

“The Task of God’s Gift of Love”

A Sermon for the People of Seaside Community Church

2 Timothy 1:3-14

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By Rev. Brad DeFord

Well, here we are again! You and me, talking about things that matter with words that must be said... Only this time, our context is different. This time, we are living in a world “between.” Pastor Paul has left. And we await the new pastor that God will send us. We are living “between...”.

This is my way of “framing” the grief we all feel. We are in mourning as a congregation. Our expectations that Pastor Paul would be with us even longer have been dashed. We may be experiencing some fears about what it will be like for us as a church without him—such as: Who will call on us when we are sick? Who will celebrate our lives when we die? Who will be our pastor until the “next” pastor is sent to us? We may be experiencing some anger: How *could* he leave us, anyway? And we may be experiencing some relief! At least we won’t be hearing about all the issues that Pastor Paul brought up that were so *annoying* to hear about! All of our sadness, our disappointment, our fear, and our anger—and many of the other feelings we have, too—are about our mourning, our grieving the loss of our pastor.

Now, you know me, and you know me to be of, shall we say, a “certain bent”? Well, one of the things I say to myself is: FEEL EVERYTHING! The pleasant and the unpleasant, the sad and the happy: *feel everything!* And I would say this to us now: At least here at the beginning of this time of being “in between” pastors, may we “feel everything,” and not tell ourselves that we should-- or should not-- feel one thing or another.

Once we understand ourselves to be grieving, then what? Well, it matters very much how we talk about what we are going through as a congregation. Specifically, it matters whether we speak in ways that leave God out, or whether we speak in ways that invite God in. For instance, I suspect that out of our feeling hurt, we kind of *blame* Pastor Paul for leaving. *How could he do that to us?*, we might be saying. And that’s OK. That way of talking is a common, typical way of talking. That’s OK. But there is no mention of God in that way of talking.

Instead, we could say, *God, I hurt, because you sent our pastor away from us, and I am not sure whether or when you will send another pastor to us!* See? Including God “in” means that, as we express our feelings, they become almost like a prayer...

Moreover, as we listen to ourselves when we include God “in,” we come to realize that, in this “in between” time, our trusting of God is going to be tested. Can we trust that God will act, that God will send us another pastor?

Ah... you see: in our spiritual lives, what this time is about has to do with our faith, and our confidence, in God. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away—but the Lord *will* giveth again! Blessed be the Name of the Lord!

One of the ways we can begin to hear God speaking to us at this time is to pretend that our Scripture passage, from 2 Timothy, is being spoken to each and to all of us. I am no Bible scholar, as Pastor Paul was. But I have a sense that, because the Apostle Paul was speaking sort of man-to-man with Timothy, most of the time this passage is read for what it offers in *personal* encouragement. That is fine and good, as far as it goes. We each need a little personal encouragement from time to time, especially in times like this!

But I hope we’ll hear the Apostle Paul speaking to each and all of us—so that we hear it both personally and *together* as a church. For it is how we respond together as a church during this in-between time that will matter the most for how God is able to act among and with us.

For the purpose of hearing Paul’s words as an encouragement to each and to all of us as a congregation, I want to focus primarily on verses 5-7.

I have said that we are in an “in between” time, and that it is during times like this that our faith can be tested. So it is important for us to hear together the first thing that Paul says to Timothy: he reminds him of the *lineage* of his faith. His faith is not *his* alone, of his own believing, of his own choice or volition. Rather, Timothy’s faith has a history: it has been passed down to him from his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice.

It is good for us to begin here, too, as Paul might, by reminding ourselves that our faith has a history. This church, as a witness for God in Jesus Christ, has a history on this corner in Torrance. And all of us are inheritors of that history! We participate in the great lineage of faith

that is Seaside Christian Church. It has been handed down to us—and *lives* in us, as Paul would say.

It is this lineage of faith that provides the basis for Paul to say to Timothy: “rekindle the gift of God that is within you!” *This* is the challenge of our present time, is it not? The challenge, as the old hymn used to say, “not to let the fire go out!”

We’ve just been through the opening of the XXI Winter Olympics. We’ve been reminded once again about how important it is to “pass the torch.” We can see the fear and anticipation at each moment when the lit torch is brought close to the unlit torch—will the fire be passed? Or will the fire go out?

Well, there is a danger in all of these in-between times in our lives that we will lose a little bit of the fire... Moreover, I want to be open with you, and to guess with you, that maybe during Pastor Paul’s 15 years here, maybe the fire diminished a bit? I have not been with you long enough to know, but my sense of congregations when there has been a long pastorate—and 15 or 16 years is a LONG pastorate—that a kind of complacency creeps in. So let me simply ask: Did a kind of complacency creep into this congregation? Was there in that wonderful status quo of a decade and a half, a sense that things were always going to be that way? Were there degrees of “taking for granted” that occurred?

