

“The Bold and the Beautiful”

Sermon by Ann Evankovich

Women’s Sunday

Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:3-7 Thanksgiving and Encouragement

Hebrews 4: 14-16 Jesus, the Great High Priest

given at Christian Community Presbyterian Church on

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<http://ccpc.bowiemd.org/sermons.htm>

Maggie Kuhn was a great American activist who would be 101 this month if she were still alive today. Forced to retire at age 65, Maggie was not going to be told she was too old to count. This bold and beautiful woman founded the Gray Panthers, which was an organization that worked on the concerns of the elderly, such as pension rights and age discrimination. At age 67 she wrote a book called “Get Out There and Do Something about Injustice.”

One of her many inspirational quotes was on a card that I sent my mother a year or so ago. This quote was the perfect opening for my first ever, official sermon. She said, “...speak your mind – even if your voice shakes.” That’s what I’m doing here today.

So pardon my nerves. After 10 years as a high school English and Special Education teacher, I got pretty good about acting calm when I wasn’t. Motherhood has also been an excellent tutor for learning how to maintain a calm façade – like just last Wednesday when Mik came into my kitchen bleeding profusely from somewhere on his face. I wanted to call my mom – but then I remembered *I was* the mom. I’m drawing on those skills now to control my stage fright.

I’ve heard it said that everyone has one good novel in them. My personal novel is still in the research stage. I also believe that everyone has at least one sermon in them. This sermon has been brewing in me for at least a decade – probably all my life.

Last spring I realized that CCPC honored women’s spiritual gifts annually on Women’s Sunday. Mom pointed out the preaching opportunity to me, but I was too personally empty and still too new to this congregation and to Presbyterianism. Now a year has passed and my mom pointed out the opportunity coming by again. I spoke to Peggy Oates and agreed to the task, but then I chickened out. But how could I chicken out of a sermon about boldness? So last Sunday I recommitted to the assignment.

Apparently there was no rush of volunteers.

I want to thank you for this amazing opportunity. The given theme of this Sunday is “Tending the Flame.” If I have my history correct, Presbyterians have been ordaining women for 100 years. In this congregation, the first woman was appointed to be an elder the year I was born – that was 41 years ago. All my life, this church has been allowing women to use their gifts to honor God.

That's amazing. I can't tell you what a relief it is to worship in a place where women's gifts are **not only permitted, but honored and even recruited**. I know many of you out there; both men and women grew up in this wonderful environment. You grew up never aware that women could be blocked from participation. I grew up not realizing that public participation was an available option.

So what is old news to you is new to me and to many. That's kind of like the Gospel isn't it? What many of us have grown up with, the good news of God's love for us through Jesus, is so new and so fresh to many people. We must remember that what we are comfortable with, what we have feasted on, others are starving for.

So if today's theme is "Tending the Flame," I just wanted you to know that I am dancing around that flame. Thank you for building the fire. I am honored to tend it.

In the second letter that we have from Paul to Timothy, Paul begins with the words of encouragement that _____ read for us just a few moments ago.

Timothy's faith brings Paul to tears of joy. He attributes that faith to the women who raised Timothy, an intense faith that has been shared by three generations. I bet most of you can think of someone who tended the early embers of the faith that brought you here today. It may have been your mother or grandmother, like Timothy. It may have been a mentor and friend, like Paul was for Timothy.

Whatever human vessel sparked that faith in you, **that faith is a gift from God**. Those people who fanned the flame of your faith were ambassadors of God, just as I'm sure you are to others, whether you are aware of it or not. That is one of the great reasons we worship together, to help fan the flame of our faith.

God gave us this gift of faith through those who came before us. And **"God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."**

That's why I agreed to speak to you today. Through God, I know I can override my anxieties and my timid impulses. He has given me a spirit of power, and he has given it to each of you. He has given it to you if you are **8 years old or 80**.

He has given it to you whether you are **male or female**.

He has given it to you whether you are **single or married**, **Presbyterian or other** religion, whatever your **skin color**, whatever your **education level**,

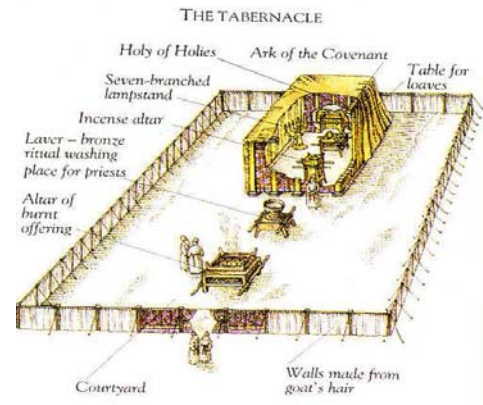
no matter how you manage your finances, and

no matter how many times we fail to overcome temptation.

