

“A Spirit of Power, and Love, and Self-Discipline”

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Richard C. Allen

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South Glastonbury

Connecticut

When I read through Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy, I tried putting myself into Timothy’s shoes, tried imagining that I am the one receiving this epistle. When I reached the verse where the author says, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and self-control,” I felt challenged and inspired. It made me want to reflect on these three gifts: power, love, and self-control.

There is a hint in the Letter that Paul has been checking up on young Timothy to see whether he has been using these spiritual gifts for the common good, or whether he has been neglecting them. Paul wants to see that Timothy and church leaders who come after him don’t shy away from exercising the gifts of the Spirit.

So, this morning, I invite us all to put ourselves in Timothy’s shoes and to reflect on how we use or don’t use the Spirit’s gifts of power, love, and self-control.

Everyone here has a certain amount of power. This morning I am thinking of the power to lift up, to lift up somebody who is down, to raise up somebody who has failed, to pick up somebody who has grown weak. When we read of power in the newspapers, it’s usually been used to crush somebody. But when we read of power in the Bible, it’s usually used to raise up somebody. Jesus, for example, raises Lazarus from death. He raises children to a place of value. He raises women to a place of respect.

Many of you will remember Walter Buckingham. Walter is one of those unforgettable characters. He is unforgettable because of the way he used his power. He used his power by volunteering in the Connecticut Prison Association. He went into the prisons to meet inmates at their lowest possible moments, and had a way of lifting them up, re-establishing their hope, giving them a reason to complete their sentences and to get on with their lives. Walter was maybe the most powerful man I ever met. He used his power to raise up those who had made poor choices, inviting them to find self-respect once again. “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but a spirit of power.”

“God gave us a spirit of love.” This morning, I am thinking of the power of love to support family life. Love is what it takes to make a family, to support a family, and to nurture families everywhere. I didn’t need my bachelor’s degree in Sociology to figure this out. I knew this as a child. It is just so obvious that families thrive where love abounds. We can get by without a TV or without electricity or without i-pads, but families fall apart when love is in short supply.

I want to introduce you to Newt and Myrtle Brummett. The Brummetts had moved up to South Dakota from Nebraska, had Homesteaded on 40 acres, then grew their farm to sustain their family. By the time I met them they reached their mid-eighties, it was time to give up the cattle and the wheat and move into town. None of their children or grandchildren wanted to take over the farming operation. The value of their land had reached an unheard of \$360 per acre. At that price, even the savviest horticulturist would struggle to turn a profit. Newt and Myrtle considered the easy life they could have by selling their land at that price. Then, they considered the demands of love and their love of family life, in particular. They put their farm up for sale at half the price of its market value, hoping another family would thrive there. They moved into town.

Mark and Twyla Schuler, recently married at the Congregational Church, bought that farm and raised their family out there on what is still known to this day as The Brummett place. Each time I drive by this farm on Highway 212 in Ziebach County, I think if it as the love farm, as a symbol of how love, when valued more than money, transforms family life. Paul's Letter to Timothy forces us to look carefully at how we choose to love families into wholeness; not only our own immediate family, but all the families in God's world.

"God gave us a spirit of self-control." When our four children were very young, we had a record player and a 33 1/3 long playing record with nine songs based on the nine gifts of the Spirit named by the Apostle Paul in one of his other Letters. Self-control is named as the ninth spiritual gift. The refrain in the song on our children's record went like this: "Self-control is just controlling yourself. It's listening to your heart, and doing what is smart. Self-control is the very best way to go, so I think I'll control my self."

"Listening to my heart, and doing what is smart." I believe that's what Paul was reminding young Timothy to do. Nowadays, Paul's same letter would sound something like this: 'Timothy, lots of people will want to give you advice on how to provide leadership. It will be easy to go with the flow; it will be easy to run with the crowd; it will be easy to follow the pack. But listen to your own heart. Listen to what God has in mind for you. To your own heart, be faithful.'

In our Confirmation curriculum, we use a reader's theater I cooked up many years ago. It's called "Miss Teenage Mechanic." It features a number of adolescent boys and girls anticipating a weekend dance at which the fictional, wildly popular band, The Creepos, are playing. Everyone is hoping to find a date for the dance, everyone except Sally.

Sally is passionate about automobiles and engines and things mechanical. She'd rather go on a date to the car show than to the Creepos dance. Her mother and her grandmother and her friends pressure her to be like all the other girls. But Sally holds her ground. She listens to her heart and does what is smart. And, of course, she is the one who wins the applause.

I appreciate Paul's challenge to Timothy, and thereby to the churches in every generation, to claim not a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power and love and self-control. For this is the key to living in the greatest of hope. Amen!