

## **“Fan into Flame”**

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A Sermon on 2 Timothy 1:1-7  
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*“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.”*

When was the last time you were at the ocean? More specifically, when was the last time you waded into the ocean water? Whether it's been recently or many years ago I imagine you know that feeling when you wade into those waters and get maybe waist-deep - and sometimes you can really start to feel the undertow pulling you. At first, you press back against it with your body so that you don't get pulled far away from your family or whoever else is back on the shore with you that day. But even if you keep it at, give it just a few minutes time out in the ocean and even in the mildest of undertows, you turn around looking for your people or your beach chairs or the house where you are staying...and its suddenly really far over that way. Undertow is quiet, it's invisible - and it is formidable.

In today's Scripture, Paul sees Timothy caught in an undertow, perhaps unaware. And we are given the name of this particular undertow in verse 7:

*“For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice”* Paul tells Timothy. Or it also translated *“timidity”* or also translated quite bluntly: *“For God did not give us a spirit of fear.”*

Paul in this letter is writing in large part to encourage Timothy amid Timothy's very real fears.

- Timothy currently faces difficult opponents, false teachers who have been countering his teachings.
- He faces the prospect of dealing with more and more people who are, as Paul puts it later in the letter, “lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, **3** without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, **4** treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God — having a form of godliness but denying its power.”
- And then on top of all that Timothy faces the fact that his mentor and friend in Paul is in prison for his faith, aging and will soon die.

So... not only will Timothy continue to face growing resistance, he will do so without one who has always walked with him, always been a support.

Paul sees the all-too-familiar undertow of fear taking hold of Timothy as looks out at the world around him and projects what life will soon be like... and truth be told, it's the same undertow that catches people generation after generation.

During one of our Zoom conversations for the Race, Racism, and the Church class some of you at FPC shared in over the summer, one participant said, “You know it's hard to talk about this stuff because I feel no matter what I say people hear it as either this side or that side. Every comment and every question either makes you red or blue, right or left and then one group starts to tune you out or push back.” And I could hear the lament in this person's voice as they wanted to be able to offer thoughts, raise questions, consider nuance and contradictions and paradoxes inevitable to any hard discussion, any worthy discussion...but what this person was experiencing was an undertow powerfully at work in our society pulling people from one another.

The currents of fear quiet many people from speaking or acting (because the repercussions from the other side or even from within one's own side can be quite significant) and the currents of fear are behind some of the loudest voices and actions. And those are our national waters, but on a day to day basis far more acutely we feel the myriad of localized fears that accompany our job or job search, our finances, our health, our family.

*“For God did not give us a Spirit of fear...”* those waters, that undertow - not what you, Timothy, you church, have been given. Well then what is?

Have you ever tried surfing? I've only tried a handful of times, and its only because of an instructor that I managed eventually to stand up and ride a 1 or 2 foot wave here and there. But basically the idea is this: You need to hop out of the water and lay down on your surf board, and when you see a wave coming so you start to paddle with your arms. Then, just as the swell of the wave catches the back of your board, just as that wave's power is reaching its zenith, you basically do a push up on your board and then bring one foot to the front, stand your body up and surf.

It is a quick motion that feels terrifying and vulnerable as you are essentially trying to stand on rapidly moving water. You very well may wobble or fall, look foolish or get hurt... or you could surf. And I can tell you from limited experience it is a profound thing to experience the full focus and freedom and joy of this moment where you are riding in sync with the gift of God's creation.

*"For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."*

Paul is exhorting Timothy to rise from the undertow and know the freedom and joy of a different Spirit that is already his. In particular, Paul exhorts Timothy to know the gift of that Spirit by exhorting Timothy to focus afresh on Timothy's own gift.

*"I remind you, Timothy, **to rekindle the gift** of God that is within you..."*

"Gift" there is "charisma" in Greek - the word used to describe spiritual gifts. Multiple times elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul declares that all of us have been given spiritual charisma, spiritual gifts from God. And oftentimes we have a hard time seeing our own gifts but if we ask others who know us - they see it. We think nothing of the fact that we are a good listener - it's just natural. Others, they comment all the time on how we are a good listener because they recognize - that's not everybody's reality. "Your empathy, your ability to hear the heart of another so bring healing... that is a gift."

We all have spiritual charisma. Do you know yours?

Paul is calling Timothy to 'rekindle' or 'fan into flame' his gift - because it is in his gift and through his gift that the spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-discipline pours forth.

Or put another way:

**“Timothy, I see you caught in the currents of fear that are not of God. As this next wave of rises toward you...raise up and stand vulnerably and fully upon your God-given gift. That gift is the conduit of Jesus’ power and love and self-discipline made known through you.”**

But how to risk rising up? When the currents pull severely and the waves roll high - how is Timothy to find the courage to fan into flame his God-given gift, to risk standing by faith? What indeed can break the church from the currents of fear and free us to risk standing to offer our God-given gifts in this world come what may?

