

SERMON TITLE: "Set an Example"
SERMON TEXT: 1 Timothy 4:6-16 (also Jeremiah 1:4-10)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 24, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

For several months I've known that today would be the day when Stephen Boyer was going to speak about our church's youth ministries back in the 1960s and 70s. When it became apparent that today was also going to be a big day for the youth fundraiser—Save It or Shave It—it seemed appropriate to dedicate this service to youth. That's why, instead of going to their Sunday School class, the youth are in worship with us today, lighting the candles, giving their announcement, and reading scripture.

Since the teenagers are here with us, I want to take this opportunity to say "Thank you!" again to the youth who helped with Vacation Bible School. The youth really added a lot. By serving as puppeteer, science assistant, and crew leaders, they demonstrated to the children how to be quiet, listen, and pay attention--and how to speak up and participate when it's time for that. As the youth joined in the singing and the motions to the songs, they really encouraged the children to engage and get excited. As the youth showed enthusiasm for learning, they set a wonderful example for the kids.

Each of today's scripture readings speaks about a young person that God called into ministry. In the children's sermon time, we heard about young Samuel, whom God called in the middle of the night to become a special prophet of God. At a young age, Samuel started paying close attention to God's voice, and he served as an important spiritual leader of Israel.

The reading from Jeremiah told us how God called that young man to speak God's words to the people. When Jeremiah said, "Ah, Lord God! I don't know how to speak, for I am only a boy," the Lord replied, "Don't say that you're only a boy . . . for you shall speak whatever I command you." And speak he did. The book of Jeremiah has 52 chapters; it's one of the longest books in the Bible.

And then, last but not least, there's our reading from First Timothy. In chapter one, verses six through sixteen, we hear an older mentor giving advice to young Timothy. In verse 12, that mentor says,

“Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example.” Learning doesn’t only go in one direction—from the old to the young. The young also have a lot that they can teach believers of any age. So, this sermon today is especially for the youth. But whether we’re young or in our mature years, let’s dig into this scripture this morning and see how we can prepare ourselves to set an example.

1—TRAIN YOURSELF IN GODLINESS

The first pointer we get in this passage is in verse seven. There, the instruction to young Timothy is, “train yourself in godliness.” If we are going to set an example for other believers, we have to know what we’re doing. We have to be ready. We have to be fit. The writer indicates that physical training has some value. It’s good to build strength by working your heart, lungs, and muscles. But what’s even more important is to be spiritually fit. We need to be trained in godliness.

How does that happen? Well, just like physical exercise, we need to exercise our spiritual muscles. We need to put ourselves through daily training in the spiritual disciplines of praying, reading the Bible, attending worship, and participating in classes and Christian fellowship. We need to practice generosity, do service projects, and speak about our faith with other people outside the church. We need to trust in God in difficult times, so our faith muscles can be tested and grow.

Since the instruction is to train ourselves in godliness, we might ask, what is godliness? What is that righteousness and goodness that God wants us to believe, think, and do? Determining God’s will can sometimes be challenging. Fortunately, in the United Methodist Church, we have a training exercise that helps us out a lot. It’s called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. That’s a fancy way of saying that John Wesley taught that there are four sources of authority to help us discern God’s will and expectations. First, we ask, “What does the Bible say?” Second, we ask, “What does church tradition tell us?” Third, we ask, “What does reason say about this?” Fourth, we ask, “What does our human experience tell us?” No matter what belief or behavior we have a question about, we can put it into this four-sided box called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and see what comes out.

Using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral takes some work and some practice, and definitely some time. You certainly might need the help of other Christians to figure this out. But the exercise is really good. When you put your godliness question into that box and stir it around with those four sources of authority, usually you can come out with a pretty good answer of what God wants you to believe and do. And that really is good training in godliness.

