

Bold and Loving and Sensible
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“Bold and Loving and Sensible” Pilgrim Church UCC, November 16, 2014—Consecration Sunday (2 Timothy 1:1-7)

Our Stewardship theme this year is from Second Timothy. We often debate whether Paul wrote it and who exactly was Timothy and what community was he part of that seemed to be in trouble all the time. But I'd like to focus elsewhere today as it's the formal end of our Stewardship Campaign. This year, we need every person to give financially as you are able because literally the ceiling is falling down upon us. You know it's crazy when I crawled up into the attic this week with Dan, our Sexton, to figure out what's up, and it's still a mystery! Honestly though whoever wrote Second Timothy wrote something cool: “God doesn't want us to be shy with God's gifts, but bold and loving and sensible.”[1]

God doesn't want us to be shy with God's gifts. Lisa spoke to the children last Sunday about letting our lights shine. That what our children and youth learn in Church School, she hopes they'll share with others. This is about sharing God's gifts—gifts of community and meaningful stories and ways we can live out our faith. We could feel pushy and like we're doing that scary evangelism thing. But we need to stop being so shy as Mainline Protestants because being so reserved about our Christian faith has consequences, and people need to hear our voices.

The results of the National Study of Youth and Religion were recently published and far and away, the number one thing that keeps youth religiously active as young adults is their parents. Youth ministry, clergy, worship, even formal religious schooling pales in comparison to the influence parents have over their own children. Here's where it gets even more interesting: two-thirds of teens raised by African American Protestant parents and half of teens raised by conservative Protestant parents had high or moderate levels of religiousness as young adults. On the other hand, seventy percent of teens raised by Mainline Protestant parents had minimal or lower levels of religiousness as young adults.[2] We clearly have room for improvement when it comes to keeping our children connected to their faith as young adults in our part of Christianity.

In the interviews, the folks performing the study asked Mainline Protestant parents about this. Many conveyed that they “feel guilty if they think they are doing anything to direct their children toward their religion as opposed to any other possibility.”[3] Many parents in our part of Christianity aren't telling their children why they're Christian, what they believe, how they came to be part of a denomination like ours that values inclusivity and service and taking the Bible too seriously to take it all literally and so on.

When I read these stats this week, I felt sad. But the solution is to work on parents to get you comfortable and growing and open enough to talk to your children about your progressive faith and why church matters, about why you come and why you give your time and talent and treasure. The answer lies with you. And if you have children who don't come to church or haven't found a church of their own or don't want to come to church, it doesn't mean you've utterly failed as a parent. But it does mean that if you'd like to bring them along—it's up to you to do the work with the support of our faith community. Because it ends up that you, mothers and fathers, are the most influential religious voice in your son or daughter's life.

Now all this doesn't mean that we won't continue to focus on the education of children and youth here at Pilgrim. But it has to go beyond that. I've known for a long time that part of my

call here is a teaching ministry—to teach you the practices and stories of our Christian faith in small groups, in sermons, through the mission work we do together. Part of our call together is to not be so shy with God’s gifts because being too reserved, even and especially in our own families has consequences.

God doesn’t want us to be shy with God’s gifts, but bold. How are we bold here at Pilgrim? When the church decided several years ago to hire a Youth Director and a Sexton, that was rather bold. When our church decided to combine the Christian Education and Youth Director positions to step up our investment in our children and youth, that was bold. This Christmas will be the first Christmas at Pilgrim for both Dan Schmidt and Lisa Hulbert—having a new staff with new ideas, that’s bold. When we undertook the process with Theory One Design to have a new website and logo and written materials and write a Mission Statement to anchor us, that was bold. Sometimes, to use a favorite sports metaphor—we need to go big or go home!

Being bold as a church, which usually involves changing the way it’s always been done, may be one of the hardest things for some folks to process. Rev. James Forbes of Riverside Church in New York City once said that in a truly vital church, you’re only happy with what’s going on 75% of the time, because you’re giving up the other 25% for someone down the pew who’s different from you—and who really needs what you may not even want.[4] When we are a bold and vital church, it means that no one is going to be happy all the time. Or in the words of Harvard’s Ron Heifetz—leadership is disappointing your own people at a rate they can tolerate. Because if we’re content all the time, then we’re not pushing ourselves and I’m not pushing you and we’re not open to change. We’re not open to where God is leading us now.

