

WGUMC May 29, 2016 "The Next Generation"
2 Timothy 4:1-8

Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.

Thus begins every episode of *Star Trek: The Next*

Generation, my personal favorite of the Star Trek series of series. I loved Patrick Stewart as Jean Luc-Picard. I'm a pastor, not a ship's captain, but I wish I could say "Make it so" like he did. Even though it was kind of corny at times, I hated to see the mission end.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the original Star Trek series. What was special about what Gene Roddenberry did back in 1966 was that he used the setting of a future world to make social commentary on this world. By projecting our problems into the far future, somehow he made them seem more manageable, more resolvable. In the best episodes, he

encouraged us to use our moral imaginations to envision new ways of thinking and being.

Scripture does the same thing, if we use our imaginations when we read it. With all of its talk of the future, the day of the Lord, the coming kingdom of God, the Bible is almost begging us to imagine that life can be different because we can be different.

The author of Second Timothy (most assuredly not Paul) is trying to hold onto this hope. So he urges Timothy, as a leader in the Church, to keep proclaiming the message, because the time is coming when people won't want to hear it, when they will have ears itching for new ideas, new ways of thinking and being, and he's afraid that they may give up on the truth altogether and wander away into misconceptions and myths.

Makes me wonder what was happening in the Church to make the author so afraid of the future. Scholars think the letter was written in the early second century. That would

mean that the author was living long after the Apostles lived and long after Paul died. The Christian Church was still small and no one knew how long it would survive. So I can imagine that Christian leaders were concerned about how they were going to go on without Peter, without Paul, without any of the founding followers of the Jesus movement.

They were scared that folks would stray from the path, forget the faith, and give up on the God they had come to know in Jesus Christ. And so one of them wrote a letter in the name of Paul, in the style of Paul's last will and testament, to give hope, strength and guidance to a Church that had lost its elders in the faith.

On this Memorial Day weekend, I'm thinking that that Church is like this one. Oh how we are missing so many of our elders in the faith! And we need them. We need Christians who are in what Richard Rohr calls "the second half of life" or we are liable to miss out on life.

It's not that we need them for their words. Rohr says, "When elders speak, they need very few words...." [Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 119] No, it's not their words, but their very being, their presence, that is so precious to us. Why? Because they are so full of life, so full of truth, so full of grace; in short, so full of God. Such elders are the 'grand' parents of the world, because we feel so safe and loved around them. [Rohr, 124]

Every one of us needs elders in faith in order to have faith and our institutions need them, too. This church has been abundantly blessed with second-half-of-life Christians. But many of them are no longer with us. While the changes in this congregation over the past five years may have been predictable, they are still incredible.

I did some figuring the other day. By my quick count, we have lost about 25 of our every-Sunday attenders in five years. But at the same time, we have taken in 31 new members by

confirmation and 24 new families. Though we don't see them in church as often as our elders, most of them are involved here in some way, participating in the youth program, the winter shelter, the mission trips, Lisa's boot camp, the Preschool and Vacation Bible School. The reality is that Sunday morning, which was central for the last generation, is not so much so for The Next Generation.

It's easy to think that we have lost something. And we really do miss Grace and Ruby and Al and Dorothy and Walt and Wayne and Elizabeth and so many dear ones. The place just doesn't feel the same without them. But we have also gained something: we have a new calling. We essentially have a new congregation. And we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to invite the Spirit to lead us into a brand new way of thinking and being Church.

When Jesus was about to die, he told his disciples that he would not leave them orphaned. He was sending the Holy Spirit

to guide and to teach them. [John 14:18, 26] Ruby and Grace and Al and Walt didn't leave us orphaned, either. The Holy Spirit that led them will lead us, too.

The great patriot, Thomas Paine, wrote, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." I would paraphrase that by saying that it is in the Spirit's power to begin this church over again.

That is my motivation for starting some conversation about worship over the next few months. This congregation is changing, and how we do worship is going to change, too. But when I talk about rethinking worship or beginning the church again, I don't mean that we should be giving up on what the author of 2 Timothy calls "sound doctrine." I have no intention of turning away from listening to the truth and wandering away into myths. [2 Tim 4:4] And I don't mean that we should give up our rich history or dismiss our traditions and liturgy. But I do

mean that we have to learn to retell the story and reshape that history for new people in fast-changing times.

What are we to do? As our text says, the one thing we must do is proclaim the message. [2 Tim 4:2] The times are not always favorable, and as messengers, we will not always feel capable. Nevertheless, we are called to carry out our ministry fully. So we'd better figure out how to make the message more accessible and the medium more adaptable.

But for some, any talk of change is too radical. Let me assure you that nothing we could conceive of doing in this church would be as radical as what some women priests are doing in the Catholic Church, or rather outside of it. I was invited to the ordination of a Catholic woman priest yesterday. The service wasn't held in a Roman Catholic Church, obviously. It was held at Campbell UMC. It was a wonderful ceremony of beautiful liturgy, inspiring music, inclusive prayers and open communion.

Though it was not my tradition, it was familiar enough to a traditional Methodist like me. I felt totally welcome and at home there, so much so that when it was over, I began inquiring where there were communities led by women priests so that I might find a worship service not on a Sunday morning where I was welcome to take communion without having to offer it to myself. I learned that there are bi-monthly services in San Francisco and in Berkeley.

Women who feel called to minister in the Roman Catholic Church are not wandering away into myths. They are fighting the good fight, and even though they haven't finished the race, they have kept the faith. Their courage tells me that the church that served the last generation won't be the church that serves the next generation.

Today, we realize that we have a different fight. The world has changed. The rules have changed. We live in a far more secular society than the one our elders grew up in. And

we are running a different race. Surviving in Silicon Valley is much harder now. Participating in a faith community is more of a challenge now.

Because it is a different fight and a different race, we need a different way of looking at our faith. Gone are the days when you could say that Christianity has all the answers. Today, we live among those who find truth in other religions and in no religion. They find truth in art and literature, science and technology, and we have to learn how to welcome truth and not be threatened by it. We Christians need a humbler faith, a more trusting heart, a more open and curious mind, and a much more active imagination so that we can envision new ways of thinking and being Christ for this world.

I am quite sure that the challenges and changes will just keep coming. But then I remember the legacy left for us by all the second-half-of-life Christians who have graced this place. Because of their faith, the challenges facing the Church today

cannot depress me. On the contrary, they excite me. I have reason to believe that what churches such as ours are going through now is a "falling upward" moment for the whole Jesus movement.

So I look forward to helping the Holy Spirit empower you to become the next generation of elders. You may think you're not ready for it, that you couldn't possibly be another Ruby or Grace or Al or Walt, but that doesn't matter. The Holy Spirit is the one doing the work, anyway. The important thing to know is that this is your church now, and it is yours to begin over again.

If this sounds like an epic undertaking, you're right. If we could make this into a TV series, each Sunday episode would start something like this:

Spirit: the final frontier. These are the journeys of the congregation Willow Glen. It's continuing mission: to seek out new life, to explore new ways to make disciples of Jesus Christ and to transform the world by boldly taking the Gospel of Love to people and places it has never gone before.

Holy Spirit, make it so.