

"Fan the Flame of Faith & Feed the World!"

C Pentecost 17; II Timothy 1:1-14

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

1 1-2 I, Paul, am on special assignment for Christ, carrying out God's plan laid out in the Message of Life by Jesus. I write this to you, Timothy, the son I love so much. All the best from our God and Christ be yours!

To Be Bold with God's Gifts

3-4 Every time I say your name in prayer—which is practically all the time—I thank God for you, the God I worship with my whole life in the tradition of my ancestors. I miss you a lot, especially when I remember that last tearful good-bye, and I look forward to a joy-packed reunion.

5-7 That precious memory triggers another: your honest faith—and what a rich faith it is, handed down from your grandmother Lois to your mother Eunice, and now to you! And the special gift of ministry you received when I laid hands on you and prayed—**keep that ablaze!** God doesn't want us to be shy with his gifts, but bold and loving and sensible.

8-10 So don't be embarrassed to speak up for our Master or for me, his prisoner. Take your share of suffering for the Message along with the rest of us. We can only keep on going, after all, by the power of God, who first saved us and then called us to this holy work. We had nothing to do with it. It was all *his* idea, a gift prepared for us in Jesus long before we knew anything about it. But we know it now. Since the appearance of our Savior, nothing could be plainer: death defeated, life vindicated in a steady blaze of light, all through the work of Jesus.

11-12 This is the Message I've been set apart to proclaim as preacher, emissary, and teacher. It's also the cause of all this trouble I'm in. But I have no regrets. I couldn't be more sure of my ground—the One I've trusted in can take care of what he's trusted me to do right to the end.

13-14 So keep at your work, this faith and love rooted in Christ, exactly as I set it out for you. It's as sound as the day you first heard it from me. Guard this precious thing placed in your custody by the Holy Spirit who works in us.

MOTHERS AND GRANDMOTHERS of FAITH

Who is your Lois? Your Eunice? The mothers and grandmothers in the faith who have taught you what most matters? Helped you to fan the flame, nurture the seed that's been planted in you?

They might be blood or chosen family—mothers *and* fathers in the vast family of faith who have had an impact on your heart—maybe long ago, maybe recently.

My "Eunice" came relatively recently into my life, and her impact has been a gentle *kindling of the flame* as she embraces life's stages and ages with grace and deeper probing of the depths of faith and life.

My "Eunice" looks a lot like a little sparkplug named Jean Brody that I am privileged to call my mother-in-law.

Recently, especially, her writings have come across my radar at synchronistic and serendipitous times. I don't always read them right away when they arrive in my mailbox on Wednesday nights after her son-in-law Steve types them up for her and sends to the

publisher of the Winchester Sun in Kentucky. But when I do read them, it's exactly the right time!

The day we had the daughter of a Holocaust survivor share her family's experience at Women's Missionary, I had just read Jean's article on Forgiveness. It couldn't have fit more perfectly. I gave the kind woman a copy of our newsletter with the article in it (along with some CUCC coasters!)

The other night, I was tossing and turning and, for the life of me, could not sleep! After about the third time of trying to read for awhile, I pulled up my phone, tucked it under the covers so as not to disturb Clarke with a light, and pulled up my email.

Jean's article for this week had just come a couple hours earlier, and I pulled up the first page:

"Do you have nights when you just cannot sleep?!"

I about laughed out loud—that would have disturbed Clarke for sure!

Then, I realized that this moment of serendipity was a true gift to me from the Holy One. For Jean's story told of how she "fans her own flame of faith" and keeps her hope and comfort alive by soaking in the presence of God in Nature.

My "Eunice" was reminding me to kindle my own flame by returning to the Source—the Ground of our Being. And, she was reminding us all that we don't even have to be there physically, but can go there in our imaginations and we will find the soothing stillness and presence of Spirit in our midst.

How do you fan the flame of *your* faith? I invite you

close your eyes and listen—or better yet—look out these beautiful windows to the sky, the trees, the mountains, the hills.

Jean Brody – MAGIC OF THE SEA

It is 5:30 am and I am sitting in my living room. The front of our home is glass so my vision encompassed sand dunes, high palm trees, the expanse of sandy beach and then seagulls all the way to the horizon in its emerald splendor. It is quiet, reassuring, humbling.

The birds are awake ready for a morning soar and breakfast. The seagulls are noisy and anxious each one seemingly out for himself, while the pelicans are more organized. For the clowns that they are, the pelicans behave amazingly well. They fly high in the order of a V and in silence.

Then there are the sounds. I recognized the music of the sea. If I listen closely I can hear the chords amplifying as waves wash the shore depositing shells from the ocean floor far away. And then the hushing as they recede back to the watery center.

And the smells. Oh my! There is a sea smell as familiar to me as the air itself. No matter what sea or what island, the salt mingles with the seaweed and it is garnished by the life that swims within it.

