

Grow deep: Equipped with spiritual wisdom

Lessons: **Philippians 4:8-9; I Timothy 4:6-8, 15-16**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians%204:8-9;%20I%20Timothy%204:6-8,%2015-16>

On Tuesday, our Associate Conference Minister, Deborah Streeter, and I met together. Deborah is the representative of the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ to the Santa Clara Association of UCC churches. Her job is to help churches and pastors fulfill our mission, and to serve as a bridge to the resources of the larger church. Deborah was on sabbatical this summer, so she's been making the rounds to the churches of the Association, talking to us pastors and catching up.

I asked her about her sabbatical, and Deborah told me about using some of the time to listen to God, to discern where God was calling her next in her ministry. She has been serving in her current contexts for a while, and wanted to know if God had any changes in mind, or new ways to use and fulfill the gifts God had given her.

Then we talked about this church. I told her that we continue to try to discern where God is calling us. As a church, we try to understand what changes God has in mind for us. We try to discover the new ways to use and fulfill the gifts the God has given us. Among the gifts I mentioned were:

- † God gave us the gift of depth — we are a church that wants to go deep with God and with other people.
- † God gave us a gift of prophecy — we are a church that prefers the truth, even when it's hard to take.
- † God gave us a gift of faith — we are a church that trusts in God's intent, even if we aren't always sure of what God is doing.
- † God gave us a gift of joy — we love to worship and celebrate and to rejoice.

Then, I started to tell her about all the specifics — all the gifts of the Holy Spirit this year:

- † **courage** to use the bequests of the Nelson family — the money that built Nelson Hall decades ago and the money received just a few years ago — to God bring new life to our ministries;
- † **hospitality** to rehabilitate this campus, starting with the rooms used in our community ministries, so that the searchers who use this space might feel welcome and at home.
- † **joy-filled energy** in our music ministry and worship life;
- † **dedication to finding and growing leaders**, through and ongoing budget for training lay leaders, and the beginning of the ministry coach position;
- † **learning** through the conferences and revivals we've hosted or participated in;
- † **spiritual formation** through the new women's ministry and men's ministry and youth ministry;
- † **outreaching desire to share the gospel** through the developing ministry of evangelism;
- † **heartburst for men in real soul need** lived out in the growth and deepening of the ministry to homeless men at Montgomery Street;
- † **hope that we might be doing God's will**, from the searchers who bring a longing for God and are looking for a place to really live,
- † **signs of the power of God to transform lives** in longterm members who have new light in their eyes and open Bibles on their desks after years of placidness and apathy.

As I was reciting all that's going on around here, suddenly, God stopped me short. In the middle of telling all the concrete changes, all the activities, all the new ministries — God caught me up mid-sentence.

I heard, as clear as day, these words echoing in my mind: "Tell her the truth. Tell her what you know to be true. Claim Me. Claim Me."

And then, I heard myself say, "I don't know what God has in mind for us. But I know that God is at work here. The Holy Spirit is working amidst and within our people. We are disagreeing, which means we are talking. We are failing, which means we're trying new things. We are in chaos, which means that new life is springing up all over and we aren't in control. We are learning, which means we are listening to Jesus, and practicing what he taught."

- † Men go out together and buy Bibles.
- † Jerry needs prayer and we go to her and pray with her at her home.
- † Children want to sing and so a new choir starts.
- † A guy from the Thursday night AA group stops me in the courtyard and witness to me about the grace of God in his father's death.
- † JoMary wants to join this church community but wants to do it when her daughter can be here too.
- † Suzanne and Jim, who have been here just a short time, have a baby and Mary Alice takes them food.
- † The Montgomery Street Christmas project sets a target of not 85 bags, but 125 bags so all the men get something — and they start talking about how we can really be church with them.
- † John, who spends many of his waking hours doing facilities and a/v here, does the real work of God by talking faith with strangers in the grocery store.
- † Some of our most stalwart hard workers are finally admitting they need help. And other people are helping when they don't need to.

