrenched in our own ways we never make a way for finding new ways of living or hearing another’s voice, including the voice of our adversary?

Yet God’s power, God’s love, God’s grace all seeks a new way to draw us together, to pull us into one new humanity with Christ at our center. Today’s passage from Ephesians is a prayer from Paul to live together in harmony, former Jews and former Gentiles, together as one community of faith, the body of Christ, the church.

When I was growing up, the Berlin Wall was a physical symbol of separation. Now my kids learn about it in their history books. This past week marked a turning point for the people of Germany. For 10,316 days following WW2, they were divided, east and west, by the great Berlin Wall. I can still remember the night in 1989 when suddenly east Berliners were allowed across the border without being shot, and there was a party when families were finally reunited. I grew up with the Berlin Wall pulling Germans apart. My kids are growing up in a world where Germany is one. Now, this past week, the wall has now been gone for longer than 10,316 days.

Oh that we would tear down the walls that divide us, and be empowered to see every person

as God’s beloved son, God’s beloved daughter, a sibling in the family of God!

God’s great love for us is greater than we will ever be able to fathom. Ephesians declares that the love of Christ surpasses knowledge, is deeper than we can ever fully comprehend, and is boundless. As finite human beings we may only begin to grasp the breadth and length and height and depth of such love, yet we can catch glimpses of such love in our daily experiences.

When have you experienced God’s love through Christ?

Have you been moved by a song or scripture?

Have you been encouraged by another Christian?

Have you been in awe of the wonder of nature,

and realized that the God of creation created and loves you?

Only when we recognize God’s great love for us can we begin to share such love with others.

God has offered us a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.

Sometimes I struggle with self-discipline. I can procrastinate. I can be lazy.I struggle to eat well.

Yet a life of faith is led by a spirit of self-discipline.

Last week after the Eagles won the Super Bowl, I appreciated how much media coverage discussed the Christian faith of many of the Eagles players. Imagine the temptations that they face every day, but also the support they have from each other to be disciplined on and off the field, in football and in faith.

There are many ways to live by a spirit of self-discipline.

To be intentional in prayer and scripture reading.

To think twice before we post or respond to a post on Facebook.

To find ways to swerve our community weekly, monthly or even daily.

To listen well and speak less.

God has not given us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.

When we allow ourselves to live as those loved and claimed, called and sent, encouraged and empowered, then watch out! We will be doing more than simply our duty to God—we will be actively living for God, sharing with others what we know and what we have experienced,

sharing love and hope, passion and compassion, forgiveness and power led by the Holy Spirit in and through and among us.

As we close in worship today, and as we close this series that reminds us of the ways God reaches out to us, I want to leave you with a blessing that I also gave the first Sunday of the year. This blessing is found in our baptism covenant. No matter where you may worship,

no matter in what ways you may serve God in church or the community, no matter if you are still living into God’s love for you, receive this blessing today:

*The Holy Spirit work within you,*

*that having been born through water and the Spirit,*

*you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.*

Go in the authority of the one who claims you and calls you.

Go to share God’s love in all you do.

Go as the Spirit leads you.

May it be so.