

(Note: This manuscript is a “living document” ! It may differ substantially at times from what is shared aloud during the worship service. There may also be typos, or written in a way that makes more sense for oration than for reading. Feel free to share all or portions of this text, but please include a citation.)

I. A gift, and a power.

I'd like to invite us all to do something together. If you can, try to picture in your mind a scene or image of a loved one that brings a smile to your face. It could be a child, a pet, a partner, a dear friend. Try to imagine a moment in that relationship, when you felt overwhelming love. If you're technologically inclined, you might even pull up a picture on your phone to look at.
(Take a moment to imagine, or to look.)

If you're a parent, you might consider the first time that you looked into your children's eyes, or perhaps the first time they smiled back at you. Or if it's a beloved pet, you might remember meeting them for the first time, or the first day you brought them home. It's easy in these moments to recognize a gift. The very presence of Godself, the God who is in fact, Love itself. In the eyes of another we see unadulterated trust, care, hope... a living embodiment of Grace, holy love that loves us just as we are.

And that gift, that love, is also a superpower. You'll run through walls to protect your beloved. I know that I had a lot of fears before becoming a parent; about being good enough, nurturing enough, and all those feelings melted the first time that I saw my newborn child. Instantly that protective mechanism kicks in. We got a new puppy a few months ago, and my partner Amy was hooked the minute little Maggie curled up into her lap and tried to fall asleep. We all fell in love with her. And then, miracle of miracles, our child Jojo was committed to help feed her, take her out, and play with her. They were empowered by the gift of love.

And then the next morning, Maggie pees on the carpet. “Dad, Maggie peed!” “Ok, can you take her out?” “I'm busy!”

After these sublime moments, these “thin” moments (to use the image of the ancient Celts, where the invisible barrier between heaven and earth seems more translucent than opaque) – we inevitably get sucked back into life. Sometimes gradually, sometimes through a rude awakening, some of that energy, that fire, starts to dissipate, as we come back down from the mountain-top, and realize that relationships of any kind are hard work, if we want to maintain them. Or that relationships can get complicated or messy. I love Jojo today as much as I did at first sight, but are there days when I lose sight of that? Yeah. (Although I really don't have much to complain about.) And our sweet adorable puppy? Who could be on Puppy food ads? Who is also defiant and shrill and shows her displeasure at life through chewing things and leaving presents? Yeah.

That sense of grace, that feeling of empowerment, can't always be sustained in full force. But, maybe as you recalled your moment, or looked at your picture, you reactivated your memory, even if just a little bit. Maybe it did bring a smile to your face. There are similar techniques that are used in therapies, in positive psychology, to re-engage past memories of love, that can then change the engagement we have with another person in the present, to remind us how much we love and value the person (or dog, or another pet) for who they are, how much they remind us that we are a gift, which can then re-invigorate our care for each other.

We don't always call it as such, but are all holy moments in their own way. To love is to experience a taste of God. You may also have encountered that extravagant and whole love of God for you in worship, or in prayer, while building a house, while keeping vigil, while on a literal mountaintop... And these moments are awesome, and, they fade too.

II. Timothy, too.

Today's passage comes from a letter of encouragement – written to a young early church leader that we're calling Timothy (*we think that this is not the same Paul and Timothy we see in Acts, that they're pseudonyms of some kind, maybe a teacher and disciple relationship who use the names of Paul and Timothy to protect themselves, or as a shorthand for others who read it to understand their relationship – we don't really know; for simplicity's sake, we'll just go with Paul and Timothy here*) Timothy appears to be at least a third-generation Christian, his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois being his first spiritual mentors. He grew up in the church. He might never have had a “conversion” moment, but was just held by his Christian family from the get-go. And at some point someone “laid” hands on him, maybe it was Paul who did it, since he says “Recalling your tears...”

I imagine that to be chosen among your community, your family, to be called to leadership, in a community that they believed was creating heaven on earth, had to be a tremendous honor. It had to be a moment of deep pride for Lois and Eunice, assuming they were alive to be present for it. I imagine this was a thin moment for Timothy, where the Spirit flooded his heart, a gift, that empowered him to walk through walls.

