

October 7, 2007
(World Communion Sunday)

“Playing With Fire”

I

What is it with church, anyway? You know, we try really hard around here. We’ve got first-class musicians, a magnificent sanctuary, a stunning range of programs for all ages and a pastoral staff that can only be described as...adequate. We’ve got all these bells and whistles, but come on. We’re not fooling anybody. This is still church: respectable, tedious, boring old church.

It’s not *our* fault, of course; churches have always been like this. If you don’t believe me, just take another look at II Timothy, our text for today. This is supposed to be a letter of advice and counsel from Paul—the original innovator, the adventuring apostle—to Timothy, his chosen successor.¹ So what cutting-edge, paradigm shattering, revolution-inciting insights does he pass on to his protégé? “*Hold to the standard of sound teaching.*” “*Guard the good treasure entrusted to you.*” In other words: Hunker down. Hold tight. Try not to make any sudden moves.

I guess it makes some sense. We know that II Timothy was written in perilous times. At the end of the first century, the beginning of the second, the long-term outlook for Christianity is kind of grim. Jesus has long since left the scene gone and does not seem to be in a hurry to come back. The fortunes of the fledgling movement now lie in the hands of the second and third generation. They’re untested; inexperienced; still wet behind the ears. And to make matters worse, the Empire is stirring. Caesar has begun to take notice of these peculiar people, these so-called “Christians” with their uncertain loyalties. Already persecution is breaking out here and there, with rumors of far worse to come. Will these rookie Christians be equal to their task? Will the church make it to *its* 150th birthday? Nobody knows. But the smart money says probably not.

What would you do in that situation? II Timothy suggests one strategy: turn inward and go conservative. Less innovation; more preservation. Fewer prophets and more priests. Less democracy; more hierarchy. Less chaos; more structure. And that is what they did. Threatened within and without, uncertain and insecure, the early church took its traditions and teachings and clung to them with a white-knuckle grip.

II

As it turns out, that was a hard habit to break. Here we are, all these centuries later, and the church still clings to the traditions of our elders. Even here at Plymouth, we would just as soon believe what we have always believed and do things the way they have always been done. Religion is, by its nature, a conservative creature. And a lot of people think that is what is wrong with the world today: people of faith who can not let go of inadequate traditions and outdated beliefs.

I know a lot of people feel this way because I have been reading their books. A lot of us have, actually. On Wednesday nights, we have been gathering in the Greenwood Room to listen to the new atheists —authors like Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, thinkers who are fed up with the faithful.

Christopher Hitchens wins the gold medal for best book title: *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. (Subtlety is not Mr. Hitchens' strong suit). But these different authors offer surprisingly similar arguments: Religion, they say, is a force for evil in our world because believers still adhere to ancient ideas which they insist on imposing on the rest of us.

These are popular books, best-selling books, but you have to wonder: why now? Atheism is nothing new. But the world situation is. The global village is shrinking, and not all of us like our new neighbors. Five times a day, every day, beginning at dawn, the Muslim call to prayer rings out in the streets of Dearborn, Michigan. They say you can hear it from half a mile away. Are we up to the challenge of living in that kind of a world? When so many still cling to the faith of their mothers and fathers—and when religious certitude brings forth righteous violence with depressing regularity—it is worth wondering whether the advice of II Timothy might not be part of our problem. *Hold on to your teaching? Guard the good treasure entrusted to you? Resist, react, dig in? Isn't that exactly what is wrong with religion? Isn't that what got us into this mess in the first place?*

And I don't think Plymouth Church is off the hook just because we house the Des Moines chapter of the Marcus Borg Fan Club. 150 years is enough time—it is more than enough time—to build up layers of teachings and traditions, to nurse our anxious certainties and nurture our pet beliefs. Plymouth can be part of the problem. We are, after all, still a church—and that makes us far more conservative than we like to let on.

III

It's enough to make you wonder how the early church survived. If it was all about clinging to the past—if their only posture toward the outside world was one of anxious reaction—how exactly did they manage to make it through those early years and into the present day? And not just survive, but turn the world upside down? How did they do it? What did the early church know that we do not?

It is easy to miss, but I think it is here in II Timothy. Tucked between the greeting in the beginning and the admonitions to preserve the traditions of the past at the end, right in the middle of the passage, we find this one little line. It is in verse six: *For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you...*

Rekindle? That sounds a little different. Maybe even a little bit dangerous. Rekindle the gift. Is that conservative? I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that an image of playing with fire?²

I dropped out of the Boy Scouts at the age of thirteen, shortly after attaining the rank of Second Class. This means two things: First of all, for the rest of my life, I have to live in the knowledge that I am only second class. But, secondly, and more importantly, it means I missed out on a lot of helpful information about the proper construction and maintenance of camp fires. Properly trained Boy Scouts know how to poke and prod and coax a dwindling fire back to life; the only thing I know how to do is reach for the lighter fluid. I'm lucky I still have eyebrows.

