

Rekindling

2 Timothy 1:3-14

Dakotas Annual Conference Opening Worship

June 9, 2011

Watertown, SD

At this opening worship, this is normally the time when I give my “Episcopal Address”, as it’s sometimes called. But today I would rather this message not be quite so formal. I would rather that in the next few minutes we have more of a conversation than an ‘address’.

This has been quite a year for us here in the Dakotas. It’s been a year of change – a year of great transition.

- We’ve been working closely with the good people of Minnesota as we prepare to receive Episcopal leadership as part of a “two point charge” with the Minnesota Conference. That’s a big change, and for some, a rather painful one.
- We’ve been living through all the normal ‘healthy chaos’ of a new Platform for Ministry, and with that,
 - We have seen budgets change ... district lines change ... programs change ... processes change ... personnel change;
- We’ve dealt with new challenges in our local congregations as we:
 - Work with others churches or ecumenical partners to create larger parishes;
 - As we prayerfully discern new ways to reach out and extend the United Methodist witness in our communities by Growing By One;
 - As we have looked honestly at the statistics and trends of the past 40 years – and looked into the future;
- Even the General Church is pushing us to change as we are being asked to hold one another accountable for growth in worship and small groups and outreach ministries;
- And then, to top it all off, we’ve experienced unheard of flooding in: Fargo/Moorhead, Minot, Devil’s Lake, Bismarck, Pierre, Yankton, Dakota Dunes, the James River Valley ... and innumerable places across these two states.

Many of you have heard me say this, but it’s true. There is a saying that is both a curse and blessing ... “May you live in interesting times.”

Well, we do.

So, first, let me commend you for your willingness to work with these changes.

I know - change is hard, and as we have lived into our new Platform for Ministry, I know many of you have felt the anxiety of that change:

- placing beloved programs into new hands ...
- or the uncertainty of a new form of budgeting ...
- or struggling to determine who does what.

So I mean it when I say “Thank you” for working together and for trusting your leadership during this time of ‘healthy chaos’.

And yet, the truth of the matter is ... I believe these changes are just the first of many to come.

I hope by now you have all heard of the Call to Action - the document from the Council of Bishops (and approved by the Connectional Table) – which outlines the direction for our work and ministry for the coming years.

You will find the key recommendations on pages 6 – 7 of the “Called to Act” brochure in your packets. But, in short they are to:

1. Revitalize congregations
2. Reform clergy leadership, development, deployment and accountability
3. Collect statistical data from all areas
4. Reform the Council of Bishops
5. Align the work and structure of the General Church

Friends, we are serious about making changes ... at all levels. And, without a doubt, these changes will directly impact this annual conference, our local churches, and our clergy and our leadership.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said:

“Indeed we find ourselves standing between two ages, the dying old and the emerging new.”
(June 19, 1965 at Antioch College)

That is exactly where we are.

So, in the midst of so much that is in flux, where do we find our anchor?

Where do we find the foundation upon which we stand as we move forward step by step?

What is our touchstone?

Listen again to the words of Second Timothy:

“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, a faith I am sure, still 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.”

The book of Second Timothy is a special little book.

Timothy was a gifted young man who travelled with Paul, and who was trusted enough by Paul that, on occasion he was sent by himself as Paul's emissary.

But in the situation of this pastoral letter, Paul has left Timothy behind at Ephesus with an awesome responsibility: to teach sound doctrines and to guide this congregation in the right way against such complex issues as Gnosticism and false prophets and heresies of many kinds. It was a huge task ... especially for a young and fairly inexperienced new missionary.

So Second Timothy was written as a personal letter to inspire and to strengthen this new, young pastor in a new and challenging place.

I chose this passage specifically for this year's annual conference because even though these words were written to Timothy – a young and some would say even timid pastor – they are words of advice that we here in the Dakotas, should also take to heart.

There are certain phrases that just seem to strike me as words we need to hear today – in this time. Phrases such as:

- **'I am grateful to God ... when I remember you';**
- **'I am reminded of your sincere faith';**
- **'I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you';**
- **'God does not give us a spirit of cowardice, but power and love and self-discipline';**

Phrases and words that can be a touchstone for us as we move forward into new territory – and new ways of being the Church.

For you see, the change we need to see within the church ... the change that needs to happen if we are to truly make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world ... is a change that starts right here – in this room – in our hearts.

It is change that can't be accomplished through new programs or initiatives.

It can't be done with a new structure.

It can't happen simply because we are told it must happen if the United Methodist Church is to thrive – and not just survive.

But I believe it will ONLY happen when WE are once again on fire with the Holy Spirit ourselves.

As Paul wrote to Timothy, I AM grateful to God when I think of you. You are doing some amazing things!

I have seen:

- new ministries to our Native brothers and sisters;
- wonderfully creative forms of worship;
- a willingness to examine our own local churches and to look closely at those places where we need to improve through NCD or our Equipping Link's Boot camp;
- new faith communities and ministries.

