“Rekindle the Flame” / II Timothy 1:14 / 2 October 2016

“Rekindle into flame the gift of God that is within you...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power and love.” God's gift to us is the power and the love to get us through this life, the power and the love to be the people we're made to be, the people we will never be happy until we are. But that gift—which is a fire—burns low. Sometimes it smolders down to the embers from neglect. It gets buried beneath smoking ashes and coals. We must rekindle it into flame every now and again. You must fan into flame the gift that is within you. But what is that gift? What is your gift to this world, your bit of flame to be added to the brightness of the day? What is your gift? And does it need to be fanned back to flame?

Oh, gifts are tricky things! Down through the course of an ordinary life, a person gives and receives far too many gifts to keep track of. Some are simple, some elaborate. Some gifts are mere tokens, placeholders that say, “I'm thinking of you...but not very hard.” Other gifts say, “I know you. I know your heart and at least a few of its desires.” When have you given someone a gift, and when they received it, you realized with joy that it was perfect? A real home run. When have you given a gift and known immediately that next year you'll just be giving out “gift cards” to Target? It's a tricky business, the giving and receiving of gifts.

Today is World Communion Sunday, an old-fashioned kind of church holy day when every church in every nation is encouraged to receive the Lord's Supper in worship. Always, World Communion Sunday turns my heart to those faraway places where little bits of it have remained. In Cameroon, gifts are very big business, not in a consumerist, commercialized way with glossy ads and Internet pop-ups. No, gifts are big meaning that when you're traveling through the countryside and you pass through a village on foot, the chief of that village will expect a visit and...a gift. How are you supposed to know, as a foreigner, that when you walk down the dusty lane through a little gaggle of mud huts, you should have brought a small bottle of whiskey for the village chief and fifty pieces of bubble gum for the kids? Of course, I also didn't know at the time that you must not give gum to a toddler. I hope I never harmed anyone. Gifts! They're tricky.

It took me two years to get a green card for that country where I stayed five years—and when the card finally came it actually was green! But the process was long. They kept finding just one more document I had to get have in triplicate, just one more signature I had to seek out from a bureaucrat up in the capital, one who never answered his phone and whose surly secretary always told you was at a funeral or sick at home after you'd made the perilous journey in from the countryside. The green card only came when at last I realized, “Gifts! This is a culture of gift-giving, especially to anyone who wields any kind of power.” After failing for two years to get a green card, I finally brought a small gift to the bureaucrat at immigration and had my card in two weeks.

Ah, but Cameroonian gifts as readily as they take them. How many a time I caught a motorcycle-taxi in from a far-flung village with a live chicken under each arm and a huge load of bananas on my back! Of course, the chickens are truly “free range,” and you have to sit and wait while everyone in the village tries to literally beat them out of the bushes and bring them to you. Gifts! Messy, cumbersome, beautiful.

Is there someone in your life who always gives you a gift but whom you never remember to buy for? Most people like that don't really expect or even want anything in return, do they? My stepfather-in-law is the brother of the lady who runs Sacred Heart Bookstore in Bloomfield. Sacred Heart is easily the most Catholic place on earth and a true Pittsburgh institution. The sweet lady who runs it is Sister Mary Madeline. Her family just calls her by her childhood name, Theresa, though she corrects them every time. Each year at Christmas, we go to my mother-in-law's house to find that Sister Mary Madeline, or “Theresa,” has sent gifts. Everyone gets the same exact thing: a coffee mug, a stocking cap, a tee-shirt that lists the cute phrases in “Pittsburghese,” things like “yinz,” “redd up,” “dippy eggs,” n'at. She doesn't really know any of us very well, and the gifts are all identical. But she never fails to send her gifts, receiving nothing in return. That's not what it's about for her. Gifts. You just
receive them with grace. You just say thanks and you mean it from the heart, because the giver remembered you.

“Fan into flame the gift that is within you,” the Epistle of Second Timothy prods a young apostle. “For God’s gift to us is not cowardice, but power and love.” Timothy, well, he’s timid: Timid Tim. He’s beginning to believe that he doesn’t have what it takes to be an apostle in that early church. You can tell from the slightly fatherly, slightly chastising tone of the letter that Tim is one of those incredibly gifted people who doubts his own abilities. He doesn’t “get” what other people see in him. Tim is one of those folks who need others to call their attention back to their own gifts, for they doubts those gifts. Maybe you’ve been there? But we can really only know the joy of living, the joy of contributing to the good of our world, the joy of purpose, when we accept our gift—odd as that gift may be—and understand that God is trying to give it to the world through us, and then cast aside our timidity and rejoice in using that gift. And so, I ask you again, what is the gift that ought to burn bright within you? And are you letting it shine as it ought, or does it smolder beneath ashes, waiting to be fanned into flame?