But by the time this letter is being written, it feels like something's changed. Time has passed, and according to Paul, we see later in the chapter that there's some infighting in the church. We're not sure why. It mentions that they were “wrangling over words” in a way that was putting people off; perhaps they were squabbling over doctrinal differences; maybe they were arguing about who was responsible for paying the caterers, who knows. But whatever it was we do have a clue as to what Timothy was feeling, because Paul encourages him: “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice,” and, “Do not be ashamed.” Fear and shame. Those seemingly-powerful deflators of love and grace. So, perhaps he didn't feel like he was living up to his family's expectations, his community's? Maybe he's being criticized by those he loves and wants to try to appease them? Whatever the circumstances, it seems that Timothy's fuel tank is getting dangerously close to empty.

I find it comforting, strangely. As someone who has been a Christian my whole life, who has devoted my life to serving God and yet I often feel “approaching empty.” Especially in moments of stress. Especially when the world we live in feels like a pressure-cooker that’s turned up way too high. Maybe for you too, whether you’ve been a Christian your whole life, whether you’re new to exploring the Christian tradition, or whether you’re not sure what you’d call yourself, if anything... To consider the fact that Timothy, who in all likelihood was a poster-child of the community, raised up in faith, anointed into leadership by the lineage of apostles – even he lost steam. Even he lost sight of grace, felt fear and shame, and needed to remember.

III. Treasuring, and rekindling.

We need sacred memories. Not to go back to the past, or to recreate it, but to help remember what is true, and to orient us towards the future.

Part of my job as the interim pastor here, will be to encourage us all to reflect, and engaging our sacred memories is a part of that. It’s why we will be organizing times to connect and have conversations and share stories with each other.

Reflecting on memories helps us do what Paul encourages Timothy to do: *“Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me (which is) the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you..”* The treasure is the Spirit of God, but the chests for that treasure are so often the people with whom we share in divine love, those who model God’s love to us... and also, the sacred memories of these encounters.

Who has modeled divine love to you? When have you experienced that unadulterated acceptance for you, as you are? That sense of deep connection to each other? What or who have been the treasure chests, the broken vessels, that remind you, of the treasure inside of you, and the treasure that you are?

This community, you all, have modeled divine love to each other in countless ways. Hopefully sacred memories emerge for you as you picture scenes of past worship services, past group meetings, prayer vigils and protests, Christmas pageants, mission trips, frolicking in the pumpkin patch, and more – all of these can be “thin moments”. – I know it’s impossible to imagine a lot of these memories of holy moments without the loving influence and care of Joan, who embodied the loving and encouraging leadership that we see from Paul here. I didn’t get to hear a lot of Joan’s preaching, but I know from my conversations with her and with many of you, that her wisdom, her love, her nonanxious presence, the impact of the legacy she left is immeasurable, and it’s entirely normal and expected if you are feeling the absence of that person in whom you discovered such treasures. These memories are sacred.

And I don’t think we don’t move forward by “trying to get over” that feeling. You all need time and space to feel that feeling, to share those feelings with each other, giving grace to one another. I think by “treasuring” our sacred memories of this community, including Joan’s indelible legacy,

and personal impact, will be important. It will feel a little sad, yes. But behind that sadness, there is the gift, and power, of the Spirit. There is the wisdom shared that now lives in you, in us. There is the recognition that that same Spirit lives in us, and hasn't gone anywhere, she is still speaking, still empowering us to hold each other, and to be salt of the earth, to carry the light into the world.

Fear and shame are insidious, and lead to despair – but we have not been given a spirit of fear, but of power, and love and self-discipline. And so Paul also encourages Timothy to “rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” He’s asking Timothy to remember that sacred memory of having hands laid on him, that holy moment where he felt empowered by the Spirit of love, when the gift felt abundant. Maybe some of these holy memories we’re recalling can help anchor us in the moments when we feel dry, or when despair at the state of things makes us want to crawl under the nearest rock.

