

Tend the Fire
A Sermon for October 2, 2016
2 Timothy 1:6
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

My sermon for today is entitled, “Tend the Fire.”

Jesus’ words to us this morning from Luke chapter 17 are a hard-on-the-ears reminder that there is nothing we can do to put God into our debt. The disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, and Jesus says, in essence, you don’t need any more faith-- you have everything you need. You just need to do the things that you’re commanded to do.

I want to leave that thought in the background as we again draw our attention to the writing of Paul-- the one who had been a great enemy of Christ, but whom God chose to bring the good news about Jesus to the non-Jewish world. Paul has a coworker-- a young protégé named Timothy. And as Timothy is engaged in passing on the faith that was passed down to him by his mother and his grandmother, Paul gives him this advice:

“I remind you to *rekindle* the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands”

In the early church, at times, God’s Holy Spirit did not come into believers until an apostle came and laid hands on an individual. An apostle was someone who knew the risen Christ personally and who had been sent out to proclaim the good news. Perhaps in sending an apostle to lay hands on new believers and confirm their faith, God was ensuring

that the one receiving the Holy Spirit was properly instructed by one who knew Christ personally.

And so Paul tells Timothy, “I remind you to *rekindle* the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands.” Now, wouldn’t it be nice if Paul were here to bestow God’s gift on each of us through the laying on of hands? But we don’t have Paul. What we have is the grace of God, the teaching of the apostles, and one another. But I believe that Paul is speaking here a general truth to every Christian, and so I’d like to focus on the image evoked by the word “rekindle.”

“How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believe.” You know that line, right? Many of us are here today because at some point in our lives, perhaps it was 60 years ago or 6 years ago, we had an experience of God’s grace. God grace, which is the presence of God in our lives, drew us to come to God. God’s presence convicted us not only of the many individual times that we have failed to love our God and our neighbor, but also of the ways that Sin compels us-- or as the new testament would say, enslaves us.

With that burden of sin and guilt, and perhaps some amount of desperation-- God’s miracles always seem to happen in times of desperation-- we came to God in prayer. And amazingly, we were raised up into new life with a deep, surprising sense of God’s love. Do you remember how precious that grace appeared the hour you first believed? Perhaps it was like a fire was ignited in you.

Having quoted Amazing Grace, I have to take a quick aside. Do you remember falling in love for the first time? It's as if that song, "God Blessed the Broken Road" was a song written only for you. In fact, for many of us, *all* love songs became songs that spoke truth. Before you fell in love, they were just sentimental words, but once you fell in love, all the words made sense.

My brothers and sisters that's what happens when someone falls in love with Jesus. All the words make sense. As the disciples said after meeting Jesus on the Emmaus road, "Weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?" I keep going back to old hymns, the hymns of Charles Wesley and others, because they resonate so much with my understanding of scripture and with my experience of God's grace. I think I probably quote one Wesley hymn to you a week.

But I'm not a hymn fan, I'm just into Jesus. I'm not a fan of prayer-- I just want to spend time with Jesus. I'm not really a fan of reading scripture. I'm just into Jesus! I wasn't naturally predisposed to being a pastor-- God knows it!-- but I fell in love with Jesus and all the words came true. God lit a fire in my heart and I'm doing my absolute best to ensure that it doesn't go out. "How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!"

God's grace is nothing less than the Holy Spirit's working in our lives. And when Holy Spirit comes into you, gifts come too. God's flame touches us, and something inside us begins to smoulder. What gift did God ignite in you? What is your gift?

You might not think you have a gift, but if someone came along and accused you of not being gifted in any way, I imagine you'd rise up and defend yourself! You'd find something to say!

So in my remaining time, I'd like for us to consider three things: what is your gift? How do we rekindle it? And what are the reasons for rekindling it?

What is your gift?

The scripture is clear that there is one primary gift that is given to those who confess Christ as their Savior and their Master-- and that is nothing less than the Holy Spirit itself. But the scriptures also speak about the many gifts of the Spirit. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12 that these gifts are all given by the same Spirit for the common good. In various places Paul lists some of them: prophecy, ministry, teaching, preaching, giving, diligence, cheerfulness, healing, discernment, and others.

Common to the gifts that the Spirit gives is that they are all witness to the good news that in Jesus the Messiah, God was reconciling the world to himself. All of these gifts serve, in one way or another, to demonstrate to others that God is good news in your life, and that you want others to experience that good news as well.

What gift has God given you that can show others that God is good news in your life? You might not be a pastor or a preacher, but if you've fallen in love with Jesus, God has given you the means to proclaim the good news. If God has done something for you, then you have a story to tell. What's your story? Remember, people may be able to critique your philosophy, or your scientific knowledge-- they can challenge your

views and your stated facts-- but no one can ever take your story away from you.

What has God done in your life? Celebrate that! Share that! That's the gift that God has given to you. People can say whatever they want about, but it's your story.

Now, you may have gifts other than your story, and you must search for those. But if your life has been at all touched by Jesus, then you have a story. And the best way to ensure that your story goes away and is useless is to not tell it. Which brings us to our second question.

Why do we have to rekindle the gift?