Mind you, I don’t know! But I would say this: Complacency and taking for granted are just the kinds of attitudes that tend to put a damper on the fires of faith and service. If we have grown complacent as a congregation, then we might well indeed need to “rekindle the gift of God” that is within us. This in-between time is the right time for this “rekindling” to occur.

Which leads me to ask the question at the heart of this sermon: *How do we rekindle God’s gift?* Even putting the question that way makes me pause and want to reframe it—because it is not entirely up to US to rekindle God’s gift. It is up to us, AND it is up to God to be at work in us...

Let’s look at verse 7 to hear what I mean:

Paul writes: “*for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, and of love, and of self-discipline.*”

In this in-between time, it is important for us to remember all of this, and let's start with the first part: *God did not give us a spirit of cowardice*... As we go through this process of mourning that God has removed our pastor from us and sent him to serve another congregation, we can find ourselves intimidated by what lies ahead of us. At the present we have more questions than answers; we are aware of more uncertainties than certainties. It is both good and necessary to remind ourselves that our courage to be church does not come from our own making or because of our own merits. Rather, our courage to be church is itself a spiritual gift of God to us.

Paul senses Timothy's need to hear this—and then he juxtaposes a three-fold spiritual gift to counter balance our tendency to fear. In-between times are anxious times. We can easily feel that “spirit of cowardice”—but THAT spirit is NOT from God. Instead, in our helplessness and anxiety, Paul says, right off, God does give us a “spirit of power.”

This is only the first of the three-fold spiritual gift God gives us, but, especially here at the beginning of our in-between time, it may be the one we need to remind ourselves of the most. God gives us a “spirit of power.”

What does this mean, for each and for all of us, now?

Well, I think it means several things, some of them practical. My guess is that this is the first pastoral search many of us have been through—certainly the first in a decade and a half! I've got to believe that, as a congregation, we are not well-practiced in looking for a pastor, nor in opening ourselves up while God helps us in our search. This is Valentine's Day, and we have a cultural sense that Valentine's Day is for couples—which is to say, that Valentine's Day is for people who have already *found* someone. As a church, we can be forgiven for feeling ourselves to be a bit like a single person on Valentine's Day... without a pastor... Or like a widow or a widower—someone whose spouse has died...

So the “spirit of power” God gives us is meant to encourage and empower us to face this time in our life together as church by being bold! We are not to be cowed by what we do not know, nor are we to be overwhelmed by what we face, nor are we to be discouraged because there are no easy fixes for our situation. Instead we are to rely up the “spirit of power” God gives us, so that we do not become victims of our helplessness and fear, but rather encouragers of each other.

Moreover, at times like this, it is most important for us to have a sense that we are *together*. One of the things that can happen to a church when it has a long-term pastorate is, it can come to rely on *other people* taking care of our life together as church. So we rely upon the pastor, or we rely upon the elected leaders of our church—anyone but ourselves! But this is a time in our life together as church when we would do better less to seek to *be* served, than to seek to serve. This is why this gift of a “spirit of power” is given to us both as a congregation and to each and all of us—not just our elected leaders. At no time in our life together as church is it more important for us to live into our calling as “the priesthood of all believers.” When each of us allows ourselves to receive the gift of a “spirit of power,” we will together feel empowered by God to be the congregation God is calling us to be.

Here we come to the hard part of what the Apostle Paul is saying to us: we are each and all being empowered by God to serve for the sake of the life of this, our church. This is not an easy message to hear, let alone receive, let alone bring to action.

This past Advent I went to a concert given by the female choral group *Vox Femina Los Angeles*, in which one of my friends sings. It was wonderful Christmas music, inspiring and entertaining and well done. But one of their songs was new to me, and really stuck with me afterward. The title of the song was, “Now the work of Christmas must be done.”

It was a beautiful song and simple: the shepherds had returned to the fields; the wise men had gone back to their studies; the holy family had returned to Galilee; and the star no longer shone in the heavens. So *now* the work of Christmas needed to be done. The Gifts of Christmas had been received. Now the “work” of Christmas needed to be done!

I loved that song and its message: How often do we receive the gifts of Christmas—and God’s other gifts, without being willing to do the *work* of them?

When I was at The University, there was a professor who was both old and wise—or so it seemed to me at the time! His name was Al Pitcher, and he was quite the theologian, scholar and ethicist. As an ethicist, Al was especially concerned with our actions—about how things got done, and why. One of Al’s favorite sayings was this: “God never gives us a gift without also giving us a task.” Gift and task come together, Al used to say.

So yes, God gives us the gift of the “spirit of power”—and God also requires of us that we **USE** it! The gift of the spirit of power comes with the task to use it—for each of us to use it!

And that is how the “work of Christmas” comes to be done!

It is with that thought in mind that I want to move on to the second of the three aspects of God’s Gift to us, and that is Love. Not a “spirit of cowardice” but a spirit of Love. Perfect for Valentine’s Day, right?