He has given us this gift of faith. We only need to accept it.

(temple slide please)

Four thousand years ago or so, God gave Moses details for constructing and using the tabernacle: the place where God himself would descend from heaven and meet with man face to face. God gave Moses excruciating details about every aspect of the tabernacle construction and use. The tabernacle was the precursor for the temple that was eventually built by King Solomon.



The center point of the temple and earlier tabernacle was the Most Holy Place. In this place, one day a year, the High Priest would come face to face with God on the Day of Atonement. At no other time did anyone dare to approach God so boldly. A tapestry-like curtain separated this inner room from the rest of the temple. In fact the Hebrews were so sure of instant death in the inadvertent presence of Almighty Jehovah that they tied a rope to the ankle of the high priest and bells to the hem of his sacred robes. With these devices they could tell if the high priest was still alive without looking behind the veil. If he was dead, they could pull him out without coming face to face with God.

You could only be a priest if you were **a man** from the tribe of **Levi**, a requirement over which you obviously had no control. According to Exodus 21, a male Levite would be excluded from the priesthood if he had any **physical defect**.

He couldn't be blind or have any eye defect.

He couldn't be lame, disfigured or deformed, even if it was just a cripple hand or foot.

He couldn't be hunchbacked or dwarfed, or have any sores.

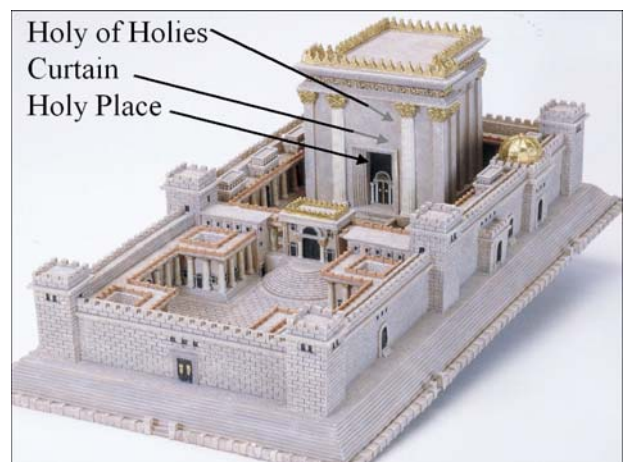
He couldn't be a priest if he were a eunuch.

He couldn't be a priest if your wife wasn't a virgin when you married or your unmarried daughters weren't.

There were many exclusions to the priesthood.

Only Aaron, and eventually a series of his physically flawless descendants, could go into the Most Holy Place, and they could only go in once a year.

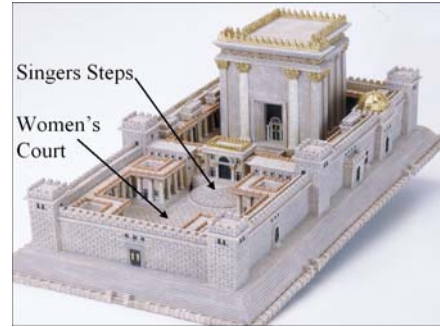
Circling out from the Most Holy Place were other levels of access to God. Surrounding the Most Holy Place was the Holy Place, which was somewhat like a stage. If you were a priest from the tribe of Levi, you could perform your duties in the Holy Place that was in front of the Most Holy Place *if* certain rituals were performed.



Surrounding this priestly area was a **covered area where the men of Israel** who weren't Levitical priests could enter to worship their creator - that is men who were not ill, who had performed various cleansing rituals, and who had made their appropriate Sin, Grain, Guilt, and Burnt offerings.

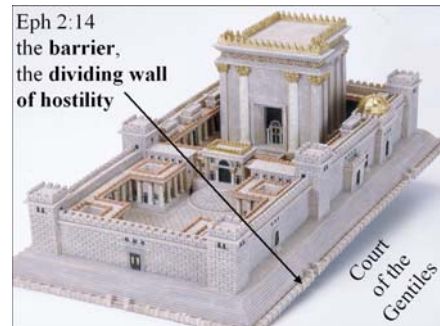


Down a series of steps, **the women of Israel could gather in a courtyard** and at least hear the musicians of the temple who would often performed on the steps between the two areas - that is if they weren't menstruating or hadn't recently given birth.



If you were an Israelite who had the misfortune of being a leper, you could only approach **a side gate of the temple**. Women in their monthly cycles of uncleanness could approach at another gate, but not enter.

Outside the temple you could only approach to a **low wall if you were not an Israelite**. Temple guards enforced this barrier much like today's militiamen guard our southern border.



So in these ancient times, **many literal barriers to God** were enforced based on your physical traits: **ethnicity, gender, health**.

Then Jesus came.

He predicted he would destroy the temple. The Hebrews who were heavily involved in maintaining the sacred barriers were alarmed by this idea. Destroy the temple? Blasphemy!

Matthew 27:51 describes an event at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross: the temple curtain that separated the Most Holy Place, the place where God's very presence came to earth, was torn in two from top to bottom. The ultimate symbol of God's inaccessibility was destroyed.

The Hebrews 4 passage read before the sermon tells us that **Jesus is Now our only High Priest**. We go through no one else here on earth. We are told to approach the throne of God's grace with confidence, boldly. What will we find there? **Mercy and Grace in our time of need**.

But we as humans *have a hard time with free access*. We want to regulate and organize. We are comforted by rituals and lists of rules. But over time, our bold forefathers and foremothers have knocked down those barriers to God that we have set back up. Men and women in the very early church endured hardship and alienation to bring the mercy and love of God to the Gentiles. Hundreds of years ago, Christian martyrs like John Wycliffe and William Tyndale gave their very lives in an effort to translate the Bible into English, granting access to God to the common people. And 100 years ago, the Presbyterian Church made the bold statement that they would no longer maintain official barriers to women's participation. And 41 years ago, Marie Little was bold enough to be the first woman elder in this particular congregation; I'm sure confronting some of the emotional barriers that remained for women at that time. Barriers are still in place officially and unofficially in churches around the globe. There may even still be some here.

But because of Jesus, and because of the people who have gone before us in faith, we must continue to be bold in our lives and in our faith.

God will use your life whether you like it or not. He will use your deliberate efforts for His purposes, and He will use your screw-ups too, just like he used Josephs' brothers' big mistake. When we are bold in our lives, however, we give God more to work with. God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power.

Ephesians 3:12 tells us that "In him and through faith in him, we may approach God with **freedom and confidence**."

I love worshipping at CCPC because you guys seem to already know this. I read through the whole issue of the Caller this week and was moved by the boldness and beauty of this congregation. You have it there in your programs.

The Caller begins with a heartwarming letter **from Dee McCarty** whose service to this congregation and this community has been such a blessing. There was an announcement about a **program to honor the retirement of Jon Youngdahl** who has served this congregation and God boldly with his musical talents. **Astrid Jonas wrote a wonderful biography of our soon to be installed youth minister** who will bring many assets to our church family.

The list of announcements continued with **charitable project reports:**

Disaster Relief support,

help for small farmers,

small loans for people in developing nations,

textbooks for flooded high schools in this country,

food for those in this community who have fallen on hard times.

There was a thank you from the high school for the use of our hall for a quiet testing location.

And then there were **the bios of the new deacon and elder nominees**. They include people from various educational backgrounds; people spanning a wide age range; people new to Presbyterianism and life long members; local members and ones who grew up in other parts of the country; people with civil and military backgrounds.

And that was just this week's Caller. There are so many other ways this congregation acts beautifully and boldly to serve God, our congregation, our community, and the world. *You guys are great. I am honored to be a part of your lives.*

There is always **room for more boldness**. Where we are strong in some areas, we are weak in others. We could use more boldness in our efforts to better appeal to the racial diversity of our community. We could use some bold effort to reach those in our community with special needs children.

Some of you may need to follow the **example of Mary of Bethany** and take some time to sit at the feet of Jesus long enough to restore your zeal. It is so easy to be as busy as Martha. I'm up here praising all the Marthas. *But if you have spread yourself too thin, if you are feeling your edges getting crispy as burn-out approaches*, you may need a bit of a sabbatical. That's OK. Saying so takes boldness.

When I arrived here I was empty. All the boldness I could summon was only enough to get me through the doors. I had no strength for anything else. You all welcomed me anyway. I had nothing to offer, and you let me float. You let me sit down like Mary until I felt restored. I feel so much stronger than I did last year. Thank you for allowing me that rest.

When the tabernacle and the temple were dedicated, the Scriptures describe God's Holy Spirit descending on the structures, filling it with a cloud of the Glory of God. After Jesus fulfilled God's plan with his resurrection, the Scriptures describe in Acts 2 that the Spirit of God descended on the believers, both men and women, like wind and fire.

That fire makes each of us now God's temple,
no matter your tribe,
no matter your purity,
your health,
your gender,
your age,
your past.

**You are God's temple. You contain His Holy Fire.
He has not given you a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of Power.**

Unleash it!