2—CONDUCT YOURSELF IN LOVE

Of course, there's more to setting an example than just going through the training to *know* what godliness is. For those who are going to set an example, verse 12 also gives the instruction to *conduct* yourself in love. Lots of people know and maybe even talk a lot about the right thing to do and then still fail to do it. They don't practice what they preach, and that sets up a situation of hypocrisy.

That's why First Timothy chapter four indicates that how we speak, how we behave, and how we live out our faith should all be determined by love in our hearts. If there's ever a question about which way we should go or which thing we should do, the greatest purity test is always love. If there's ever a conflict of values or understandings of God's expectations, love is what should prevail.

Being godly or righteous isn't as much about being right as it is about loving other people. When Jesus was questioned about why he and his disciples didn't obey Jewish purity laws, he always went to the heart of the matter. Be compassionate. Be kind. Be considerate. Be respectful. Don't say cruel things. Don't hurt people with your deeds or your words. Jesus taught that, if there's any question or conflict between competing rules or values, the two laws that supersede all others are to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

I think that's what the Apostle Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 13, where he wrote, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to

move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to the flames, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (vv. 1-3).

We can know, say, and do a lot of things right, but if we don’t operate from a place of love, none of our righteousness matters. Whether young or old, to set an example, we must conduct ourselves in love.

3—DON’T NEGLECT THE GIFT THAT IS IN YOU

So, to set an example, we hear the instruction to train yourself in godliness and conduct yourself in love. A third suggestion given to young Timothy and to us is found in verse 14: “Don’t neglect the gift that is in you.”

God made you unique for a reason. You have special talents. Like we learned in Superhero VBS, you have special powers. Use them. Be proud of who you are. Speak up. Stand up. Use your gifts to proclaim God’s word. Through art, drama, music, sports, science, construction, business endeavors, volunteering in the community, teaching Sunday school, social activism, your amazing personality, your hobbies, your preaching, whatever! Discover the niche God has created you to fill and use that gift for good. Set a positive example in whatever field of interest and expertise God has given you.

Notice our instruction isn’t to do something that is boring to us or impossible for us. Instead, we’re told not to neglect the gift that is already in us—something that should come fairly naturally. Sure, we can all hone our skills through practice. Even natural talent can be improved and perfected with time and effort. But the gifts God has given us usually are something inherent in who we are, something we enjoy, and something that’s fulfilling to our soul.

Sometimes we stifle who we are because we’re timid or ashamed. Maybe someone has criticized us or belittled who we are. Maybe we think our unique gift isn’t really appropriate or helpful. But when we’re fulfilling our God-given potential and having a blast making the most of the unique gifts that God has given us, that authenticity will be attractive and helpful to other people. God has made us varied and

unique so that the gospel message can be told in a variety of ways and written on a variety of lives and hearts. You set an example when you don't neglect the gift that is in you.

CONCLUSION

As I was trying to think how to conclude this sermon, I typed the words "United Methodist youth set example" into my Google search engine. What came up at the top was a news story about a youth group from the city of Orange, Texas. The Orange First United Methodist Church has given their youth a high level of responsibility for managing their own youth ministry. Every Sunday night, the youth group time begins with a fellowship meal. Then they have prayer time in the chapel, skits or videos made by the students to introduce a lesson concept, the presentation of the lesson, small group discussion, and games. With prior preparation assistance from their youth pastor, their parents, and other volunteers, the youth help lead all those different parts.

Trent Brown, a high school junior who serves on the Youth Council Games Committee, says his youth group is a place where the youth accept one another and that the youth "can be vulnerable and ask for prayer about anything." As for his own part in the leadership, Trent says that "leading games has been a blast this year . . . It's awesome to see everyone play a game I pick or make up and really enjoy it or learn from it!"*

Every youth group is different, just like every person is different. But no matter who we are or how old we are, God has called us train ourselves in godliness, conduct ourselves in love, and not to neglect the gift that is in us. Whether we're old or whether we're young, that's how we will set an example.

*<https://www.txcumc.org/newsdetail/first-umc-orange-youth-lead-by-example-8093869>