Paul’s tact for encouraging Timothy in this regard is deceptively simple: “Timothy as you stand in that undertow, I am reminded of the faith of your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice - and now, I am sure, lives in you.” Paul points Timothy to back to his roots. His family roots. The gift of faith known in the lives of Lois and Eunice and passed through those folks to Timothy.

And Paul also has Timothy consider Timothy’s own church roots. Paul talks about Timothy in this letter as a “son” not biologically, but in recognition that in Jesus Christ we are family. And so Paul talks as a father to his son about his love for Timothy and his prayers for Timothy - these are encouragements from one generation of church family to the next. This form of encouragement by Paul has deeply biblical roots.

How often in the Hebrew Scriptures do we hear God encourage God’s people to take risks and to offer their lives by reminding them, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?” It is as if God’s most fundamental way of encouraging the current family of God is by reminding them of the past family of God with whom God was faithful, though whom the faith found courageous animation.

One of the gifts of Christina Bondesen’s video earlier in this service is that it makes us mindful that whether we joined First Presbyterian Church six month ago or six years ago or sixty years ago...all of us are recipients of the faithful work, faithful prayers, faithful service, faithful generosity, faithful love of the previous generations at FPC - all of it unfolding in times where the reasons for fear were acute.

*“Timothy as you stand in that undertow, I am reminded of...a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.”*

Virginia Sedgwick Weatherbie. That was my grandmother on my mom’s side.

One of my earliest memories of being at grandma's house was this one drawer she had. You would open it and it was filled with ketchup packets. Some honey packets, too. But mainly ketchup - McDonald's packets, Wendy's packets, Burger King packets. Ketchup packets filled the drawer - and you could tell many of them had been there for years because you could see how the logos had changed over the years.

Now...grandma was well-off enough to afford her own ketchup. But if you grew up a child of the Great Depression and that time of profound fear - something deep within your soul knew for the rest of your life that at any moment you could have nothing. And so there was wisdom in holding onto even the smallest of things just in case you needed it or your neighbor needed it.

Having had nothing in her formative younger years made my grandma deeply empathetic to those who might know any semblance of that kind of situation. That, coupled with her God-given gift for generosity, that was her surf board, that prompted grandma to respond a certain way one day in 1967.

She was in the church office talking to the secretary at a Presbyterian church in Cincinnati, and a woman with a couple of children comes in. They are hungry. The father was in the car with a couple other children. They had come from Georgia for a family funeral and the father had lost his job for choosing to come to this funeral. Grandma went and bought some groceries and then told the family to be there at the church the next morning. She'd figure some things out.

A few phone calls later she had folks donating food and clothing. She had folks assisting with job possibilities. Her efforts were so successful she was given a whole closet within that Presbyterian church that very week in which she could operate a Food and Clothing pantry for however long. Now mind, she had never done something like this and had no experience running any sort of operation of the church or business world or otherwise.

Ah, but she had a spiritual gift from God for generosity and she began stand upon that.

Soon, she needed two closets. And soon she needed a whole classroom in the church basement. And then she needed the entire basement of another church in the neighborhood. And eventually she needed a whole building dedicated just to the efforts of what became known as the Valley Interfaith Food and Clothing Center still in existence today in Cincinnati, OH as it provides food, clothing, job training and housing assistance.

Virginia Sedgwick Weatherbie.

Who are your Loises and Eunices? Whose sincere faith now lives in you? Who in your biological family or church family or both have you seen stand - amid plenty of reason for fear - you have seen them stand upon their gift from God and so you have seen the power and love of Jesus through them precisely because those rose and trusted Jesus? And even when they didn't trust, Jesus was faithful to work out the wobbles. Who are your Loises and Eunices?

It is tiring to be dragged by undertow for a prolonged period of time.

- The body wearies of fighting it constantly, the body tires of being bowled over by it.
- The body laments finding itself pulled quite far from where it actually wanted to be.
- And, in the final analysis, if you stay in that undertow too long the body exhausts and those particular waters quench the fire of faith - and all you are left with, in the words of Paul, "is a form of godliness - but no power."

The only way to deal with the undertow is to get onto another plane of reality altogether: namely, the Kingdom of God.

What is your God-given gift or gifts?

And what would it look like to stand in these fearful times not upon anger and vengeance, not upon a political platform or a bank account...but upon Jesus and specifically the gifts he has given us to steward and through which he is so faithful?

And if stepping out and standing forth is a terrifying prospect... let us take some time to remember our roots - the saints before us who have risked stepping in faith.

Then, as the water swells behind us, may their lives prove the extra measure of encouragement that draws our legs up to stand for such a time as this and discover the Spirit of power and love and self-discipline flowing through our being and offering that same Spirit unto the world.

Perhaps then one day our names shall join the likes of Eunice, Lois, and Virginia and sit upon the lips of those of future generations caught in the undertow, longing to be free. Amen.