In my heart I heard Jesus saying, "Claim Me." And so I told Deborah what I know to be true: "I don't know what God has in mind for us, but the Holy Spirit is working amidst and within our people. Jesus is in the house."

Jesus is in the house. Jesus is working the miracle of new life in his people at Campbell UCC. Jesus is resurrecting and guiding and setting us on the path to true discipleship and service in our communities.

When the apostle Paul was called to be the pastor to the pastors — to coach the baby churches in Rome and Philippi and Corinth and Colossae and Thessalonica — he went around or wrote letters and asked their senior pastors: what's going on in your church these days? And the leaders in all those newly born churches would tell him about the struggles and the conflicts and the pain, and all the new life that God was birthing.

Paul would write letters to the churches and the pastors, like the letters to the Philippians and to Timothy we read today. A lot of the time, he was just trying to solve the conflicts and the struggles. He didn't say the same thing to every church, and some of what he told the churches then we wouldn't do now.

But when Paul was at his best – when God was guiding his letter-writing hand – he would write things like what we read today: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. ... be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed. Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress.”

Paul knew that conflict and change and struggle were part of new life, and that if the pastors and the churches steeped themselves in the teachings of Jesus and the prophets, and if they practiced what they had been taught, and they focused on what was good and honorable and just and true, they would please God, and be good servants of Christ Jesus, and be at peace.

My brothers and sisters, Jesus is in this house. Through the power and influence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is helping us take the risk of changing our lives and our surrounding. He is leading us to be faithful to the gospel instead of protective of tradition. He is leading us to invest money and time in our ministries – in your ministries – instead of saving it for the second coming, or for the promised land. Because you are being faithful – worshiping, praying, reading scripture, giving and serving and relating, God is helping us dig in deeply. God is guiding us when the work is hard.

The Apostle Paul knew that the elders of the church, the ones steeped in Scripture and in practice, needed to train the new believers and coach the new leaders. So Paul advised Timothy to do what he had learned and received and seen in his mentor Paul. In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we read about the Holy Spirit guiding Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, so that he could guide him in the understanding of scripture.

In this day and in this place, we are learning to learn from others, and learning how to raise up and train and mentor ministers right here. We’re doing it through the old work of asking for advice and help, and the new work of empowering our new ministry coach to help us grow.

And all the time, we are steeping ourselves in prayer. If you’re not praying for the ministries of this church yet, if you’re not praying for the staff and the leaders and all the ministers of this church body every day, if you’re not praying that we will continue to reach past our doors to the people who really need to hear the good news of Jesus’ inclusive love, please start. Please pray for all of us every day. Because to do the work Jesus has called us to do, we are going to need the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit every hour of every day.

And we can have it. My brothers and my sisters, we have what we need to do both do God’s work and to have God’s peace.

- † We have been given the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- † We have trust in the wisdom of the Lord.
- † We have the word of scripture and of many centuries and many streams of tradition.
- † We have the practices of daily living with Christ and community.
- † We have faith in Jesus Christ, who suffered and died and was resurrected by God into new life that changed the world.
- † We have faith in the One God who made himself a servant in order to be a king we could love.

† We have faith in the One who allowed himself to suffer.

† We have faith in Jesus who became Christ and triumphed over death so that we might never need to fear.

In our practice and in our faith, God has given us the spiritual wisdom we need to do God's work and to have God's peace. All we have to do is claim it, exercise it, and let the Holy Spirit do its work among us.

Claim your faith in Christ Jesus. Claim the spiritual gifts you have been given. Claim the practices you know grow deep roots. Claim it. Claim Christ.

Let us pray:

Holy Jesus, our Christ, we claim you right now. We name you as the One who overcame death, and leads us to do the same. We want to be faithful to you. We want to serve you. We want to really use the gifts you have given us. We want to bring your good news of abundant life to anyone and everyone who is dying to hear it. Help us to discern your desire for each of us, and to claim you and glorify you in all we do. In your name we pray, Amen.