

“The Gift That Is in You”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

New Testament Lesson: 1 Timothy 4:11-16

When the Apostle Paul tells his young friend Timothy to not let anyone despise or judge him because of his youth, he encourages him to set an example for others, because Paul was mentoring Timothy to be a participant and leader in the church. As I read this, I thought about a couple of our church leaders.

Don't worry, it's none of you. The church leaders I thought about are at the highest levels of the church. I thought about the Rev. Charles Hardwick III, director of Theology, Formation & Evangelism for the PC(USA), which is our national headquarters in Louisville.

I also thought about the Rev. Landon Whitsitt, executive director and stated clerk of the Synod of Mid America, the regional authority to which our presbytery and five others belong.

I've known Chip Hardwick since seminary; he was a doctoral student when I was there. And every time I think of him, I can't help but picture him in all of his 6-foot-whatever glory, seated upon a child's tricycle riding down the hall of a seminary dorm. Would Paul see that as setting an example "in speech and conduct...?" Now, I couldn't find a picture of that, but I did find this picture, and this one, and this one!

Does that look like a PC(USA) executive setting a good example in speech and conduct? Of course it does!! God loves our self-expression! God loves and values every part of us. ... Every part of Chip Hardwick.

God loves and values every part of you, even the silly part, the sleepy part, lazy part, and the defiant part, the part that has you want to say "no; I won't!" God loves the good and faithful parts of us for the gift that they are, and God loves (or at least embraces) the not-so-good and defiant parts of us for what we can become, by overcoming them with God's help.

We see this in Paul's letter to Timothy, where he says, "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity....devote yourself to them so that all may see your progress."

Our problem is sometimes we get so hungry, angry, lonely or tired that our emotions take over and set a bad example, by being cranky, picking fights, pouting all alone in your room, or just getting restless and no fun to be around. This is where the opportunity comes in. This is where we can take our unmet needs and feelings and ask God to show us a better way.

Take for example our friend the Rev. Landon Whitsitt. He looks like a very upstanding church leader, doesn't he? But when Landon was attending our national meeting of the PC(USA) General Assembly in Portland, OR, last month, he got so tired from the long meetings he started feeling a little punchy. But as you can see, he turned it into an opportunity to have a little fun – obviously these photos are staged; he's taking a selfie with his right hand in the first photo.

Landon took a situation in which he was tired and instead of getting cranky, he got a little silly, but in a controlled way. The point is we don't have to give into our feelings and emotions. We can recognize them and then turn them playfully toward God, rather than taking ourselves so seriously all the time.

Look for opportunities to catch yourself when you're about to act badly, and ask God how you could act in a way that would bring joy or peace or love into the world. I guarantee you, God will show you the way.

There is a place and a time for play and there is a place and a time for work. God doesn't want us to neglect either of these gifts – the gift of joy and play in response to Christ's presence and the gift of work and ministry as we grow in the faith together.

Paul writes to Timothy, saying, "Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting (or encouraging), (and) to teaching." This is Paul reminding Timothy of his role in the work of our Lord.

We all have a role in the work of the Lord. Some of us study and teach, others can be counted on to bring joy and laughter; some people get caught up in the Spirit while singing or playing an instrument, still others bless the lives of people through their work, whether it's at a job, as a volunteer, or in the family or household. It doesn't matter whether you're an adult, young person or a child, everyone serves the Lord, and it's not always about being at church all the time either.

If we are mindful of staying in the Spirit of the Lord, then God will use us wherever we are – even at a St. Patrick's Day parade with the TUXIS Confirmation Class or at Westminster Hall for Trunk 'n' Treat.

Now, it just so happens most people find that church is a great place to get reminded that the Lord works through us, a great place to be equipped for ministry, a great place to grow in the faith, and a great place to work alongside others on behalf of Christ. Without the church in one form or another, we would be left to our lower ways of being – fighting and arguing, worry and struggle, negativity and hopelessness.

So Paul encourages us – even as he encouraged Timothy – to (quote) "... not neglect the gift that is in you...; (the gift of joy, the gift of self-expression, the gift of encouraging others, the gift of teaching, the gift of being a blessing through your work and your play). "Put these things into practice," says Paul, "devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress."

Paul wants people to look at you – and at me – and see us growing as individuals – and as a church –see us growing into the people God would have us be. What are the gifts that you bring to the work – and play – of the Lord? Don't know? Actually, to a great extent, you get to choose.

Does anyone remember my sermon on the Fruits of the Spirit when we filled the Communion Table with fruit? The Fruits (or gifts) of the Spirit are in each and every one of us, and we can pick any Fruit we want, to grow and nurture within us.

These are the stickers I gave out after our sermon on the Fruits of the Spirit. I have about 50 stickers left. After I give the Benediction or blessing at the end of our worship service, I invite anyone who would like to claim a Fruit of the Spirit for themselves to come forward, beginning with our youth and young people here today. Come forward and meet me in front and take a sticker to remind you to turn any situation you're in this week into an opportunity to reflect the Spirit of the Lord.

As Paul said, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching" – what people are learning from how you act and what you say. "Continue in these things," says Paul, "for in doing this, you will save both yourself and (those who (hear what you say and watch what you do)." Encourage by these words, in all that we do, let us be an example to others of the hope, peace, joy and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Great and loving God, we thank you for the teachings and life of Jesus Christ, and how he helps us to know you.

Sometimes, Lord, we wonder if who we are is pleasing to you, if we put a smile on your face. And then we look at the smiling face of Jesus, and know that we do.

Help us in those times when we act badly or get lost or feel hurt to turn to Jesus to see how we can be nicer, how we can find our way, how we can feel better and grow stronger in the faith.

We thank you for all that you teach us Lord, we thank you for the children of Vacation Bibles School, for their parents who value and support their involvement, and for the inspiration and energy you give us to rise up to your calling in our lives.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**