

“GUARDING YOUR TREASURE”

Proverbs 3:13-18; II Timothy 1:3-14

One of the nice things for those of us lucky enough to have been in one congregation for many years is seeing our young people grow up in their Christian faith. Usually, if I can remember you all the way to your baptism, it means you did something that was amusing for the congregation, but not so much fun for your parents. I can remember funny or unusual instances for many of the people who are now young adults, a group of whom are starting college this weekend.

The scripture lesson for today also remembers a young man, one who is unique in scripture. We have two letters written to a young man named Timothy. He is the first of a kind because he is the first person we hear of in the New Testament who grew up learning his faith from his Christian family instead of encountering it as an adult. The letter to Timothy tells of his grandmother Lois, and his mother Eunice who taught him his faith. Timothy grew up in a world that ignored his religion at best. At the worst, Christians were ridiculed or persecuted.

The letters, I & II Timothy, give advice to a young man who was a Christian living in a non-Christian world. There are people today who are still persecuted or even killed for their faith, but luckily that is not an issue in our country. Instead, the advice given to Timothy can encourage us in a different situation, that of maintaining faith in our modern world. Our world, if not hostile, is at least not encouraging to our faith. The advice given to Timothy is something we need to hear again ourselves. This week as we think about and pray for our young people who are going away to school, let us look at our own faith, and thinking of renewal in a world filled with many distractions and temptations. Today's lesson reminds and encourages us to work to rekindle our faith, to guard our faith treasure, and of the way the Holy Spirit helps us to do so.

“Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” The advice to Timothy reminds us of the necessity to rekindle our own faith. That one word, “rekindle,” gives us a powerful image. Timothy was a faithful young man. At one time he must have been “on fire” for his faith, being baptized by the apostle Paul. For some reason, however, none of us are able to maintain these mountain top experiences in our day to day lives. Life crashes in on us. Our day to day existence requires our attention. It's not a bad thing; it is just the way it is. But we, like Timothy, are given a reminder that the fire of our faith must be fed in order to keep it going. I like the fire image, of having to add kindling piece by piece in order to get the fire going again when it has died down to ashes.

For me, one way to rekindle my faith is through worship. I respond to the hymns, the music, the architecture, the scripture, prayers and sermon. The staff here does its best to prepare for the morning, and we feel the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. Your kindling may be the same, or your faith may also respond to other things. For example, you may feel strengthened by the fellowship of other Christians, responding to things like Dine with Nine, or our Wednesday dinners,

or our new Christ Care groups which are forming. Perhaps you are strengthened by prayer and a contemplative life, doing daily devotions. Maybe what reaches you in faith is service to others, either by yourself or with a group. Whatever works for you, for you and your family, for you by yourself, or for you and your community, the key word is “work.” One thing that is for certain is that without steady work, any fire will die out. In the ancient world, fire was literally life, providing food, warmth, light and leading to your very existence, to your health and well being. For us, the word “rekindle” provides a strong image. We must work to renew and keep alive our faith which starts as a gift from God. We must work to maintain our spiritual life, the part of us that is vital to our well being.

A second interesting image that is found in today’s scripture passage is the one which calls us to “guard the good treasure entrusted to you.” It is clear from the gospels that this is not speaking of monetary treasure, but rather of the spiritual treasure we have received. Timothy lived in a world increasingly hostile to his faith. I maintain that we do also. Instead of having to guard our faith against physical attack, we have to guard against a world of ease and luxury, a world of increasing distractions.

I meet several months ago with some Christian Educators who were saying how hard it was to reach people because of their constantly in touch lifestyles. We live in a world where we can have constant texting, instant emails, and of immediate availability on our cell phones. Last night I saw an advertisement for a phone company with a split screen, having the same person on each side. On one side they paid close attention every moment, and were rewarded. On the other side they relaxed their vigilance for a moment, and then led a boring life. The tag line of the commercial was, “Every second counts!” Such stress!

I don’t think the cry, “What’s this world coming to!” is the response to take to our changing world. How many generations have asked that question? Our world is changing at an unbelievable pace, and I think there is no holding it back. I read a lot of news and science information each week. I learned that last month, for the first time, Amazon sold more electronic books than it did hard cover books. I found out that scientists are testing for actual physical changes in the brains of young people who grow up from babyhood using electronic media. For those of us who are older, each decade makes it harder for us to keep up.

One response to change is to guard our faith treasure by building a fence around it; digging a moat and putting in the alligators; by circling the wagons. Historically, this is what the Amish did in the 1700’s and 1800’s. It is what Hassidic Jews did in Europe in the 1800’s. I think to some extent, it is what Bob Jones University has been trying to do today, choosing an idealized decade, and trying to enforce its mores. Long skirts, no holding hands, no going to the movies. Find a time when you think life was easier, like in the 1950’s, and then build a fence to keep the evil world out.