I AM grateful ... and yet ... that is only a start. It barely scratches the surface of what we can do – and what we should do.

So ... what holds us back?

Two things:

1. Fear -

Fear of getting out of our comfort zones and doing something we've never done before.

Fear of failure.

Fear of criticism.

Fear that we're not up to the task and we'll be found wanting.

2. Passion – or rather lack of passion.

Lack of passion from burnout;

From being burned;

From weariness;

From disappointment;

From depression and discouragement.

But Paul reminds Timothy – no ... Paul reminds us – that our foundations in faith are solid. Something called us here. Something drew us – to faith ... to ministry ... to the church. Can we remember what that was?

When I first came to the Dakotas I felt a little like Timothy. I had truly left everything and everyone I knew behind. I was faced with a ministry I had never done before, in a place I had never been before, with people I had never met. And there truly were moments when I wondered if I could do all that was expected of me. Truthfully, those moments still exist.

But what heartened me was the knowledge of the faith of those who knew me best ... those people throughout my journey of faith whose faith strengthened mine when mine was weak ... those who

believed in me when my own belief in myself faltered ... those who trusted me when I found it hard to trust myself.

And friends, those thoughts – those people – those reminders – are still a touchstone for me.

And the same is surely true for you.

Who brought you to faith?

Who encouraged you when you doubted?

Who challenged you as you grew in your faith and love of Jesus Christ?

Those are your foundations ... and, as Paul reminds us ... that strength is still there. That faith is still there. And I believe ... that passion is still there as well.

So ... rekindle it!

“Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.”

As one commentary said:

“God does not regret nor withdraw his gifts, but they can become ineffective through one’s neglect of them. Therefore Timothy is encouraged to **“rekindle”** the gift of God.”

Rekindle ... Relight ... Renew ... Revitalize ... Revive ... the passion for the work of Jesus Christ. That’s what’s needed.

John Wesley in his sermon on Zeal said this:

“There are few subjects in the whole compass of religion that are of greater importance than this. For without zeal it is impossible either to make any considerable progress in religion ourselves, or to do any considerable service to our neighbor. And what is the nature of zeal in general? And of true Christian zeal in particular? The original word means “heat” – such as the heat of boiling water. True Christian zeal be nothing but the flame of love.”

“A flame of love” for Jesus Christ and his gospel ... for a gospel we truly must believe can change the world.

At our Sessions Committee meeting last summer, Ryan Mutzenberger shared a devotional based on our Annual Conference scripture. I still remember what was said. He said:

“When I think about “rekindle” I don’t think about starting over or starting new; I think about stirring up the embers in a campfire ... the fire is not cold or extinguished, it’s still warm and it can still be felt. That ember will eventually die out if a wind, a wind of the Spirit isn’t blown upon it. ... Once the ember is brought back into the fire, that ember sparks again and will lead to a blazing roaring fire.”

Rekindle.

When Paul says “**rekindle**” he believes the fire is still there ... it just needs to be fanned into flame once again.

I say again ... the change must start with us.

Do you remember in 2006 at Annual Conference – here in Watertown – I laid out for us what I called my Transformation Expectations? You can find them in the front of our Journal. The foundation of that list is based on the belief that true transformation must start with us and our personal faith journeys.

At that time I asked each of us to:

- spend time every day in prayer –
- to participate in regular worship –
- to be part of a small group for spiritual growth and accountability –
- to tithe –
- to read –
- to work for a healthier lifestyle.

These expectations are still valid, for they can keep alive the flame – the fire – the passion for this work of Christ to which we are all called. And they are especially important as we prepare for and step into the changes are before us.

So ... Why are we making all these changes?

Not simply because it’s fun.

Not so we, as local churches can continue to exist ...

Not so the Annual Conference can have more members and more money ...

Not even so the United Methodist Church as a denomination can survive.

But we do this –

- because we believe in the transforming and saving power of Jesus Christ.
- because that power can change hearts and lives.
- SO THAT ... the reign of God will be evident on this earth.

With apologies to the Apostle Paul, let me paraphrase these words of Second Timothy:

“I am grateful to God and I remember you in my prayers. I know your tears – I know the hardships of ministry – I know the very real isolation many of you live with every day. You fill me with joy because even in the midst of your hardships, I can still see your deep faith, a faith that brought your ancestors to this land of amazing extremes – a faith that built the many

churches out on the prairie – a faith that struggled and even thrived in the midst of those hardships – a faith I know, still lives in you.

It's for this reason I remind you to remember that faith that is still within you ... and rekindle it! For remember that God does not want you to be timid, but bold and powerful and loving.

So keep at your work – this faith and love rooted in Christ. It's as sound now as it was the day you first heard it. Guard this precious thing placed in your custody – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit.”

Friends, may the Holy Spirit blow upon the embers of all our hearts.

May that fire be rekindled throughout the Dakotas and roar across these prairies, **SO THAT**...

- The United Methodist witness will live and thrive, and **SO THAT**...
- The transforming and saving gospel of Jesus Christ might set this world ablaze.