That’s the risk of gifts: They might just end up in attics and in closets. The giver doesn’t know when he or she hands it over whether that gift will be cherished and used or if it might find its way to the Bower Hill flea market. Gifts are hard to keep track of. We forget who they came from and what the occasion. Many gifts get lost in the shuffle. We pack them up in boxes when we move to a new house, and somehow that box never quite gets unpacked. We set them aside, and in time they lose their meaning, the Christmas sweaters, and the scented candles, and the bottles of cologne, and the neckties, and all the books we’ll never read. It hurts when we give someone a gift only to realize that they’ll never care for it. It hurts, too, when we look into the life of another person and see all the many, many gifts they could be using to add much goodness and beauty to the world. But they refuse to see their own giftedness, like young Timothy. They live as if those gifts are not. And as the years trickle past, those gifts—unused—begin to lose their luster. They’re pushed away to the attics and the closets of that person’s life. A person fails to see his or her own gifts, and simply denies them to the world for which they were intended. The false humility of looking past our own giftedness, the self-effacement of neglecting the good gifts God has placed in our lives, is it not a form of robbery, taking from the world a thing of beauty and goodness that God intends to give through us?

Each week on the way out of church, little Susie handed the minister a dollar, the one her father had given her to put in the offering. A little puzzled, the minister finally asked, “Susie, why don’t you put the dollar in the offering plate instead of handing it to me?” Susie patted the minister’s hand and replied, “I want you to have it. Daddy says you’re a really poor preacher.” If that’s a true story, I hope the preacher kept taking those dollars. Sometimes you just have to accept a gift as it was intended.

It’s important to accept a gift. And yet, it’s surely true that we see each other’s gifts more readily than we see our own sometimes. Looking at ourselves, we’ll largely see what we lack. That’s why it’s important, as the Epistle of Second Timothy demonstrates, to help the people around us see the gifts that they’ve been given and to encourage them to fan their perhaps waning embers into flame, to name them, call attention to them, and then allow people to live into their own gifts. What a joy, what a sense of purpose when a person begins to claim his or her giftedness. If you’ve ever taught any kind of class, then you know this. Ninety percent of the students could be drifting off or just going through the motions of learning, but then there are one or two—you can see it in their eyes—who resonate with the things you’re teaching. It’s shown them new insight into life and the world. It’s shown them something inside themselves. You’ve fanned into flame a gift buried deep beneath the smoldering ashes of one person’s life, and that flame, that passion, that joy changes the world. What else could? Who looked into your life one day and said, “You know, Timid Tim, you’ve got a gift”? Conversely, one of the unhappiest places in life is to have your gifts denied, dismissed, or overlooked. For example—speaking of poor preachers—when I hear some of the truly dynamic women preachers we have today—Barbara Brown Taylor, Anna Carter Florence, Nadia Bolz-Webber—I can’t believe that the
chance once denied itself the gift of their preaching by claiming that the gift was only given to men. How cruel to deny a person the freedom to claim and exercise the gifts that should be their joy, their contribution.

Don't you think each of the nations of the earth brings its gifts to the table, too? As do all the races and peoples? That's why, on this World Communion Sunday, we've got gifts from around the world here on our communion table, to symbolize the unseen presence of all those many who gather at table this day: an ebony cross from Hekima Place in Kenya, a teak cross from Mackenzie Leprosarium in Thailand, a soapstone elephant from Cameroon, a trifold icon depicting the life of Christ from Haiti—a gift brought back to me by our Haiti travel team after one of their earlier visits. Yes, each nation of the earth brings its gifts to the human story and to history, and how much poorer we all are when we dismiss or refuse their good gifts—whether we like them or not.

J.K. Rowling was a poor woman living off government subsidies when she wrote the Harry Potter books, the best-selling book series in history. She's also the first person ever to lose her billionaire status by giving away so much of her money. Now she's merely a millionaire. She says, “You have a moral responsibility when you've been given more than you need, to do wise things with it and give intelligently.” You too have been given more than you need, enough to neglect. You've been given a gift. And it is both power and love. What is your gift, the one that you've perhaps been tempted to leave smoldering beneath the ashes? Rekindle the flame! Of course it's scary, maybe even risky, but that gift, whatever it is, it's not just for you. It's for the world around you, and there's such a profound sense of wholeness in your life when you accept it and learn to share it. “Rekindle into flame the gift of God that is within you...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but of power and love.” Amen