

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 10/07/07  
Scripture: 2 Timothy

*“...God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord....I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust.”*

One of absolute saddest spiritual moments in my tenure as pastor in West Concord was an October Sunday in 2004 I'll never forget, a Sunday when Our Lady Help of Christians, the Catholic Church directly across the street from our own church; the church with whom our faith community shared a full-time music minister, shared choirs, shared families, shared a corner and a village--that church closed after ninety-seven years of serving folks in the name of Jesus Christ. Closed. Offered one last mass. Sang one final hymn. The priest, a good friend to so many, gave one last tearful benediction. The sanctuary that had contained the joyful shrieks of thousands of baptized babies being baptized, the tears of families in grief, the fears of townspeople on December 7, 1941 and September 11, 2001--it would shelter no more souls. So on that bittersweet autumn afternoon, the church bells rang out in funereal tones, people left, the doors were shut and padlocked, and it was gone. A footnote in a history book. A fading echo down the halls of spiritual memory.

Churches close for lots of reasons--our Roman Catholic friends were told by their leadership that Our Lady's closed for lack of pastoral leadership--not enough men going into the priesthood. Many, many churches—Catholic and Protestant alike--face this same prospect in these post-modern 21st century days. Just last week, the 370-year old Old First Church (United Church of Christ) in downtown Springfield, Massachusetts voted to close its doors come January 1st. This is the church in the very heart of that city. A church of the Underground Railroad, where President John Adams' body lay in state, whose pulpit featured the likes of Daniel Webster and abolitionist John Brown. But with a dwindling membership, an empty endowment and a spiritually exhausted congregation it voted to close its doors.

There are some truths that churches like Old First can't control--demographics, birth rates, changing neighborhoods, a struggling downtown. Yet there are clear, simple reasons why some churches die and why some churches thrive, why some climb the heights and burst at the seams—think of our friends at Bethel AME--and why some churches merely limp along, not down enough to yet expire but not vibrant enough to really live.

Five years ago the UCC planted its first new church in Boston in more than 100 years. Starting from zero, a young clergy couple, with nothing more than a passion for Christ and a post office box, began Hope Church Boston which today is one of our fastest growing churches. This evening 150 folks will gather to worship at Hope, rocking with a five piece praise band, lots of squirming babies, an average age of 35! I've mentored one of the founding Pastors, Liz, and I know what she says is the main reason Hope is alive.

It is evangelism, evangelism—folks at Hope Church loving Hope and God so much that they feel compelled, joyful about sharing their Hope with neighbors, friends, and even strangers. Evangelism: I believe this is what separates churches on the upswing from churches on the down slope.

Evangelism—I know it is a loaded term. For some--staid Congregationalists, reticent Yankee New Englanders--to share faith out loud with others, actually talk about faith--that's hard. Not natural. It can feel showy, "show-offish". Seem pushy. Or rude. It is not polite to talk about religion in mixed company or we argue that our faith speaks for itself in the lives that we lead and so we are very unsure of this whole evangelism thing. We may see evangelism as the purview of late night TV evangelists or slick talking preachers or obnoxious in your face missionaries and yet...let me take a stab at resurrecting, reacquiring, taking back evangelism for us, for our unique flavor of Christianity, for progressive Christians, liberal Christians, quiet Christians.

Evangelism simply means good news, good news. Evangelism is God's charge to us: that when we know God's good news and love, when we experience it first hand in our hearts and lives in a wonderful place like Pilgrim Church, we are so moved by this blessing that we want to share it with others--to invite them to check out Pilgrim UCC. Invite others to be a part of our church, to bring their kid to a youth group where they'll find unconditional acceptance; to church school where they can learn of right and wrong; to worship which challenges and transforms; to outreach and mission from Dorchester to New Orleans, that dares to believe hope and not despair can end war, defeat poverty.

That's the kind of place I love calling my spiritual home. Isn't that the kind of place you'd joyfully recommend? To a new neighbor who just moved to town, an overscheduled family struggling with life in 2007, a single Mom in need of support, a widowed man needing comfort and care, an idealistic young adult who wants to make the world a better place. That's Evangelism. Evangelism=invitation. Invitation. Hospitality. Witnessing to others about what God means for us. Not guilt. Not coercion. Not obnoxiousness.

I mean, remember of how you got to Pilgrim. Someone invited you. They asked you in! It was a gracious friend. Your teenager who first was invited to youth group. A loving pastor who called on you at home.

It's ironic: we'll easily recommend a chi-chi new French restaurant to friends, or the latest technological gizmo to anyone who will listen or a hot new movie, but church? God? A power that can change lives? Then we clam up. Shut down. Become a bit embarrassed, and, I know it is a strong word, but ashamed even to share our faith with others, faith that means so much to us.

That's what was happening in the church the apostle Timothy is writing to in today's Biblical text. He's sending letter of encouragement to a local church pastor who's worried about his spiritually stumbling church. The pews are sparsely filled; the offering plate is dusty; a once vibrant spirit is flat. As commentator Ron Starenko notes, "[Timothy addresses] a...pastor concerned about the well being of the church for future generations...the original apostles were nearly gone...fewer new converts could be found...folks were becoming too settled in the Christian heritage...Would the faith last? Would the baptized remain faithful?...[Yes]—for a tradition worth believing and following is worth perpetuating to our own and every generation....[but first folks must] becomes a living testimony to our Lord...witnesses to what we have received [from God]."

Listen to Timothy again: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love....Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our

Lord...for I know the one in whom I have put my trust.” Evangelism=invitation.  
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It was so much fun yesterday to see all the energy, joy and commitment of this church literally spilling out onto the front lawn and South Main Street for the youth group yard sale. As strangers milled about and picked over all that stuff I thought—what a great symbol of evangelism—of inviting friends, neighbors, total strangers to come on in, come on down, find out more about just what God is doing at Pilgrim Church.

After seven weeks among you I can report this faith community is fully alive! But—we must not ever take that for granted. We must tell others our story so they can become a part of God’s story too. God gives us faith, but not just for us, for the whole world too. Let’s love God. Let’s share God. Let’s invite others in. Let all the storytellers of God’s good news say, “Amen!”