Where is God leading us now? Where is God at work here? Bold churches are the ones who constantly ask these questions and use our monetary resources to fund new ideas and new projects and new staff to look toward new days that are dawning.

God doesn’t want us to be shy with God’s gifts, but bold and loving. How are we loving here at Pilgrim? Love comes in many forms—from caring for one another when we are sick in body or spirit, to being in fellowship, to being the hands and feet of Christ through service, to intentionally listening to each other in all our committee meetings and small groups—that’s love in congregational life.

Church growth consultants have long said that the reason churches don’t grow is because we focus too much on ourselves. We think about us and doing things that make us happy. What about them? Them being the people who aren’t even at our church yet. UCC Minister Molly Phinney Baskette shared the story of her thriving church in Somerville and that the church growth consultant she worked with often said, “Your job is to be an asset to your neighborhood, and to let people who don’t know you see you acting like Christians.” [5] Our job is to wonder who’s out there and what we think they may need for us to provide. We’ve been doing a lot more rentals lately thanks to the hard work of Kat MacDonald. We provide the space for many concerts and musical offerings. It helps with our budget, but it also helps us meet the needs of our neighbors. I like to think that when there’s music played here, even when it’s a child learning Twinkle Twinkle Little Star on the violin, that God delights in these songs played throughout our church.

God doesn’t want us to be shy with God’s gifts, but bold and loving and sensible. How are we sensible here at Pilgrim? This year, we presented a balanced budget during this Stewardship Campaign. We’ve asked for all of us to increase our pledges, if we can, by 4% to continue the amazing ministries we enact. I’m in, and I hope that you will prayerfully consider increasing your pledge too.

The Stewardship Team and our Finance and Administration Committee are sensible folks around here. The conversations about needing a new heating system predate my time here at Pilgrim, and I wouldn't be surprised if the conversations about the heating system actually predate my birth itself. When F&A first looked at the plans for a new heating system, it was terribly complicated and expensive—might as well have heated a fancy office building in downtown Boston. Thinking about it some more and going back to the drawing board, the idea was eventually to treat the church as less of a fancy office building and more like a large residence. Dare I say to treat Pilgrim Church like a home? A welcoming home to all spiritual seekers! So thanks to Derek Gardiner and everyone on F&A and Chris Reaske and his fundraising efforts and everyone who gave a little extra for our heating system—we're going to be nice and toasty this winter for the first time in forever! This is doing our best as a church to be sensible.

God doesn't want us to be shy with God's gifts, but bold and loving and sensible. We have a remarkable spiritual home here at Pilgrim Church, a place where we are supported to raise the next generation of UCCers—even if we feel a little shy in proclaiming all of God's gifts in our lives sometimes. We are bold in bringing on board new staff and new ideas, knowing that none of us should be happy 100% of the time because we're thinking about people down the pew from us and we're thinking about people who haven't even come among us yet. We are loving in opening up our space to the community, in making a real difference in our world by serving others and therefore serving God. We are sensible in not just accepting plans for a complicated heating system, but instead, finding ways to heat Pilgrim like the home that our church already is! I pray that you will give to our spiritual home today. God doesn't want us to be shy with God's gifts, but bold and loving and sensible. Let it be so! Amen.

[1] 2 Timothy 1:7, The Message.

[2] David Briggs, "The No. 1 Reason Teens Keep the Faith as Young Adults," Huff Post: Religion, October 29, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-briggs/the-no-1-reason-teens-kee_b_6...

[3] Ibid.

[4] Rev. James Forbes as quoted by Molly Phinney Baskette, Real Good Church: How our Church came back from the Dead, and yours can, too, 149.

[5] Molly Phinney Baskette, Real Good Church: How our Church came back from the Dead, and yours can, too, 81.