

A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, World Communion Sunday, October 6, 2013, 20th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis I, and all who lead the church in our care of the poor, and always to the glory of God!

“Who Inspires Your Life?”

II Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Faith is the centerpiece of our reading from our scripture texts today. In Habakkuk (which we didn't hear), the prophet tells people to write down their faith vision, post it and make it accessible and easy to grasp even for those running through the streets! In II Timothy, Paul writes to Timothy to rekindle the fire of faith which has been given to him by his mother and grandmother. In other words, Faith must come alive for Timothy through prayer, study, and conviction - not because he was told to be a certain way by his mom and grandmother. He has to own this faith as his own. Jesus speaks of the Parable of the Mustard Seed in Matthew, Mark and Luke. While each parable is small, all focus on the power of God to do amazing things if we have faith the size of a mustard seed.

For a moment, let's look at the tiny mustard seed.

The Mustard Seed is tiny in comparison with so many other seeds. Nevertheless, it produces a tree which grows to great size and gives the world a wonderful spice. This spicy seed is the source of many stories across all three Abrahamic faiths. In the Qur'an, Allah states that the scales of justice will be established on the Day of Judgment and no soul will suffer the least injustice. Even the equivalent of a mustard seed will be accounted for because God is the most efficient reckoner (Sura 21, The Prophets).

In Judaism, the Talmud compares the knowable universe to the size of a mustard seed to demonstrate the world's insignificance and the importance of humility. The great Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides writing in the 12th Century said that when universe was created it was the size of a mustard seed and expanded from there. Faith, the size of a mustard seed can change the world... and perhaps the universe itself.

It was a growing “mustard seed” faith that Paul saw in Timothy. In this letter to his young co-worker, Paul offers encouraging words so that Timothy might carry through with the work to which he had been called. In the Book of Acts we learn that Timothy was from Lystra in Asia Minor, the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother. Eunice became a Christian and that apparently introduced Timothy to the faith. Elsewhere in Acts Timothy is mentioned as a companion to Paul in his missionary travels.

In II Timothy, Paul gets personal. He speaks directly to his young understudy. It is a sincere correspondence between an experienced worker and his junior colleague. Timothy is really young (probably in his 20's) and has been given responsibly for a group of churches. Part of his work is to preserve his collection of congregations from destructive influences without and from divisions within.

Endurance would certainly be a critical quality for such a leader, for the task was not an easy one. So Paul encourages Timothy to rekindle the gift of God within him. He should never be reluctant to witness for the Lord and he must be willing to endure suffering for the cause of Jesus.

Near the end of the letter Paul says in chapter 3:10-13:

10-13 You've been a good apprentice to me, a part of my teaching, and my manner of life, direction, faith, steadiness, love, patience, troubles, and sufferings—suffering along with me in all the grief I had to put up with... And you also well know that God rescued me! Anyone who wants to live all out for Christ is in for a lot of trouble;

there's no getting around it. Unscrupulous con men will continue to exploit the faith. They're as deceived as the people they lead astray. As long as they are out there, things can only get worse. (in Eugene Peterson's The Message).

In other words: follow my example as the old dog in this pack. God has seen me through a lot of suffering along the way, and I know God will rescue and protect you, too. By the way, watch out for people who draw you in and do you in with their words and actions.

In other words, Have Faith in God alone! God will deliver you! This is sobering but encouraging counsel from Paul to Timothy. It's a way of keeping him going when he will be tempted to give it all up. Here, Paul demonstrates great confidence in Timothy – showing faith in him – as he points to faith in God.

Faith – so clear and powerful - that it can be seen while we are running, faith- so clear and so powerful - that grows from virtually nothing into a beautiful creation of God's making, faith – so clear and so powerful - that is founded in family but grows through hardship into something belongs to you. Faith witnessed. Faith growing. Faith inspired by others and inspiring others, too. Faith!

Paul inspired Timothy's faith and Timothy inspired Paul faith.

So who inspires your faith? Who inspires you to be kind? To be loving? To be gracious? To be generous?

Recently, I have found tremendous inspiration from Pope Francis. I find his words, his spirit and his presence a breath of fresh air for every person in the world. He is humble, honest, gentle, and loving.

Last month, while flying back from Rio to Rome, he spent two hours chatting with reporters on the airplane. His comments on “not judging” gay people were radical. When he said, “*Who am I to judge someone else?*” All I could think was – “*You're the Pope! You are sitting in the most famous seat of judgment in the history of Christendom! For two millennia that what pope have done! They*

judge others.” But in this man, I see true humility.

This week he continued to surprise everyone with words like, *“The church needs to mellow out on issues of abortion and judging gay people.* He continued, *“The church needs to focus on the poor and reaching out to the lonely and the lost.”* I am so impressed! God IS still speaking.... through the voice of the Bishop of Rome! The UCC needs to send all our “God is Still Speaking banners to Rome and wrap them around the Vatican!

Pope Francis inspires me with his tremendous generosity of heart and mind. Now, he could use some work on women and ordination, but he is making great headway as a first year pope!

But I need look no further than the pews of First Church to find my inspiration for faith. Daily, I am inspired by you - the great givers of First Church. Like Francis, you choose not to judge others and you extend well to the poor and those who are lonely and lost. I am also inspired by the generosity of a growing number of our members. You inspire me as you step up your financial support and grow as stewards. You inspire me in your music, your teaching, your service to others, your living of God’s word in your life. You give and give and give some more. It is my hope and prayer that more and more of us in the coming weeks and months are inspired to be great givers, too.

As we all step into this season of stewardship, I really want you to think about who inspires you to be a great giver. Think about the people in your life – past and present – who teach you to give! Moreover, what example are you setting for others to follow you? How are becoming the great giver who will inspire others?

Who inspires your life?

This is an age old question. But, it is as new and fresh as this morning’s sunrise. As we come to the table of grace this morning and receive the bread of heaven and the cup of blessing, I pray that you will be a part of the “Mustard Seed” Conspiracy of Faith – growing from just a tiny seed of faith to huge, transformative person

of generosity and faith. I pray that Christ will inspire you to new depths of love and generosity and to new heights of giving. Thanks be to God for faith and the inspiration of those faithful ones in our lives who move us to be great givers. Amen.

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