Maybe so, maybe not... I don’t know of another of God’s Gifts that is as misunderstood within the church as this “spirit of love.” Most of the time we take that to mean that we are to “get along” with each other, which ends up meaning that the spirit of love we want to receive is one that makes us comfortable with being together in this place. Lots of times over my life as a minister, I’d hear congregants extol their own virtues as a church: “we are such a loving congregation,” they’d say. “We all get along so well...”.

And sometimes this was even true... (!)

But I’ve always wondered: is the true measure of God’s Gift of Love is whether a congregation gets along with each other? I wonder whether there isn’t another measure...

For instance, even now, after the publication of my book, I am still pursuing my researches in shame. So I’m reading along in this book by Donald Nathanson called, *Shame and Pride*, and he tells this little story about his growing up Jewish in Brooklyn. He says it is 1944, and for all that is going on in Europe against Hitler, his family, and the Jewish community in Brooklyn in general, is very afraid that they will become victims of anti-Semitic violence. So his mother gathers her children around her one night, and she tells them: “Look children, if people here start coming for the Jews the way they did in Europe—run right away to the Unitarian Church!”

Well, I can tell you, I’m reading this story and I’m wondering how the Jews in Brooklyn in 1944 could have felt threatened by anti-Semitism. But more, I’m wondering why Nathanson’s mother wanted her children to go to the *Unitarian* church! What was wrong with the Congregationalist church? Or the Evangelical and Reformed church? Or the Methodist church (which is the one I was raised in)? What made the *Unitarian* church so safe?

Well, I’m not sure, of course, but within the context of the gift of the spirit of love, maybe the Unitarians were less concerned whether they got along with each other, and more

concerned with whether people in the neighborhood knew that they could take refuge there—and be loved—in times of trouble.

So along those lines, I have to ask us: Are we the kind of church to which people would send their children for safety's sake in times of trouble? Could we so Love that the mothers in Torrance say, "Kids, if there's a problem, go to that little church on the corner of Ocean and 230th Street—you'll be safe there." You see, for me, if we were to have that sort of reputation, we really would be accepting the task that comes along with the God's gift of the spirit of love...

Now, finally, there is a third part to this gift of the spirit God does give us: power, and love—and self-discipline... This third part of God's spiritual gift might be the most challenging of all to accept. I say this because accepting the gift of the spirit of self-discipline means that each of us takes on more responsibility for our own spiritual growth.

This time of being "in between" is an excellent time for us to do this, of course. In my experience, we in the congregation speak too easily about our pastors being our "spiritual leaders"—so easily, in fact, that we often come to mean that our pastors sort of have to take responsibility for *our* spiritual growth!

Pastor's fall into this pattern, too, I think. Often pastors seem to think that they can single handedly *make* their parishioners grow spiritually.

The truth of the matter is, no one else can be responsible for our own spiritual self-discipline. And the pastor that thinks he or she can *make* their parishioners grow spiritually is going to fail miserably—because none of us can *make* another person improve. It may be self-evident, but *self*-discipline is something we have to discover in *ourselves*, by *ourselves*.

My children are my spiritual teachers, and perhaps my most public lesson in the limits I experienced as a parent in "making" my children do anything had to do with my efforts to "make" my son, Daniel, find a job! Year after year in high school and college, I would put my paternal pressure on, trying everything I could think of to incentivize Daniel's finding a job. After all, when I was in high school and college, I worked all the time, and many jobs, to support myself and my schooling. Why couldn't Daniel? Why *wouldn't* Daniel?

Well, as you all know, he wrote a column for the Daily Breeze. And because of that, our little father/son struggle became public! Instead of finding a job, he would mock my efforts to *make* him find a job!

And you know what? He was right! All of that “making” was only irritating him and annoying me. Now, the worm has turned, and he works for not one, not two, but three employers! Meanwhile, I am my own boss... And there are times I think it can be said of me: Just as they say a doctor who doctors himself has a fool for a patient, a man who employs himself has a fool for a boss!

Anyway... The point is that Daniel had to discover in himself his self-discipline. In the same way, this is our time, in our life together as church, when we don't have a pastor on whom we can put our responsibility for our spiritual growth, for each of us to discover in ourselves the spiritual gift of self-discipline!

In other words, this in-between time does not have to be a fallow time, when nothing happens for us as a congregation until we are sent someone to be our pastor. Quite the contrary! This is the perfect time for us to “rekindle” the Gift of God that is already within us. This is the perfect time for us to accept the spiritual gifts of power, and love, and self-discipline—that God has already given us! This is the perfect time for us to accept those gifts by also accepting the *tasks* that come with them.

Let us serve God in empowered and empowering ways!
Let us serve God by growing in love!

Let us serve God by practicing the self-discipline of our own spiritual growth, so that together, we grow our church from the inside out.

In all of these ways and more, may we “guard the good treasure entrusted to [us], with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” (v.14)

Amen.