

Kindling Unity
2 Timothy 1:1-14
© Stacey Steck
Preached October 3, 2010 at San José, Costa Rica

Oh, were it only as simple as Lord Chesterton put it when he said, “A light supper, a good night’s sleep, and a fine morning have often made a hero of the same man who, by indigestion, a restless night, and a rainy morning would have proved a coward.” Perhaps the Rev. Terry Jones, that pastor in Florida, was a victim of chronic indigestion, and a year’s worth of restless nights and rainy mornings when he decided to burn the Quran last month, for he certainly proved himself a coward. He certainly proved he had not read 2 Timothy lately, for if he had, he would have remembered that “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

I am not generally in the habit of criticizing a brother in Christ, and to do so on World Communion Sunday when we celebrate our unity in Christ is even more unseemly, yet our brother Jones has made of himself such a fine example of Christian cowardice that it is hard not to jump on the bandwagon, even these many weeks later. I suspect, actually, that it is precisely this type of passage that the Rev. Jones read to convince himself of the rightness of his actions, and I don’t mean the part about “rekindling.” I suspect that he really believed he was showing that he was not ashamed of the Gospel, that he was suffering for the Gospel, that he too was a herald for the Gospel, that he was holding to the standard of sound teaching

of the Gospel, and that he was guarding the good teaching of the Gospel, all the things that Paul was instructing Timothy to do in our passage tonight. The only problem is that the Gospel he was defending wasn't the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but rather the gospel of righteous anger, nationalism, and false religious superiority.

I raise the story of Pastor Jones not to vilify him, but to see what we can learn from the experience, especially in light of our reading tonight from 2 Timothy; Jesus often said, "Go and do likewise." With Pastor Jones, we are reminded to go and do otherwise. With apologies to all who may have thought he was a courageous crusader for Christianity, I think that the Rev. Jones instead exhibited the cowardice of someone who defines himself by criticizing others, whose idea of power is that of match and gasoline, whose love is limited only to those just like him, and who displayed self-discipline or self-control only when virtually the entire world was arrayed against him, none of which look like expressions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to which Paul was encouraging Timothy to cling. So let us take a look at the key elements of Paul's reminder to Timothy that "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, and of love, and of self-discipline," and see what Jesus and Paul did with them.

I said that the Rev. Jones exhibited the cowardice of someone who defines himself by criticizing or describing others. Rather than limit himself to describing and acting on his own faith and belief in Jesus Christ, Jones found it necessary to bring Islam into the conversation. It was not enough to proclaim the words of his

own Bible. He needed to criticize the words of someone else's. I think a key attribute of cowardice is the construction of our own identity based on the characteristics of other people, rather than our own. This cowardice is revealed when we lack the "courage of our convictions," and an intimate and secure knowledge of what we ourselves believe, and rely only on what others tell us to believe, or claim we must believe. It is exhibited in blaming rather than responsibility-taking. Pastor Jones' church was not known internationally for its ministry of caring and compassion, derived from a confident place of humility and service. But it became known internationally as a place of division and discord, derived from its need to describe and condemn the sins of others, rather than demonstrate their own virtues. It is here we see a striking difference with the ministry of Jesus. First of all, Jesus always defined himself with "I am" statements, with "The kingdom of heaven is like" statements. Sure, he commented on the shortcomings of the religious and political establishments of his time, but only when they came to him, trying to trick him. But beyond defining himself verbally, he did so simply by living the courage of his convictions, pursuing his course for its own sake, not in opposition to others. Jesus' ministry is frequently viewed as an alternative to the religiosity of his day, that he came to show them another way. I think rather that it stood on its own merits, that it always existed, and that the hollow practices of the day were the unfortunate alternative to the authentic expression in Jesus.

Paul begins with a negative characteristic in cowardice, but quickly moves to positive ones, power being the first of three. Paul knows well God's power expressed through and among human beings, from earthquakes opening prison doors to venomous snakebites that do no harm. He himself healed the crippled and raised the dead in Jesus' name. Indeed, in his own life, he saw the sin in taking matters destructively into his own hands, his persecution of the early church before his conversion a heavy burden on his soul, and a lesson learned. Although he had changed sides, he no longer tried to express power through violence. In Roman temples, Paul preached Christ rather than topple statues of idols. In Roman captivity, he preached freedom in Christ rather than freedom through violence. Paul had learned that although Jesus had all the powers of the angels at his disposal, he revealed the power of God in mercy, compassion, and healing. Let us hope the Rev. Jones turns from matches and gasoline and comes to learn the same wise use of God's power that Paul did.

Next Paul lists the spirit of love as a gift of God. Perhaps no virtue of the Christian faith has had more said about it than love, beginning with the Apostle Paul himself. Love is indeed "a many-splendored thing," one of its greatest splendors being its expression in hospitality. Whereas Pastor Jones prefers a barbeque of books on the front lawn of the church, Jesus preferred a barbeque of fish on the beach, and a banquet of bread shared among five thousand. Jesus showed the spirit of love by eating and spending time with those the rest of the

world considered pariahs, rather than increasing the distance between them. Jesus endured criticism for closing the gap, rather than widening it, for including the so-called “unclean,” rather than condemning them. Jesus’ love was expressed by allowing himself to be torn down so that we might be built up, rather than tearing down others so he might be built up. These are lessons we need to relearn every day in a cultural environment which seems to promote circling the wagons against the other, rather than embracing them.

Finally, Paul recommends to Timothy the exercise of the gift of self-discipline, another word for self-control or moderation. Invoking perhaps his earlier advice to the church in Corinth to put limits on their freedom in Christ, he reminds Timothy that just because we have the freedom to do something doesn’t mean it is necessarily a good idea to exercise that freedom. This was his argument about eating meat sacrificed to idols, a liberty in Christ that created a stumbling block for others. Pastor Jones would have been well-served by rereading those sage words, and applying them to the freedom of the religion he invoked in the days leading up to September 11. A bit of moderation might have helped overcome the stumbling blocks many have to Christianity instead of creating even more.

Indeed, the great and ironic legacy of the Rev. Jones is that it may have created more Christian unity than any other event in recent memory. That this unity was in condemnation is regrettable, but it just may serve to remind us that we have much in common, first and foremost the spirit of power, love, and self-

discipline given to us by God through Jesus Christ, but also the living out of those gifts among one another, and in the world. There may be no better day to remember this than on World Communion Sunday where we see God's power, love, and self-discipline at work in the sacrament as we remember the work and grace of Jesus Christ. In this feast is the power of God to reveal to us yet again the grace that saves us. In this feast is the love of Jesus Christ who gave himself for us. In this feast is the self-discipline of being faithful to Christ's commandment to remember him in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. In this sacrament, we find ourselves at once being unashamed heralds of the gospel, holding on to the standard of sound teaching we have received, and guarding the good treasure that has been entrusted to us, the gospel of Jesus Christ for all the world. Let us then rekindle the gift of God that is within us, and enjoy it with one another at the Lord's table. Amen.