The problem is, you cannot do that and be Presbyterian. We have a theological principal called “The Nine Marks of Membership.” I am sure not

many of you remember when it was in a book about our educational ministry which was mailed to you 10 years ago. The book is now put in new member packets, and these “Nine Marks” are one of the first things in the book. They form the basis and the outline for our Confirmation Class. They are not things you need to do to become a Presbyterian. Instead, they are things that, if someone looks at you and knows you are Presbyterian, they should see in your behavior. They are things like taking time to go to worship, to pray, to study, to give and to serve others. The final two are different than some denominations would have. Number 8 calls us to “live responsibly” in our personal and family relationships. That part is not controversial. But it continues on to say we are to live responsibly in our vocational relationships, in our political relationships, and in our social and cultural relationships. Mark #9 calls us to work in the world for “peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.”

Presbyterians believe that we have to be active in all aspects of the world. We are called to help change the world in order to help bring about the Kingdom of God. A moat or a fence is not an option. The challenge we face is that we have to guard our faith treasure while keeping the fences down. We can’t just decry the changes in society. We have to guard our faith while participating.

So, how do we do that? If I knew exactly, I would write a book and maybe make a lot of money from it, but I don’t know all the answers. I do know that our staff talks about the changing world all the time, and works to think and adapt church life to a world that is in flux. We try hard to help provide the tools and skills we all need to be faithful in this world. Before that can work, however, we have to believe it is possible to be faithful in the modern world, and more importantly, we all need to believe that it is important enough to do so. Timothy was given a sound reminder in the terrible, difficult, awful early years of Christianity. He was given this advice, filled with confidence: “For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, and of love, and of self-discipline.” As we adapt, as we strive, and as we work, we have to believe God gives us the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we can succeed. We don’t do this by sitting back, but with love and self-discipline.

I don’t know about you, but for me, self-discipline is not my strongest trait. When I went to seminary, and even today, all candidates for minister must undergo psychological testing. In the 1970’s when I went, they compared my profile to male ministers from the 1950’s, and their conclusion was that I was too “creative” to be a minister. This is because my thoughts and ideas pop constantly from my head. I go from one thing to the next every few seconds. The creativity part is good, but the self-discipline part is harder. You have your own personality traits, your own strengths and weaknesses. Whether it comes naturally to us, or whether it is harder for us to do, we are called by the scripture, in spite of our personality types, to live life showing love to others, and to have the self-discipline to make faith the center of our lives.

I know this is not easy to do. There are more attractive, fun, important, easy, and even lazy things calling to us. Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but our Session has a rule that in order for someone to be asked to teach Sunday School, they must have attended worship 12 times a year. (Please don't start attending less in order to avoid being called to volunteer!) Remember, we have 52 services, plus four special evening services a year, and yet you would be surprised how many people haven't been here 12 times in the last year. To paraphrase the comedian Jon Stewart, "You may be able to talk me into giving 10% of my income, but no way are you getting me to give up 50% of my precious weekend mornings!" Where children are concerned, I can relate to you. I have raised two boys. I know they do not always want to be here. For many of us in the past and for some of you now, coming to church was not an option. It was just something you did. Now, there are so many choices – weekend leisure, sports teams that meet four or five times a week. But faith is not optional. It needs to be central to our lives, and that means it takes time, and work, and self discipline.

Our Old Testament reading from Proverbs reminds us that wisdom & understanding are "like a tree of life to those who lay hold of her." We need to take the time to study; in worship, and in Sunday School, and in youth groups. We must become biblically and theologically literate. Some people my age that had children in the 1980's said that they did not want to put too much in their children's heads, and so they would not go to church, but would let their children grow up and decide their religion for themselves. It didn't work. In order to have faith, you must have a strong foundation. You need the self-discipline to study, to learn, and to think, all a part of those important Presbyterian Nine Marks of Membership.

In conclusion, I want to tell you something I read recently. As you probably know, there are some ancient books that did not make it into the Bible. There were problems with these books that made them not ring true in the minds of people in the early church. One of the oldest of these is the Gospel of Thomas, which we think was written in around the year 70. It was rejected by the church, but because it was written so early, some scholars wonder if some of the sayings of Jesus that are in it are authentic. This story is one of those saying. In it, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like a woman who was carrying a jar a grain home on her shoulder. The handle of the jar she was holding broke off, and so she turned the jar around and carried it by the other handle. Unknown to her, grain began to dribble out of the broken side a little at a time, so that by the time she got home, all the grain in the jar was gone. This was a warning 2000 years ago about the danger of letting our faith drain away.

In today's scripture reading, in the advice to young Timothy, we are reminded of the same dangers. We must work to rekindle our faith, or else face the possibility that it will turn to ashes. We must guard the treasure of faith, but as Presbyterians, do so without a moat or a fence. We can rely on our God given gifts: the power the Holy Spirit gives us to live a life of faith, the ability to

constantly show love in all that we do and say, and the self-discipline to keep our faith at the center of our lives in a world which is constantly calling us away. As we now rise to affirm our faith, as we dedicate our gifts and our offerings, may we also rededicated ourselves to the commitment and work necessary for faith renewal, remembering the gift of faith which was given to us by God's grace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.