

Spirits of Power and Love
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12:40

Several years ago, I attended the Annual Meeting of the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ. The keynote speaker was Dick Hamm, a Coach and Consultant for the Columbia Partnership, whose mission is to transform Mainline Churches for vital ministry in our post-modern world. Hamm began by identifying Mainline Denominations in the first place; some of you may already know the list but I want to be sure we're all on the same page. Mainline Churches include: The American Baptist Church, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, The United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. There will be a quiz later, so you better be able to list them all. Some would add in Unitarian Universalists, though Dick Hamm did not include them in his list—those UUs can be tricky to classify.

Many of these denominations, including ours, struggle these days with membership and finances and more importantly, being relevant in our modern culture. Hamm launched into a moving argument to tell all of us gathered that we in the UCC specifically are worth saving, and we have to truly believe this and work for revitalization and transformation from within. We also have to know and celebrate who we are in order to offer ourselves to the world. He listed a few reasons why we have to stay alive, the first being that we hold faith and reason together at a time when the world seems obsessed with separating the two, our institutions of higher education engage in education and not indoctrination. We have a worldview that analyzes reality in terms of individuals and systems; we are not focused on radical individualism and therefore we are concerned for the well-being of our brothers and sisters. Moreover, when we interpret Scripture, we do so to empower women, people of color, GLBTQ persons, and all historically marginalized people, encouraging full participation in the church. Finally, when we do mission work, our mission ideals are marked by partnership rather than imperialist notions. [1] In the end, Mainline Denominations and particularly the United Church of Christ are worth saving. But we have to believe it and work to transform our churches to not just survive but thrive for the generations to come.

When we hear the words of 2 Timothy today it can give us courage to do the work. We hear, "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord." [2]

Part of the issue for Mainline Protestants like us is that the necessary practice of testimony, of speaking to people about church, the beliefs of our denomination, our own beliefs and practices at Pilgrim Church, our personal beliefs period, is unsettling and scary. Evangelism is a bad word for many Mainline Protestants. And when you hold faith and reason together and tend to not be as black and white in your beliefs in the first place, the message itself can be hard to verbalize and explain.

I've had several experiences of Evangelical Christians trying to save my soul by now; believe it or not it's happened to me in Ohio, North Carolina, and Massachusetts. I'm not really sure what this says about me. When one fellow Christian asked if I was born again, I quoted from one of my favorite bumper stickers that I was "born okay the first time." Thank you very much. But you know what makes me jealous about other forms of Christianity? Their message is so clear and easy to communicate.

One of the other times someone struggled to convert me to Evangelical Christianity he drew me a picture—there was him on one side of a mountain and me on the other—a chasm separated us. He then drew a cross spanning the chasm and said that I needed to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior to walk over on the cross to his side of the mountain, to be with the other saved Christians and eventually get to heaven. While I appreciated his drawing and told him so, my comment was that walking on top of Jesus didn't seem like a very Christian thing to do. I probably shouldn't have been so snarky, but aggressiveness like that bothers me sometimes.

However, we in the United Church of Christ can fall on the other extreme which is also problematic—we may never talk to anybody about our faith. Many of us may rather get a root canal than speak to our friends and neighbors about church. UCC Minister Lillian Daniel says it best, "Many quietly faithful people struggle with testimony. We don't want to shove our faith down people's throats. We don't want to be pushy, obnoxious, or self-righteous . . . [But] Testimony is calling out that you have seen light in the midst of darkness. Testimony is telling the story about how you met God, even when you have forgotten it. Testimony is telling the story of a community over time, of a particular people, and how God intervened." [3] Really, testimony is living into these words we heard today from 2 Timothy—that "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord." [4]

So here's the thing, if we believe that we are worth saving in Mainline Denominations for all those reasons Dick Hamm listed—faith and reason together, our educational practices, individuals and systems bound together, Scriptural interpretation used to empower people, and mission as authentic and genuine partnerships, and many more reasons we could all come up with today, then we need to get our unique and important form of Christianity in the public sphere. We need to get the message out to friends and loved ones. And sometimes that may come in the form of a challenge depending on the folks with whom we interact.

You know by now that one of my theological buddies is William Sloane Coffin, Coffin served as the Chaplain at Yale for decades and he told a great story about his challenge of professors who used to judge many religions but especially Christianity very harshly. He used to say to professors and students alike, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in" and that 99 chances out of 100 he probably wouldn't believe in that kind of God either. [5]

At a small faculty gathering of good friends, he asked with genuine curiosity, "Isn't the existence of God a lively question." One surly political science professor said, "Bill, it's not even a question, let alone a lively one." So Coffin went on to challenge his friend, he said, "I can understand doubting the quality of the bread, but I can't see kidding yourself that you're not hungry—unless, of course, your soul has shriveled up that you have no more appetite left for the great mysteries of life, especially the *Mysterium Tremendum*. And that's what I think has happened to so many of you, and why . . . some of you are pretty boring." [6]

Can you see why I love this man and quote him all the time? God rest his soul. A loving but firm challenge of friends is what we see here. We observe Coffin engaging our scripture from 2 Timothy—"Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord." [7] He could have just walked away when his question about God's existence was dismissed by that political scientist friend, but he didn't. Instead he challenged him and a good discussion ensued.

We cannot afford to walk away and not engage when folks dismiss our Christian faith. We also cannot just expect that people will flock to us and not, each of us, do the work to invite people to experience our form of Christianity, our community, our church. And we have to trust that God is with us as we do our best to live out our faiths today.

God is the one gifting us with spirits, not of cowardice, but rather with spirits of power and love. Will we accept God's gift? Amen.

[1] Dick Hamm Keynote Address, Annual Meeting of The Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ, July 24, 2009.

[2] 2 Timothy 1:6-8, NRSV.

[3] Lillian Daniel, When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church, 21.

[4] 2 Timothy 1:7-8, NRSV.

[5] William Sloane Coffin, Letters to a Young Doubter, 18.

[6] William Sloane Coffin, Letters to a Young Doubter, 18-19.

[7] 2 Timothy 1:8, NRSV.