Rekindle the gift. Well, o.k. What gift? Elsewhere the passage talks about the traditions and teachings of the faith as the gift entrusted to Timothy, the gift he must guard so carefully. But how exactly do you guard that kind of gift? Do you cling to the old tradition? Do you muffle and smother and stifle the teachings? Or do you poke a little and prod a little, coax and breathe and blow and bring it roaring back to life?³ *Rekindle the gift.* Isn't Timothy being told to reach for the lighter fluid?

The church of II Timothy may seem stodgy, but in their own way they were playing with fire. They took the teachings of Jesus and the traditions of Paul and fashioned them into something new, something shocking, even. They made Christianity a system of deliberate resistance to the Roman Empire.⁴ Some of the language in this passage that we gloss right over—like the phrase “*our Savior Jesus Christ*”? — that would make a first-century reader sit up and start paying attention. “Savior” is a technical term that comes right out of the Imperial cult. You see what is going on? The writer is taking the rhetoric of Emperor worship and applying it to the person of Jesus Christ.

This is dangerous stuff. Every time these people have church, they are renouncing the Empire’s claims on them; they are pledging their allegiance to another authority. Every single service of worship is a public and premeditated act of treason.

Talk about playing with fire. But that is how they guarded their good treasure.

IV

So here we are, Plymouth Church, 150 years young, and what have we got to show for it? Quite a lot actually. Nice building. 3,000 members ain’t too shabby. And a good treasure has been entrusted to us –15 long decades of faithfulness.

On this World Communion Sunday, we remember that Plymouth has a great tradition of building relationships across the dividing lines of denomination and culture and creed. Way back in 1938—practically the dark ages of interfaith dialogue—Stoddard Lane took a central role in the formation of the Des Moines Roundtable, fostering civic cooperation among Catholics, Protestants and Jews.⁵ That was cutting-edge in 1938. And in 1957, when Plymouth turned 100 years old, we took a chance on a pretty risky scheme –a brand new denomination uniting profoundly different traditions. We joined up with the United Church of Christ, and it was a daring thing to do in its day.⁶

We have a great heritage -a good treasure entrusted to us. So what will we do with it? We could, I suppose, timidly tend to our tradition -maybe establish a museum in its honor, get some nice velvet ropes. Or we could rekindle the gift in our time. As the world continues to shrink—as fundamentalists and progressives and Muslims and Christians increasingly cannot ignore each other—someone has got to start reaching out; somebody needs to risk a relationship with people who threaten us; somebody has got to find a better approach than killing all of them before they can kill us. In other words: somebody will need to do the kinds of things that Plymouth has always done. So I figure it might as well be us. I think it might be time to rekindle the gift.

The passage from II Timothy ends with these words: *Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.* God may not ask us to play it safe, but neither does God ask us to go it alone. The Spirit of the living God moves in our midst. And let me tell you something about the Holy Spirit: She is stubborn. She has a habit of poking and prodding at us, of coaxing and breathing and blowing on us. Sometimes she even reaches for the lighter fluid. At this table, where with all of God’s people in every time and every place we break the bread and share the cup, sometimes something starts to stir and to smolder within us. We just might come roaring back to life –the gift of God, rekindled again.

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Notes

¹ Of course, most scholars think Paul did not write II Timothy; I am inclined to agree.

² Yes, it is –and never has one word meant so much for one of my sermons. *Anadazōpurew* is a compound made up of three words: *ana*, “again,” *zōos*, “alive,” and *pur*, “fire.” It suggests the image of bringing new life into that which has suffered neglect –a potentially powerful metaphor for our relationship to our own tradition. Although this is the word’s only occurrence in the New Testament, it was common in the vernacular Greek of the time. See the entry in William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 4th Revised and Expanded Edition. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.53, and W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Volume IV. (Westwood, NJ: Fleming Revell Company, 1959), p.75.

³ This insight is neither new nor original. Calvin, for one, writing on this passage (and mixing metaphors somewhat): “Let us therefore remember that we ought to use the gifts of God, lest, being unemployed and concealed, they gather rust.” *Calvin’s Commentaries*. Volume XVI. Translated by Rev. William Pringle. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), p.189.

⁴ This is not to say that aspects of resistance to the Emperor cult could not be discerned in the teachings of Jesus or of Paul; they could. But it fell to the later church to fashion its identity predominantly around anti-Imperial themes. One commentator who consistently draws out this aspect of the Pastoral Epistles is James D.G. Dunn. See his commentary on I Timothy, II Timothy and Titus in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*. Volume XI. Lender E. Keck, Ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000). The entire *New Interpreter’s Bible* can be found in the library of Plymouth’s Center for Spiritual Growth.

⁵ Stoddard Lane’s work is recounted in an unpublished, unsigned and undated document, “Notes from Dad’s Memoirs About Rev. Stoddard Lane” in the Plymouth Church archives.

⁶ The classic study is still Louis H Gunnemann’s *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity*. (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1977).