

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
II Timothy 1:1-14

October 7, 2007
Rev. Robin Long

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. 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. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

On last week's episode of the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*, Lilly and Marshall, a newly married couple, are getting their legal and financial affairs in order. Someone has suggested that they write each other letters that are to be opened only upon the occasion of death. Marshall struggles with this task, his heart breaking at the mere thought of losing his beloved Lilly. For days he labors over the letter Lilly will read should he die before she does. He tries to put his love for her into words but because of the immensity of that love, it is a difficult task. Adding to his distress is the fact that his wife Lilly has already written her letter with seemingly little struggle. One afternoon while Lilly is out, Marshall decides that he will open the letter she has written to him, hoping it will offer him some ideas and inspiration. He finds the following . . .

Marshall,
ATM pin code 5459
Teacher's Pension Account A3932
Cancel Vogue
Lilly

What would you write in such a letter? I think I'd be more like Lilly and write Corey the following . . . "Dearest Corey, The Discover Card payment is due on the 21st of each month. The Consumers Energy bill is electronic, the user name and password are written on the front page of the phone book. The septic tank needs pumped out again in 2011. The current year's tax receipts are in my bottom left desk drawer. Sorry to leave you like this. Hope it all goes well. Love, Robin." I would assume that he knew I loved him, cherished him, and all of that stuff but I would not begin to assume that he knew about the details of our financial and legal affairs.

The apostle Paul made no such assumptions in this letter, his last letter to his friend and follower Timothy. Paul writes to Timothy from a jail cell. He writes with the knowledge of what the future likely holds for him—execution at the hands of the Roman government. And with this reality in his heart he writes to Timothy saying "I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy." It sounds like a letter between lovers, and

in a way it is—friends who love each other dearly but more importantly, friends who share a bond because of the love they share for Jesus Christ. And that is why Paul writes, because of their shared love for Jesus—“I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you . . .”

Paul’s last correspondence with Timothy reveals his concern for Timothy’s future. Paul knows the challenge of keeping the gift of faith kindled in the midst of adversity, persecution, and separation. Now we don’t live in a world such as Paul and Timothy’s, a world in which we face arrest and even death because of our faith. But that sure doesn’t mean that we live in a world that is welcoming of the spark of faith that is within us. Our spark, that fire of faith that God places within each of us, is threatened every day. There are petty people—some of them in our own families and circle of friends—people who can’t stand our spark and try to extinguish it with the breath of cruel words and winds of thoughtless deeds. There are dire situations—the war in Iraq, extreme poverty, unemployment, illness, and grief—any of these threaten our spark with waters of hopelessness and despair. And, perhaps the greatest threat to our spark—our own selves—our doubts, our fears, our shame, our sense of unworthiness—these things that threaten to suffocate the spark by sucking the breath of life right out of us. We’d be fooling ourselves if we thought our spark was safe, it’s not, we have to work to keep it kindled, work to keep the embers of faith hot within our souls. Paul knew this was true of Timothy and it’s safe to say it’s true of us as well. We need help keeping our sparks kindled and Paul offers that help.

Paul suggests there are three things that keep the divine spark within us kindled—power, love, and self-discipline. First, power. We have the power to keep our spark kindled. We kindle our spark when we claim our power. We can dismiss our power with words of defeat and hopelessness. We say things like, “Oh, I’m just one person, I can’t change the world.” Or we claim we’re too old or too young or too sick or too sad or too poor or too whatever it is we are to do anything about it. Not true. Power comes in all ages and abilities. If you’re too old to join the Peace Corps, pray for those who do. If you’re too sick to serve on a committee, send a note of thanks to someone who does. In Paul’s letter we have examples of two women who used their power to pass on the faith. Lois was Timothy’s grandmother, Eunice his mother, both of them passed their faith onto Timothy and in doing so, shared with him the empowering grace of God’s love. In two weeks you’ll have just such an opportunity to share your faith with the world wide web of our brothers and sisters in Christ when we celebrate Consecration Sunday. On that day we’ll have the opportunity to bring forward our pledge cards for 2008. It doesn’t matter if we can pledge one dollar a week or a thousand dollars a week, when we come forward on that Sunday we’ll be exercising our power to give, we’ll be claiming our power over financial worries and insecurities, we’ll be claiming the power we have to give and the power we have to help others. And when we exercise that power to give, we’ll experience a kind of freedom in Christ that will indeed rekindle our divine sparks and will help us to share our sparks with others.

In addition to power, a second means of keeping that spark kindled within us is love. That’s what Paul is doing in this letter to Timothy, he writes to him in love. Paul’s love has the power to rekindle the spark in Timothy. Just as your love has the power to rekindle the spark in others. A couple of months ago, my spark was nearly undetectable. I was exhausted, distracted, and overwhelmed. I would likely have gone on like that with my spark growing dimmer and dimmer had not one of you, speaking the truth in love, come to me and said, “Robin, you’re not yourself. You’re getting a little sludgy. You

need to take care of yourself.” She was absolutely right. What a gift of love that was, a gift that helped me to rekindle my spark so that I could then help others rekindle theirs.

And in addition to power and love there is a third thing that helps us to keep our spark kindled and that is self-discipline. How will the spark stay lit if you don’t feed the flames? If we don’t come to church, how can our spark be reignited by our brothers and sisters in Christ? If we don’t read God’s word, how will we even know there is a spark in the first place? If we don’t serve others, how will our hearts experience the great joy that comes from loving our neighbors as ourselves? And if we don’t work to resist the temptations of this world—the excesses we’re constantly being encouraged to pursue—an excess of money, stuff, food, activity, and prestige—if we don’t practice self-discipline and resist those temptations, we’re likely to become so enamored by those things, that we neglect our inner spark—that place within us where God lives.

Friends, we’ve gotta use our power, our love, and our self-discipline to keep the spark kindled, and not just for our sakes, but for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christian scholars remind us that Christianity is always just one generation away from extinction. After all, what if Timothy’s grandmother Lois had kept her spark to herself and left her daughter Eunice in the dark and then there would have been no Timothy and no letter from Paul. Our divine spark was not placed within us just for our own pleasure, but rather it was placed within us so that all may know of God’s love. It is a spark to be shared with the world wide web of believers so that in knowing your spark, our spark might be rekindled and together, we might light the pilot light of the spark of God throughout all creation. That’s what Paul asks of us in this final letter—that we let our light shine so that others may see and believe.

This little light of mine . . .

Won’t let no one blow it out . . .

Let it shine ‘round Leelanau . . .