

GUARD THE GOOD TREASURE

from the pulpit of

Harbor Church, Block Island, RI

by

Rev. Terry Minchow-Proffitt

Reading: II Timothy 1:1-14

October 16, 2011

Good morning. I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here with you again. This is my fourth visit to Block Island since you called Steve as your pastor. Actually, to be honest, my visits have been more with you, Harbor Church, than to the island itself, and each time I'm here God touches my heart through the shared life and love of your church. I've been blessed to retreat with you, enjoy the music and poetry and fellowship of your coffee house, and to worship with you. So thank you.

I'll be brief this morning and to the point. The primary reason for my being here this weekend was to lead a retreat for your church leaders that would unpack the results of your recent Natural Church Development Survey. We did this yesterday. I cannot rehash fully this morning what took us six hours to process. Besides, I'm sure that Steve and your leadership will share more about this process with you later. But here's the gist:

Natural Church Development (NCD) is a church growth approach that helps you discover what characteristics make for a healthy church. Their belief is that too often we are focused on the numbers and not on the underlying core principles that bring vitality and life to the church. To use a plant analogy, we tend to focus on the *fruit* instead of tending to the *root*. NCD began back in the 80s with Christian Schwarz, who set out to discover what makes for a healthy and growing church. His extensive field research involved 1000 Christian churches of all sizes and kinds, in some 32 countries and five continents speaking 18 languages. After processing some 4.2 million pieces of data using stringent social science methods, he had his answer: Cross-culturally, no matter where a church might be located or what it's theology might be, all healthy and growing churches embody in a substantial way eight characteristics, which I'll simply list for you right now: Empowering Leadership, Gift-based Ministry, Passionate Spirituality, Effective Structures, Inspiring Worship Services, Holistic Small Groups, Need-oriented Evangelism, and Loving Relationships.

Christian then followed up this discovery by developing the survey which you just took to help churches measure how well they embody these eight qualities. NCD teaches that once you get your survey back, you will find out how you're faring in each area. Then they encourage you to take a good look at your weakest area and your strongest area, what they call your *minimum factor* and your *maximum factor*. Then focus your energy as a church on improving your weakest quality by leveraging your strength(s). The goal is to embody all eight characteristics in a balanced and deep way.

Your survey revealed that Harbor Church is strongest in the area of Gift-based Ministry. This refers to how well you help each other discover, develop and exercise your gifts so that the Body of Christ “grows and builds itself up in love.”

Your survey also revealed that your weakest area was Passionate Spirituality. This refers to a type of spiritual intimacy with God that leads to a strong conviction that God will act in powerful ways, both in your heart and in your world. It's a faith that is colored by both honesty and hope. It does *not* refer to the exact manner or method your faith is expressed, but to whether your faith is lived out, in your own way and through your own gifts and personality, with “commitment, fire and enthusiasm.” So according to your survey, Gift-based Ministry is your strong suit; while Passionate Spirituality is the area you most need to develop.

One more word about your weakest area. NCD teaches that this is where you should focus your energy, but in a healing way, not in a negative way. Every church, and over 50,000 have taken this survey, *every* church has a minimum factor that needs attention. So I encourage you to work on Passionate Spirituality by leaning on your considerable strengths, with Gift-based Ministry being the strongest (and Empowering Leadership and Inspiring Worship close in tow).

Finally, it was made clear yesterday that the term Passionate Spirituality is problematic for many of you, especially the “passionate” part. It conjures images of charismatic hand-waving or other behavior that is seen as culturally inappropriate, especially in New England where people are more reserved in general, but particularly low-key with matters of faith. I fully understand. In my last church we used NCD throughout my eight-year tenure there. We processed five different surveys, four of them dealing with Passionate Spirituality. We, too, were uncomfortable with the term. Some in my church felt it sounded too Fundamentalistic, like NCD was pressuring everyone to be hyper-certain and

happy. And since our journey with NCD began in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, others felt the term sounded too fanatical, almost jihadist. So what we had to do over time was develop our own way of naming and experiencing more fully the reality behind the term. In a sense, we set out to do what the Apostle Paul encourages Timothy and his church to do in today's passage. We asked: How can we "rekindle the gift of God that is within" us, the faith that has been placed there by God, as Paul says, through the "laying on of hands"?

Don't you love the way Paul talks about faith here in such a deeply human and "hands-on" way? He even reminds Timothy that his faith was "handed down" to him by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. So, in this passage, Paul's speaking of a spiritual journey that has been "deposited," given to us by God through others. He encourages us to "Guard the good treasure" entrusted to us, "with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us" (II Tim. 1:14. By "guard" he doesn't mean to hoard or hog it all to ourselves. Nor does Paul want us to fortress ourselves off from the world around us.

Some 25 years ago, when Steve and I were card-carrying Southern Baptists, we were encouraged to attend their annual convention. So that's how the two of us ended up in Las Vegas together. Honestly! Moderate Baptist back then used to set up a parallel track of speakers, and that year they invited one of our favorite preachers, Fred Craddock. I still remember a story he told of how he had to make do with dinner once when his wife was away. For him, that meant a pb&j sandwich, but he was out of peanut butter. So he stopped at the nearby Winn Dixie for a jar of peanut butter. The store was huge and he was in a hurry. Knowing he could spend a whole afternoon looking for the peanut butter, he walked up to a woman pushing a cart and asked if she knew where he could find the peanut butter. Suddenly she jerked around, stared him down, and said, "Are you trying to hit on me?" He said, "I'm looking for the peanut butter." As he began backing away from her he almost tripped over a stock boy. So he asked him about the peanut butter's whereabouts. He said, "Aisle five, I think, way down on the left." So Fred goes to aisle five and sure enough there are all these big jars of peanut butter. So he took one. As he turned to leave, he walks right by the woman again and she says, "You *were* looking for the peanut butter." And then she added, "Well, nowadays you can't be too careful." That's when Fred said, "Lady, yes you can. Yes you can."

We can become too careful with our faith, too guarded with the "good treasure" entrusted to us. When Paul encourages us to "guard" the treasure of our faith, he means that we should *regard* it, honor it, be fortified by it (not fortified).

Paul's calling us to be attentive to our faith, to tend it much like you would tend a fire, to find out ways to feed our own unique and ongoing hunger and thirst for God's Presence, to enter more fully into the life that Jesus calls blessed as we hunger and thirst for righteousness. And as we do this, to make sure the path we take bears the peculiar blessing of our own personality and gifts. Your journey in the name of Christ still bears your name—and God celebrates the gift of you.

So the term Passionate Spirituality may not work for you. Find one that's better suited. Steve suggested yesterday Authentic or Genuine Spirituality, or you might like Engaged Spirituality. However you name it, the important thing is to treasure your faith within and live it out. That's our challenge. Author John Updike once said that our culture has lost "whole octaves" of passion. In our over-stimulated world that grows increasingly frantic, numb and distracted, my prayer is that you will find at Harbor Church the deepening, the dovetailing, of your passion for God and compassion for others. May you draw ever close to the gift of your *calling*, that place described by Frederick Buechner as awaiting all of us, that place for you on Block Island where your "deep gladness meets the world's deep need." And may you be blessed in your prayerful pursuit. Amen.