Maybe we can keep remembering moments of Love, in the form of a holy anger, at violence in all its forms, whatever defies the sacredness of every life - anger energized by Love... so that we don't get sucked into fear-based anger, which is reactive, and seeks to keep feeding the cycle of fear and violence.

Maybe holding each other in your hearts as you move through this season of change, as we walk hand in hand, as we continue to pour into the wider community and be a light, can keep us going... and in fact I have the sneaking suspicion that this has already been the case for many of you.

And maybe this is how we honor Joan and what she meant to this community the best – not by putting her on a pedestal, or by pretending to move on before we're ready — but, by remembering what she carried and shared, the Spirit of love that continues to connect all of us together across time and space – and to keep rekindling that love and joy and wisdom, that was here before Joan and is still here, and continues to live and work through each of us.

READINGS: ([to copy/paste into here:](#))

- **Call to Worship: (Josh or Wendy)**

One: God, We praise you for your faithfulness, and for your tender mercies that are renewed every morning.

Many: We are grateful for every blessing of yesterday, the gift of this day, and for the promises of our tomorrows.

One: Grant us an enduring faith as we strive against oppression and despair. Endow us with contagious joy that uplifts the downtrodden and inspires hope in you.

Many: Increase in us the faith and courage of the prophets, the love of Jesus, and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

- **Confession: (Josh or Wendy)**

Having been welcomed into the presence of each other and the presence of the Spirit, we now take a moment together as a community, to open up ourselves to God:

- We start with acknowledging the grace that enfolds our lives, and giving thanks for it. (pause)

- We then reflect upon our lives this past week, and consider: What is it that we are holding back? Holding onto? Resisting? What are we distracting or protecting ourselves from? Where might fear or anger be impacting our decisions? What or who are we avoiding? With whom do we need to make things right? (pause)

- Each of us now are invited to ask God for the courage to face ourselves, and for something that we need in our lives right now to be more whole. (silent prayer)

- **Assurance of Grace (Josh)**

- **Scripture reading**

Our reading from our Sacred Story this morning comes from the 2nd Letter of Paul to Timothy, Chapter One, verses One thru fourteen.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.

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.

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.

This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do.

But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

(Optional closing words): *May the Still-Speaking God refresh our hearts and minds as we reflect on these ancient words together. Amen.*

WELCOME

Hi! My name is Josh and I'm beyond thrilled to finally be here. I know that I have been on quite a journey to get here, and that you all have been on a long journey as well, preparing, praying, celebrating and grieving, and all the while "keeping on" with all the ways that Main Street shines the light and love of God in the community.

Today marks the beginning of our journeying paths converging, and joining hands along the way for a little while, and it's so nice to have company! I imagine we will teach and minister to each other in ways we have yet to imagine.

Getting to know each other will take time, and patience, and I have already experienced your graciousness and love in so many ways already. For now, as you all have so warmly welcomed me, please allow me to welcome you all to Main Street.

No matter who you are, no matter where you're from, no matter where you are on your journey of faith in God... You are welcome as you are.

No matter what you're going through, No matter your background, skin color, or preferred style of dress, no matter if you feel too young, or too old, you are welcome in this place.

No matter who you love, no matter what you have been told in the past about church or Christians, no matter what norms you conform or don't conform to, you are enough, and you are beautiful, and you are welcome as you are among these other beautiful children of God.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- New here? Please fill out a card to introduce yourself to the deacons and lay ministry team here.
 - Please help with Pumpkins! > signup link on email.
 - Please join for music by Demijon today, 3-5pm
 - Tuesday night class: podcast study on experiencing Jesus - The Way of Love. (Arlyn/Connie)
 - Any others?
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- Would love to meet/connect during open hours at Ovedia, see bulletin! If can't get away, please text or email me and we'll set something up.
 - Like to learn a little more about what an interim pastor does, how it's different, can look at this past week's newsletter (and we'll talk more later).
- > Call to Worship

Communion:

This is an open table. We believe God's grace is free and therefore, all hearts who are willing to be open to God's grace, whatever that means to you, are welcome to receive, no matter what you believe, whether or not you, or wherever, you've been baptized. This is an expression of God's love for us, that nourishes us so that we might love the world.

