

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**October 3, 2010**  
**2 Timothy 1:1-14**

**“A Spirit of Power”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

It was June 1983 when I flew to Alaska to meet the other 18 members of the expedition team that would together climb Mt. McKinley in the Alaska Range. Many of you have heard stories about the McKinley climb (some of you have seen the slides!). I had, at that point in my life, climbed many of the major peaks in the lower 48. It is hard to believe that I was once a high altitude mountaineer, but I actually was.

I trained for the McKinley climb for a year and left for Alaska believing that McKinley would be just a larger, longer, taller, and harder version of other big mountains I had climbed in the Wind River Range, the Rockies, the Absorkas, the North Cascades. I was wrong.

The bus left us off at the road head and we crossed the tundra for two days on our approach to the mountain. Then, on day three, we climbed up and over McGonagall Pass and stepped from the tundra onto the Muldrow Glacier—at that moment we stepped from the tundra **onto the mountain**. That meant full winter gear, crampons, ice axes, and harnesses. We would now be roped to each other for the next month as we climbed and then descended the mountain. We would be wearing harnesses and be traveling in rope teams until the day we returned to that exact spot and were stepping from the Muldrow Glacier back onto the tundra at McGonagall Pass.

Once we stepped onto the glacier, I was overcome with fear. The mountain felt enormous and forbidding. My breathing became shallow. The three other members of my rope team were getting organized and one of them handed me the end of a rope to tie into the team.

In my state of complete and gripping fear, I forgot how to tie myself into my harness with the appropriate knot—a knot I had tied hundreds of times in the past. I stood on the glacier in my harness frozen with fear, unable to tie myself into the rope.

A member of my rope team saw my fear and immobility and came up to me—bless his kind heart. “It will be okay Andrea,” he said as he threaded the rope through my harness and tied me in.

I remember the feeling I had that day—an overpowering sense of fear and dread. I remembered that feeling when I read today’s passage from the Book of 2 Timothy.

Paul is writing to Timothy, a young pastor who Paul regarded as a son. Timothy is struggling to keep the new faith community in Ephesus alive and well. Paul writes in this letter: “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

Now Paul was an apostle and very smart man. So who am I to disagree with him? But I do.

I think we come out of the womb with fear inside us, and sometimes the fear inside us wins and we demonstrate cowardice. But that is precisely why acts of courage and bravery are so profound. If God only gave us a “spirit of power” as Paul suggests, we would not know what it is like to be rise above fear and cowardice and experience true courage. If being courageous was our normal, everyday state, it would not be remarkable when we were brave and able to do what we thought was impossible for us to accomplish.

We can and we do know fear...and cowardice lurks right behind fear as its shadow.

Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is not letting fear win.

Courage is feeling the fear, and going forward anyway.

I believe we are made in the image of God with a wild and wonderful pot pourri of characteristics, emotions and attributes inside us when we are born.

We have the capacity to be fearful and brave, cowardly and courageous, kind and unkind, loving and apathetic, angry and forgiving, suspicious and trusting. We are born with the capacity to feel a huge range of emotions. That is the essence of our nature and spirit as human beings.

And as independent, thinking and discriminating people, we have the capacity to highlight, lift up or accentuate certain emotions, reactions and behaviors.

We can fan the flame of trust inside us and as trust grows, suspicion diminishes.

We can fan the flame of patience inside us and as patience grows, impatience diminishes.

We can fan the flame of courage inside us, and as courage grows cowardice diminishes.

Paul is right when he says that God gave us a spirit of power, love and self-discipline. And we can choose to bring forward those feelings, responses, behaviors and they can WIN out over the other emotions we hope to diminish.

But that is a hard process.

It is hard to be watchful, discerning, disciplined and careful so that we are consistently choosing kindness over and over again, patience, love, generosity, courage, and forgiveness over and over again. It is easy to lapse, to grow weary, to be discouraged, to sink—shall we say—or regress to more primal (and less Christian) unsavory thoughts and behaviors...