I confess, my brothers and sisters, I was never a big camper or a backpacker. I wasn't ever a boy scout. But, boys will be boys, and I've built quite a few fires in my life. You and I both know how to keep a fire going. You've got to feed it. You have to give it fuel.

Ideally you've got cured, dry wood sitting not too far from the fire, so you just have to get up and put a new log on it periodically. But sometimes, when you're out in the wilderness, you've just got to gather anything you can find that seems like it's dry enough to burn. A few twigs from here, some nasty pine branches from over there. You just keep feeding it, because you know that if you let that fire go out, you've got to start from scratch. We didn't start the fire, but we can let it go out.

Actually, short of throwing a big bucket of water on a fire, really the only way a fire will stop is if you neglect to give it fuel. Have you neglected to give your gifts fuel, my brothers and sisters?

If you have, then you'll soon find yourself cold and burnt out. You'll be unable to do any work for God with power, love, and self-control that the Holy Spirit brings. Feed the fire before it goes out, my brothers and sisters! It'll happen before you know it.

If you neglect to fuel the fire, you'll soon be left with a pile of cold ash. But praise God for being patient with us. I've been amazed how long little glowing embers can stick around. Maybe you've seen it happen before. The fire will look completely burn out, but if you go up to it and very carefully *ppph*, you'll see it. A few glowing embers.

What you do with them? Well I can tell you what you don't do. You don't walk away from them! Then it really will burn out. You also don't throw a log on them. That will snuff them out. It's not ready for that yet.

You take the smallest, most delicate kindling. Tiny little pieces of grace. And you place them delicately over the ember. You have to proceed carefully. You fan the ember ever so slightly, giving it just enough oxygen, until-- poof!-- fire. You celebrate the fire, but you can't celebrate for long. If you don't act quickly the fire will burn out.

I've seen this so often and it's always tragic. Someone rekindles their gift-- and their love and service for God is burning brightly. They think they're set. They get back to business as usual. But without any heavier fuel, the fire burns out quickly, and you're back to square one. And so you put some tiny little twigs on it. Something with just a bit more substance to strengthen the flame and give it enough fuel to start igniting some bigger stuff. Then you put bigger sticks on, and before

you know it, your fire is able to ignite a big log. And then, seeing your roaring fire, people come from far away. They've come for marshmallows.

With this image in mind I want to give you my 5 steps for rekindling the gift that God put in you:

1. Get the ash off. It's not helping anyone. That's yesterday's fuel that's been burnt up. You can't rely on it any more. It's spent. And relying on it is pointless, because you've got to stoke the fire anew with new fuel. So blow off the old ashes. All that stuff that you did years ago, or last week, or yesterday. It's ash now. Get the ash off.

God needs to be involved in this process. Take a walk-- literally. Or kneel down. Or just lift up yours eyes to God. Ask God to remove the things that are keeping your gift some being rekindled.

2. Look for the ember. Now that the ash is cleared away, you must look for the glowing ember. Where is your God-given fire? Ask God to show you where your gifts are. Don't be tempted to confuse someone else's gift for your own. You need to be both hopefully and honest as you search for the gift to be rekindled.

We could aimlessly place kindling everywhere, but it's very unlikely that anything would actually catch. We need to search carefully for that glowing ember. This is the gift that you have been given you to serve your God and your neighbor.

3. Add kindling. The best way to ensure that an ember of a gift grows into a full fire is to use it. Seek opportunities to use it.

Consider how you might put your gifts and talents to use out of love for God and neighbor. Don't be afraid at what will happen when you use your gift. You have to start somewhere! Start small, because you don't want your ember to be snuffed out, but start somewhere!

4. Add fuel to the fire. You've found your gift. You've nurtured it and now it's a very small blazing fire. Don't just leave it like it is. You're only a little while away from it burning out if you don't feed it better. How do you do this? Consider how you need to offer yourself in some new way to your family, your friends, your co-workers, or your church? What else should you be doing for Jesus. The little stuff you were doing before was good, but you need some bigger sticks to burn.

But don't just feed the fire. Try to make it better. Keep learning about your gift. Keep growing spiritually so that your gift remains connected to God's purposes. And if you have trouble doing that, get a poker-- sometimes our souls need a poker, my brothers and sisters! Find someone who can see what parts of the fire are not burning brightly and help you deal with them. Don't be satisfied a haphazard fire. Poke the fire. Stir it up.

5. Share the marshmallows, the fruit of your fire. The blazing fire of your gift is not just to warm you up and make you feel good. It is to draw others in and feed them, and not just with marshmallows.

As I close, let us consider the final question. Why go to all this trouble? Why rekindle the gift?

The answer takes us back to our Gospel reading. We do it because we love our Master and we want to obey his commands. And he has commanded us to use the faith and the gifts that we have been given.

Jesus gave his all for us. Jesus didn't hold anything back you. Jesus burnt himself out completely, dying on the cross, in order that the Spirit might ignite in you a love of God, and gifts to serve. And just as a bride honors the groom by proudly displaying the ring that the groom bought, we honor the gifts that Jesus gives us because Jesus bought them for us-- at a very high price. Because we've fallen in love with him.

And so we don't hold anything back. We don't worry about what others will say when we use our gift. We simply tend to the flame, honor the gift, and seek to be obedient to our calling.