The Lord be with You – and also with you.

Lift up your hearts - We lift them up to God.

Let us give thanks to the Lord. – It is right to give thanks and praise.

It is our joy in all times and places to give thanks to You, Creating God, Everlasting Spirit! You created the heavens in all of their splendor, and the earth with all its glorious diversity. You have given us life, held us in your embrace, and showed us the richness and depth of holy love through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and in the powerful gift of your Spirit to the world.

In this moment together – we acknowledge you, oh God, as the Source and Sustainer of our very breath and heartbeat, and we wonder at the holy memory of Jesus, who walked with the suffering, healed the broken, laughed with children and called out hypocrites, who saw and uplifted the good in those that society called sinners, and who promised the possibility of renewal and remaking, a future new heaven and new earth.

Spirit of God, as we seek to follow Christ's steps, we receive your welcome, as we are, to Christ's table. We do not come perfect in belief or perfect in love, and we struggle to set aside our burdens, our worries, our fears. May your Holy Spirit be especially present to us in this moment, and in this meal, rekindling the Spirit of love and power within us, as we receive the radical hospitality of your sacred table. As we partake may we be awakened in our contentment, remember the freedom of "enough," and hold in our hearts those who long for physical, mental, and spiritual nourishment this morning, even as you hold them close. Bless these elements and bless us, your people, that as your beautiful broken family, we might be the sacrament, the vessels of your Spirit, and the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Amen.

(move behind table)

ON the night Jesus was betrayed...

This is the Feast of Love, prepared for you!

Prayer

We are a praying people, as we open ourselves up to listen to the Spirit among us, we also share our joy, our gratitude, our hopes, our laments, our tears and our celebrations with God, and with each other. (will start with joys, concerns, prayers, then end with the LP, using the language for God most comfortable to you.)

As we begin I invite us all again to start with some deep breaths....

And then as part of our joys, I'd like to invite us all to do something together (another reflective practice). If you can, try to picture in your mind a scene or image of a loved one that brings a smile to your face. It could be a child, a pet, a partner, a dear friend. Try to imagine a moment in that relationship, when you felt overwhelming love. If you're technologically inclined, you might even pull up a picture on your phone to look at.

(Take a moment to imagine, or to look.)

Does any snippet of that past joy or love come back, even just a little? If so, try to allow a smile to come to your face and to hold that feeling, that memory, close. (And if you can't do this right now, that's ok. When you're in the right space to try it, encourage to try it later on your own.)

This is actually a holy memory, no matter how mundane it may seem. (We'll come back to this...From here, let us acknowledge the various ways God's love infuses our lives. (you can continue to meditate on your image, or you can let it fade into the background for a bit...)

> Oh God this morning we remember and give thanks for your continued presence in our everyday lives, most vibrantly demonstrated in our communities of love, including this extended family of Main Street Congregational Church. Oscar Romero said that no matter what hardships we face, the church walks serene for it bears the force of love; we seek joy with abandon, not in ignorance or escapism, but in order to share in the strength to hope, to keep walking forward, to stand up with holy love in defiance of that which threatens to rob dignity and humanity.

> We offer a moment now to name our celebrations, our successes, anything that we are grateful for this morning, any hurdles you have found the strength to overcome.

> God we also ask for your abundant grace to be with those who hurt in body, mind, or spirit, those who mourn, those who are facing unexpected change, those that feel stuck.

> We offer a moment to name our concerns for ourselves, each other, for family members, or others.

> And We pray those in our communities and beyond who suffer at the hands of senseless violence, power or greed, for all who get caught in the crossfire, for those who are hungry and those who are afraid. >We name Gaza, Israel, Russia, Ukraine, in the bulletin, I would like to add Sudan and Haiti to this list. Any others?...

> Romero again says that it is the grace of the Christian to hope. When all seems lost we dare to say NO. We are still awaiting God's grace. It is just beginning to be built on the earth. Oh God we dare to smile, to dream, to hope, above all to let our love and light shine, Please keep building, and help us make your grace more and more visible – as we pray as Jesus taught, saying: