

A Ritual of Revival
A sermon by Angie Witmer
Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ
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I've been feeling a little sentimental these past few weeks. Maybe it's because I recently turned another year older—always a good time to pause and reflect on where you've been and what you've done and what you hope for the future. Maybe it's the changing of the seasons and the kick off of another program year and the realization that I've been around here longer than I've been anywhere. Wow. Maybe it's because of a trip back to my hometown last week to bury my 99 year old uncle and reconnect with cousins that I haven't seen in 25 years—talk about a trip down memory lane. It's all been good. Very good, even. I am grateful for all of these opportunities to reflect and remember what's important in life and use these memories to look ahead at what's next.

In his 1st letter to Timothy, Paul seems to be asking the church in Ephesus to do the same thing that I've been doing: reflect on what they've been doing, remember what's important, and look ahead to what's next so that they might be a faithful, fruitful community of Christians both now and in the years to come.

The readers of Paul's letter may have reason to be skeptical of the author's advice—which could be why he feels the need to offer his credentials up front and reassure people (ala Dave Barry) that "(he) is not making this up." Paul opens this letter to Timothy with a reminder of the dramatic experience that brought him into ministry—he was knocked off his horse. Literally. And ever since that day, he has been one of Jesus' most passionate, enthusiastic, and

sometimes even obnoxious cheerleaders, dedicated to getting the word out about God's radical love and saving grace. He would travel from town to town, inviting people to come together to learn and grow and serve God by following the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Once he had established a community of faith in one place, he would take off do to it all over again in another place. Every now and then, Paul would drop a note in the mail to the churches he left behind in order to keep in touch, offer some advice, and lend his support with some words of wisdom and encouragement.

That's pretty much what this letter to Timothy is all about: Timothy is the young leader of the church in Ephesus—a community that Paul had worked with once upon a time, a community who now seems to be wondering how to best to go about the business of being the body of Christ in the world. In today's reading from the second chapter of this letter, Paul begins with these words of advice: "First of all, you've got to pray." Before you do anything else: pray. Prayer grounds you, focuses you, and reminds you that what you're doing isn't business as usual—and this stuff that we do here in the church is anything but business as usual. This is life-changing. World-changing, even. Transformational. So pray. Pray for those you love and those you like and those you tolerate and those that you can't stand, too. Pray for kings and rulers and people who walk the halls of power so that we might know peace in our lifetime. Basically, just pray for everybody. Absolutely everybody. That's the only way this is going to work. We've got to recognize that we're all in this together. God wants everybody to be saved—not just those who look like us or think like us or act like us. God wants everybody to let go and lose their lives only to discover something way better than they could ever imagine:

wholeness, peace, love. Nope, Paul isn't lying when he says these things. He's telling the truth of the gospel: everyone's in. No one's out. That's the message he risks his life for. It's worth it.

Sharing this message is our job now, too—and doing that work takes prayer. Perseverance and patience, too. I thought about that this past Wednesday night as we started up the Stepping Stones program for the year with about 30 or so 7th graders and their parents gathered together in Waveland Hall to talk about “Surviving Adolescence.” In our 90 minutes together, we took a stroll down memory lane, remembering what it was like when the parents were in 7th grade, then we marveled at how things have changed in the 25-30 years since those days, and then we talked about what life is like for 7th graders today. Let me tell you—it was eye opening. Kids shared that they feel pressure to produce, compete, be successful, and get good grades all while looking ‘just so’ so that they might hang out in the cool crowds. It's a dog eat dog world out there for those 7th graders...and their parents. And everyone else. That evening was a huge reminder for me that the church is as important now as it ever was: it's our job to say, “Enough already.” Dog eat dog isn't what God has in mind for us. It's not how Jesus taught us to live. I'm not lying. I'm telling the truth: there is another way. It's our job to learn that way and live that way and invite others—invite everyone—to do the same. How do we do that? Well...that's what we need to figure out.

“Last Sunday afternoon I went through my drawer ritual...” is how Robert Fulghum begins one of his stories. It was evidently time to organize “those drawers” in his house—you know, the ones that contain all of the things that

need to go “somewhere.” He says, “...I carefully emptied out all the drawers and laid out the pieces as if they had been found in an archaeological dig. A small-scale museum display of a life. In addition to...the items...that are supposed to be (in the drawers), I found these: loose change, matches (both unused and used), Kleenex (ditto), nails, screws, nuts and bolts and washers, miscellaneous mechanical parts of unknown purpose, pipe cleaners, a computer disc, one of my wife’s lipsticks, various notes scribbled on scraps of paper, two unmailed letters, three opened rolls of Roloids, four Chap Sticks (mostly used up), five assorted small batteries, six odd buttons, loose pipe tobacco, one sock, one cuff link, two pencil stubs, refill cartridges for a fountain pen and ballpoint pen, bicycle wrench, a clothespin, a deck of cards, an unsmoked cigar, a partially smoked cigar, a nail file and toenail clippers, gum wrappers but no gum, used and unused Band Aids, the corpses of a fly, a moth and two tiny beetle bugs, and a lot of dust and tiny trash. I kid you not. But then, you aren’t surprised, are you? Industrious, I washed out the drawers with soap and water, re-lined them with craft paper and ruthlessly triaged the former contents. Much of it went in the trash can. A sack of possibly useful items got dumped into an even bigger drawer in the kitchen. This is called putting things “somewhere else” (someday I’ll sort that one out). Carefully, thoughtfully, I replaced the proper contents in their proper little wicker baskets in their proper drawers...There. The drawer ritual (was) complete...How can something so mundane seem so important? It has ritual value—as a metaphor of larger things. I wonder how many times in my life I have done this? Often enough to know I will go through this cycle again sometime. Often enough to know this ritual for what it is:...a ritual of revival.”

A ritual of revival. That's what we're doing around here this fall. We have called it a "Season of Discernment" but it's really a ritual of revival—a time where we ask the question "How do we do this?" and listen for an answer, too. We kicked this season off last week when 700 or so of us filled out a survey during worship. From what I've heard, some of those questions have some of you thinking about things like the Bible and who God is and what the church means and whether or not you think that worship is boring every now and then. How great is that? You start out thinking you'll go along with the exercise and darken those silly little ovals for ten minutes or so and you wind up wrestling with issues of faith. Who'd have thought a simple survey could do something like that?

The survey is only the beginning, though. There are listening circles, too—places where we can get together to reflect on what we've been doing, remember what's important, and look ahead to what's next so that we might be a faithful, fruitful community of Christians. Honestly, I was a little surprised with my experience in the listening circle: sure, I expected to hear stories about Plymouth and what all we have—and maybe even haven't—done to be a faithful community. And I did hear some of those stories. But more than that, I heard and told stories of what this place means to me and to others. The two hours spent in that listening circle went by in the blink of an eye—and those two hours were somehow holy. A thin place. I can't really describe it, other than to say that I walked out of my circle knowing that I had been in the presence of God. And I'm not the only one—I've heard from at least a dozen of you who have described a similar experience. If you haven't signed up to participate, I hope you will. The listening circles are going on this week and

next. They really are amazing opportunities to do what people have done for thousands of years: question, reflect, listen and dream of what could be.

After all of the information from the surveys and circles has been collected, there will be a time for people to come together once again—a leadership retreat. At that time, all of the data and feedback will be spread out and sorted and organized much like the items in a drawer ritual. We might not be using the same methods that Paul and the early church used, but we’re doing the same thing: prayerfully discerning what it is God is calling us to do and be as a community of faith—God’s people in the world—right here, right now.

A few years back, the United Church of Christ adopted the slogan: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” because commas indicate that there is something more. Periods say: “This thought is finished. Done. Over.” But a comma says, “Hold on a second. Breathe. There’s more to come.”

So when we say “Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” we are really saying that we believe that God still has a thing or two to say. And if God still has a thing or two to say, it would probably be a good idea for us to stop and listen every now and then. Fortunately, faithful people in each generation have done just that: stopped to listen to what God is saying. And they have adapted and adjusted and changed course as necessary. If they hadn’t, we might still be following the advice that Paul offered Timothy in this letter. If you read the rest of the letter, you’ll find that Paul suggests that women shouldn’t teach, that bishops should only be married once, and that deacons should be serious and not indulge in much wine. Let’s face it: if folks hadn’t

questioned and wrestled with these issues (and others) over the years, I know I wouldn't be standing up here today. And a few of you probably wouldn't be sitting out there, either. So I, for one, am grateful for the comma and the still-speaking God and for those who have worked to listen and shift course and try to live faithfully over the years. It's good to be here in community with all of you as we do our best to be the church in the world today.

Surveys. Circles. Retreat. We don't do these things just because it's time to do them. Or because we think they'll be good for us. We don't do them so that we can complain about what's wrong or wax sentimental and congratulate ourselves on a job well done. We do them because we believe that these are faithful ways to reflect and remember and look ahead to what's next so that we might be a fruitful community of Christians sharing the truth of God's radical love and saving grace. Everyone's in. No one's out. It's the truth.

How do we do that here and now? That's for us to figure out. Prayerfully. With God. So keep talking and keep listening...and stay tuned. Amen.