**that is why being a part of a faith community is so important.**

When we make a commitment to being an active and responsible member of a faith community—as eight new people in our church have done today—we make ourselves accountable to others and so we try even harder to bring forth the life-affirming, love-filled, generous and brave parts of ourselves to be that person to our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Being part of a community of faith means that we are exposing our behaviors to a group of God's people—we are drawing close to a group people of faith and revealing our strengths and our weaknesses and being accountable to them.

It is easier—I have said this many times before—to avoid committing our hearts and minds to a community of faith. It is easier to go it alone, to be a solo traveler, to avoid the responsibility and expectations that go along with being a part of a faith community. And to avoid the exposure. It is easy not to commit, not to join, not to be close and accountable to others.

Easier. But not the way Jesus lived or the model he left for us.

Jesus' entire ministry was done in community.

He and his close companions traveled and ate together, studied and prayed together, touched and healed the sick and spoke of God's unfailing love side by side.

And like Jesus and the early Christians with Timothy in Ephesus and the other early Christian communities, we too are drawn together to work, sing, pray, study and worship side by side.

And in so doing, we see each other's lives up close.

We do not hide from one another.

We walk this journey together.

And so we try to bring forward the strongest and finest of our emotions, behaviors and reactions with and for each other.

We try to be brave with and for each other, honest in our interactions with one another, kind and caring to each other, and generous with all that we have. We are open and exposed, striving to be our best selves for and with our church family. And slowly we notice that bringing our best self forward is not limited to our church family. As we bring forward our loving, brave, generous and caring selves with one another, those behaviors leak into all our relationships far beyond these walls. Our faith community, our church family is a practice run, a dress rehearsal for our behavior in the wider world. What we learn, practice and hone here, is exportable. We take what we learn and practice here out into the community and the world. Our faith community changes us on a fundamental level, makes us better people, and we share our good selves with this beautiful but broken world. And so when Paul says, "...God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline..." I simply do not agree.

God gave us the capacity to be frightened and cowardly AND the ability to be strong and brave. And God is there to lead and guide us. And like a rope team, we are there with and for each other. We are a community of faith—holding one another in love, practicing together being our very best selves, rehearsing being courageous rather than afraid, trying to be other-focused rather than self-focused, generous rather than pinched. As a church family, we are learning together, practicing together, and then taking our brave and beautiful selves into the world.

Many years ago, I stood nearly paralyzed on the Muldrow Glacier, so frightened I could not tie the knot I had tied so many times before. So gripped with fear I could not tie myself into my harness, give the ready sign to my rope team and start climbing the big mountain I had come to Alaska to climb.

But with the help from an expedition mate, and I believe the grace of God, I was able to reach deep inside—past the fear that was also inside me, past the doubts and immobility and rising panic—I was able to reach deep and past those very human emotions and find the courage to turn toward the summit and take the first step on that enormous mountain. A rope team member said one supportive sentence and helped me tie one important knot and I went forward, brave and fortified.

Today, I am spiritually roped to all of you. God has led me to you and you to this place and us to each other. And we are like a spiritual rope team. When I have questions about what to do, choices that involve being generous or not, loving or not, patient or not, compassionate or not, I realize that I want to be my best self for my church family, my spiritual rope team. I want to be a model for you, I want to live as Jesus lived, I want to be my best self for and with all of you. I feel accountable to you, I feel responsible for you, and I feel that you call forth my strongest, clearest, kindest, best self. We do that for each other. We're roped together. It's called being in community. It's called being a church. It's like being a rope team on a climb but we're disciples on a journey of faith.

And so I say to the eight people who joined our church today....welcome to the family. Welcome to the rope team. You will find that your very best self grows larger, deeper and fuller with us. AND when you slip, don't worry, we've got you and we'll hold on tight. Amen.