

## Christian Community Jesus Would Recognize

As we move into a time of reflection, we recognize the gift it is to be freely gathered here for worship as new friends and friends we've known for a while. We are on the live stream and on this land that has been loved by First Nations and others throughout time and where we are now weaving our way of community. I invite you to join your hearts with mine in a moment prayer – closing your eyes if that helps to ground you in this moment.

God of all, we invite your Spirit to speak to us today through words, music and silence, and as we join in the feast first hosted by Jesus. Spark our imaginations today as we wonder how we might become more fully a community of people Jesus would recognize as following him. We ask this as disciples of Jesus. Amen.

This morning, I invite us to consider to what extent our congregation is a collective of people whom Jesus would recognize as attempting to follow his teachings and lived example.

The framing of the spiritual task at hand was influenced by my recollection of a 2015 quote from John Fugelsang – actor, political commentator, and author of the book, *Separation of Church and Hate: A Sane Person's Guide to Taking Back the Bible from Fundamentalists, Fascists, and Flock-Fleecing Frauds*.

Let's hear how Fugelsang wondered if people would recognize Jesus. With reference to President Obama (again, this was in 2015 – the last year of his second term in office), Fugelsang made this statement:

*“Obama is not a brown-skinned anti-war socialist who gives away free healthcare. You're thinking of Jesus.”*

This statement points to the stark difference between the colonizer Jesus created in the narrow and limited image of a particular people group (and currently perpetuated by the white Christian nationalist movement) and the actual historical Jesus remembered by gospel writers (both within and beyond the pages in our Bible).

White Christian nationalism is spoken of with increasing frequency in the present day. If you were to run a simple internet search for the words “colonizer Jesus versus historical Jesus,” you would find a popular graphic comparing the two. Here are several of the 12 pair of descriptors:

- white versus middle eastern brown skinned
- died for your sins versus killed by church and state
- silent in the face of oppression versus liberates the oppressed
- a king versus a homeless man and child refugee
- endorses holy war versus non-violent

When I was ordained as a pastor within the United Church of Christ, I vowed to be faithful to my call as a minister of word and sacrament. I hope that, today – joined with neighbors worldwide, through sacred words and through the sacrament of Holy Communion, we will discover both more about how we can be a community Jesus would recognize as patterning itself after him and more about how to recognize the real Jesus in our midst.

Let’s begin by examining several verses within the reading from the letter to Timothy, looking for glimmers of who Jesus was and hints of how we can faithfully follow him. And then we will turn to poet Jan Richardson for encouragement along the journey.

First, there is a moment in which Timothy's mentor reminds Timothy and us to trust that the Spirit of God works just as powerfully in each of us as it has in each of our ancestors in faith – clear back to Jesus and beyond. The mentor writes, *“I'm reminded of your **sincere faith**, which first **lived** in your grandmother Lois, then in your mother Eunice, and now, I'm certain, **in you as well.**”*

Each of us can be assured that we carry in the fabric of our being a sincere faith – a genuine trusting connection – to the love of God as modeled by many who have gone before us. Our congregation's five core values are preceded by these words: *“Our relationships with God and each other form the current that empowers us to...”* And then we name those values. I invite you to repeat them after me – in an unrushed fashion:

- nurture spiritual growth
- invest in children and youth
- offer a space of belonging
- commit to social justice and inclusivity
- balance innovation and tradition

**I wonder – both in our individual lives and as a congregation – how might leaning into the author's reminder of our deep connection to the love of God help us to more effectively nurture, invest, offer, commit, and balance?**

Timothy's mentor moves from a reminder of deep connection to the heart of God to encouragement of actions toward which that trusting connection leads us. Let's hear how they encourage Timothy and us to live boldly.

We hear, *“That’s why I want to remind you to **fan into flame the gift of God**, which is in you... For God didn’t give us a spirit of timidity, but **a spirit of power, of love, of self-discipline.**”*

Bearing in mind that Timothy and other first and second century disciples of Jesus lived in fear of persecution for their countercultural beliefs and practices, **I wonder – in what space of your life could you live more boldly (claim your power, practice love and self-discipline? And in what aspects of our life as a congregation could we live more boldly (claiming our power, practicing love and self-discipline?**

And that isn’t even the hardest challenge Timothy’s mentor poses. We hear, *“**[J]oin with me in suffering for the Gospel by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life...**”*

**I wonder – on this World Communion Sunday, can you identify some ways in which you (in which we) are resting too comfortably in our privilege?** How might you, how might we take steps into spaces of, if not suffering for the Gospel, at least some sacred discomfort on behalf of the gospel message of love and justice for all?

And Timothy’s mentor does not leave us without a word of comforting assurance (mixed with one more challenge). We hear, *“**Guard the rich deposit of faith with the help of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us.**”*

**I wonder – how do you guard the deposit of faith within you? Do you keep it the Holy Spirit’s flame kindled through your thoughts, words and actions?** We can trust that God’s Holy Spirit will never leave us, even when we drop the fan from time to time. We will find a fan within reach for rekindling the flame once more.

On this special day in the circle of our church year, let's join with poet Jan Richardson, trusting that even in this ritual of gathering for weekly worship and especially through the sacrament of Holy Communion, we can and will remind one another of the power we have to give to and receive from one another.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment if you are comfortable doing so. And let's hold our hands open and our hearts open to hear a few of her words speaking directly to each of us.

*"And the arms will open wide to gather us in.  
And our hearts will open wide to receive."*

*"And we will come as children who trust there is enough.  
And we will come unhindered and free."*

*"And everywhere will be the feast."*

At our best, a Christian community Jesus would recognize is one of great vulnerability and great power – vulnerability and power to ***"fan into flame the gift of God,"*** with ***"a spirit of power, of love, of self-discipline."***

Let's be and do that, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)  
October 5, 2025 | 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (World Communion Sunday)  
2 Timothy 1:1-14, "Christian Community Jesus Would Recognize"