

“Tending the Fire”  
July 31, 2022

2 Timothy 1:1-7

Not too long after worship is over this morning, I’ll be on my way to New Hampshire for some family vacation time. It will probably be mid to late afternoon when I pull into the driveway up in Sandwich, New Hampshire. And I will probably park my car on the left side of the driveway, right next to what qualifies as the front yard of the house.

It’s not a very big front lawn. And it hardly looks a golf putting green, thick and lush, the way some lawns look here in South Windsor. I think it’s mostly weeds that look like grass. In any case, the highlight of that lawn is the fire pit we’ve created. Nothing fancy. If there’s one thing New Hampshire has in abundance, it’s rocks. So, this fire pit is nothing more than a patch of dirt and ash surrounded by a circle of rocks.

If the weather in New Hampshire stays as hot as it has been recently, we may not make much use of that fire pit this summer. But I’m willing to bet that as the days get shorter in August, the temperature will drop at night. And someone in the family will suggest building a fire in the yard, especially if that fire is accompanied by marshmallows, graham crackers and squares of chocolate.

These days I’m not usually the one who builds and tends the fire. I’ve generated plenty of fires in my day, but now there are younger family members willing to take on that task. And that’s fine with me.

Nevertheless, looking back I have learned a good deal about fires over the years. Not big, dangerous, destructive fires. Rather, tame campfires out in the yard or the woods. And I found myself thinking about fires when I read this morning’s Scripture lesson from the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy and when I listened to Ken read it again a few moments ago.

In this morning’s passage, Paul begins by expressing his love for Timothy, who was presumably a protégé. But the key part of the passage for my purposes begins in verse number five. “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure lives in you.” Sometimes it’s good to have someone like the Apostle Paul remind us of our roots. When we remember where we come from, it helps ground us and reaffirm our identity.

Paul continues. “For this reason, I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

The main reason Paul decides to write to Timothy is because Paul has determined that Timothy is not using his God given gifts the way Paul expects him to. It’s not clear

why Timothy isn't meeting Paul's standards or in turn, God's standards. The only thing we know is that Timothy's gifts have run cold. And Paul tells Timothy that his God given gifts need to be rekindled.

The Apostle Paul is using a fire analogy in today's Scripture lesson. Just as God builds and lights a fire within each of us, God built and lit a fire in young Timothy long ago. But Timothy's fire is beginning to blow out. And Timothy's fire needs some care and attention or else it will extinguish altogether.

The question Paul raises is how Timothy goes about building or rebuilding his God given fire? And that's the same question I raise for you and me today. How do you and I go about building or rebuilding our God given fire?

Now for some of us in this sanctuary that question isn't be hard to answer. Because we would probably describe ourselves as already on fire. We're hearing what God is saying to us clearly. We're doing the work God has called us to do in the world. We're exercising our God given gifts to the best of our ability.

Others of us in this sanctuary would probably put ourselves in Timothy's category. Maybe we're smoldering a bit. We have a spark or two in our lives that's waiting to catch. But we're hardly on fire. We're not totally clear about what God wants us to do in the world. We're exploring a couple of things but not finding the meaning we desire. As a result, it feels like our best, most useful gifts are going cold. They either aren't really needed or there's no place to use them properly.

Whether we consider ourselves on fire this morning or on our way to burnout, there is one fundamental truth about a fire. Every fire needs tending or it's going to go out sooner or later. With that fact in mind, I offer to you four things you have to do to keep a fire burning. **(1)**

First, when it comes to a fire, you have to get in there and mix it up. Unless you happen to have one of those remote-control fireplaces, you can't stand far away from a fire and tell it to start burning. Fires require hands-on. You have to fuss around with a fire, moving the drier sticks closer to the flame. Adding some paper or some kindling. Getting down on your hands and knees and blowing on it. Figuring out where the hot spots are in the fire and then shifting the wood around accordingly.

The same principle applies to our God given gifts. We have to search and fuss around for our gifts. We have to stop and listen to figure out what God is saying to us. We can't stand away from the fire and come up with reasons not to get involved...we're too tired, too stressed, too far past our prime. If we're going to use God's gifts, we need to shake things up. Get in there with our hands and our hearts. Mix things around and stir stuff up. Even if the spark of God's fire is hard to find. Even if the embers of God's fire seem to be cooling off, that doesn't mean God's fire has stopped burning. It just means we have to look harder for it.

Second, sometimes you have to add more fuel to the fire. And the best way to do that is by constructing the fire the right way in the right order. You begin with the flammable paper or cardboard on the bottom. Then the twigs and sticks. Then the smaller logs that will catch fairly quickly. Only then does it make sense to put the larger logs on top of the pile. And if all that doesn't work, you go back to the beginning and start again. You don't add more big logs on top. You add more paper on the bottom.

When it comes to our God given gifts, sometimes we have to add more fuel to the fire. But we can't do that randomly and expect it to work. We have to step back and take mental notes. What are the gifts in my life that I can use easily? Those are the gifts I'm going to use first. Once I start using those gifts, then I can proceed to the bigger gifts or the harder gifts or the gifts I didn't know I had.

Third, fires need to be watched carefully. If we suddenly have to take a phone call or do some chore when the fire is burning, we shouldn't be surprised if the fire is out by the time we come back to it. Or if a fire has been giving heat to a particular space or a particular group of people and all of a sudden, we look around and people are starting to put their jackets or their blankets on again. That's probably a sign the fire is waning and needs some attention.

By the same token, we can't take God's gifts for granted. If we get distracted or we ignore what God has given to us, we shouldn't be surprised if we start to feel burned out. God can't be the only one keeping track of our gifts. You and I bear some responsibility as well. Each one of us are stewards of our own God given gifts. Those gifts are precious and immensely valuable. And it's up to each of us to safeguard our gifts as if our life's meaning depends on it. Because arguably, it does.

Finally, campfires are supposed to be useful. They make us warm. They can be used to cook things and heat things. They're cozy and comfortable. They serve as gathering places for families and friends.

More than anything else, fires are not meant to be kept to ourselves. One of the best things about fires is sharing them with others. Telling stories and laughing. Listening to the crackling and popping sounds. Seeing one another in the glow of the flames. Similarly, God's gifts are not self-serving. God intends for us to share our gifts freely and joyously with people around us...

Mix it up and stir things around. Add fuel if you need to, in the right order. Watch carefully. And share with others. Wherever you are the rest of this summer, tend your fires well. The ones you create outdoors with family and friends. And the ones you nurture in your own heart and mind and spirit. Amen.

(1) From her sermon entitled, "Stir Up the Gift," by Rev. Dr. Yvette Flunder, *Where The Edge Gathers; building a community of radical inclusion*. (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005) pgs. 71,72.