So I sit in my home by the sea, allowing all my senses to come alive and I tie it all together. People have written about the gifts from the sea and I recognize that this morning is indeed a gift to me and it is my obligation to not only understand the message but to pass it on to you the best I can.

The sea speaks as the epitome of loyalty, of dependability, in that no matter what I do or don't do, the ocean tide will rise and fall exactly on time—not my time, but a universal time.

For me, the sea is my mentor, my teacher, my connection to all else. It is my proof that God exists and that, in ways only He knows, I am a minute but necessary part of the whole. So are you.

EXPANDING OUR FAITH AND TABLE

“Fan the flame of faith. Guard the good deposit.” On this World Communion Sunday, we consider many ways that kindle our own flame, but also share the spark, and spread the love and presence of Christ far beyond our own lives and community.

Our passage in Timothy reminds us that we need to expand our understanding of the gospel, in order for it to be *good news* for all the world, today. To “guard the good deposit” and “fan the flame of faith, we bring fresh breath and understanding to our brothers and sisters in all traditions, in all parts of the world.

“Holding fast to the sound teaching” is not a desperate grasping to a rigid set of doctrines and ways of seeing the world and our faith as the only way to understand it. It’s an opening of the bellows and letting the breath of Spirit flow through. Opening of the clenched fists to open and giving hands.

A story from Theologian Karl Jacobson illustrates this path to opening and expanded understanding, albeit with some surprise jolts along the way!

When I was a junior in college I studied in Shanghai as an exchange student. I lived in the foreign students’ dormitory with my Canadian roommate, two other Americans, a couple of Australians, one Italian, ten or twelve Japanese, and over fifty students from Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

We western types, as well as the Japanese, were there to study Chinese language, literature, and history, which was facilitated at the university or college level. The African and Arab students were in China because of arrangements made at the government level, to study math and science *in English*; to my knowledge none of them studied Chinese formally, which left many of them very isolated.

This was in the days running up to the first Gulf War, Desert Storm. I remember watching on Chinese television coverage of the first use of the so-called “smart bombs.” It was a **tense** time to be an American studying abroad. Shortly after New Year’s my Canadian roommate was on a trip to Beijing, and I was up late studying for an exam. There was a knock on my door, and when I opened it, was met by one of the Muslim students from Yemen. He stood in the door in formal attire, with his *jambiya* at his hip. The *jambiya* is a ceremonial (but very functional) dagger, with a broad, curved blade of about six inches and is worn by all Yemenis men of age. So there he stood, knife and all.

Well, I did exactly what you would have done in that situation, at that tense time—I invited him in.

He entered and promptly did two things—he shut the door behind him and then reached up and pulled the wire from the two-way speaker above the door. That two-way speaker was a way for the front desk—usually manned by two old

Chinese communist party members—both to contact us for any reason and to listen in on us; which they did.

Every now and then we would hear it pop on as they eavesdropped. With the wire pulled, there was *no* communication, one way or the other.

I didn't know what to expect in that moment and I didn't really know what to do. So I asked him how I could help him.

- He had been trying, for the better part of two years He began by telling me about his family, his wife and four sons who were back in Yemen.
- He told me that he had been separated from them for more than three years as he pursued his degree in mathematics, and that he missed them.
- He had been trying, for the better part of two years to get the university to allow them to come and live with him, with no success.
- He had come to me, hoping that I would write a letter to the president of *Huadong Shifan Daxui*, East China Normal University, in Chinese—because a letter in Chinese would be, he said, more respectful, and more likely to succeed.

So I did. We spent the next couple of hours working over a letter in Chinese, asking that his family be allowed to come and join him. He gave me his words, and I did my best to put them into Chinese.

When we had finished, I gave him the letter and asked him another question, “Why did you come to me? There are others here whose Chinese is much better, who have been here longer and who would do a better job. Why me?”

And he said, “I come to you because I know that you are a Christian. And I knew a Christian would help me.”

Ever since then, I've wanted to be that kind of Christian, the kind that *creates expectations*. The kind of Christian that can break forth with the message and unconditional and unlimited love of Jesus for all—the whole world that God so loved.

Kindling the flame, blowing our faith into life and action takes courage, stretching out of our comfort zone, living the one precious life we've been given with abandon—while guarding what's been entrusted to us. Not an easy calling, but “the God we worship with our whole life” fills us with the flame and keeps it glowing. “It only takes a spark!”

George Bernard Shaw once said,

“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. Life is no ‘brief candle’ to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to the future generations.”

Let us keep fanning the flame, kindling the fire, breathing in the magic of the natural world to ground us, guarding the good deposit, coming to the Table. A place where all are welcome, and there is always another place set and room for another soul. Amen.