

Go out into the world in peace. Have courage! Hold fast to what is good. Return no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering. Honor all people. Love and serve the Lord your God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I grew up with those words. At Westminster Presbyterian Church, in Charlottesville, Virginia, at the end of every service, Bill Smith, our minister, would come out to the center of the chancel, he was tall and imposing – then again, pretty much everyone looked tall and imposing to me, I guess -- and Bill would lift up his hands over us and speak those words. *Go out into the world in peace. Have Courage. Hold fast to what is good.* I never saw the words written down until much later; I didn't need to, still don't need to – they became written within me, etched in memory, engraven on the heart. *Return no one evil for evil, strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, help the suffering. Honor all people.*

I was a kid like any other kid in church back then – bored, counting the minutes until coffee hour, hoping they'd have the really good donuts this week. Actually, I probably *wasn't* a kid just like any other kid, I'm pretty sure I was worse. My brother and I sat in the balcony together while our parents sang in the church choir, the set-up was just like here. My mother would watch us from the alto section to make sure we were behaving, so we learned the art of smiling sweetly while pinching each other viciously – she couldn't see that. There was also a gap at the end of the pew where you could drop pencils down which would fall all the way to the Narthex and drive the ushers crazy – you can't really do that in this church. My point being – I was not paying a whole lot of attention in church. But when Bill lifted his hands up over us, and said those words, I was always riveted. I always felt something, I felt something. *Love and serve the Lord your God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.*

I think I felt called to attention. I think I felt like I was being reminded of who I was supposed to be. And I felt – I guess the

word would be empowered. Listening to those words not only made me want to be a better person, it felt like those words were giving me the **power** to be better. *In the power of the Holy Spirit. have courage. honor all people.*

Years later, as a student minister at First Church in New Haven, nervously leading worship for the first time in my life, I came to the close of the service, and suddenly realized I was supposed to have prepared a Benediction, a final blessing. I had nothing in my notes. But when I opened my mouth, out came the words. *Go out into the world in peace. Have courage, Hold fast to what is good. Return no one evil for evil.* And that's all I've ever said, ever since.

In truth, the words aren't a benediction properly -- a benediction is supposed to be just a blessing: God be with you, my children. Have a nice day. **These** words are, well, they're what I experienced them as when I was a kid: a call to attention. A charge. An encouragement. An empowering. *Love and serve The Lord your God rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.*

And what is wonderful about this church, this church that David and I are blessed to serve, is that it is full of people -- you -- who live out these words, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

You, you go out into the world in peace , with courage, you do your best to hold on to what is good, you believe in not repaying wrong with wrong, evil for evil. You get out there and look for ways to strengthen the fainthearted, to find the weak and support them, to find the suffering and help. I've seen you -- I've seen you carrying food into Operation Hope, I've seen you sit patiently at a hospital bed, I've seen you march in Hartford, and walk kids across the street to Sunday School. I've gotten your phone calls on the days when it is really hard to figure out how to hold on to the good, how to honor all people, even the ones who are driving you right round the bend. I know how seriously you take those words.

This week, Malala Yousafzai has been traveling around our country, the young woman who has lived with extraordinary

courage for all of her young life, bravely standing against the Taliban as a voice for education, for peace, for women. Midweek, she appeared on The Daily Show, and what she said on that show left host Jon Stewart speechless, no mean feat. She was talking about the moment when she found out, at age 13, that the Taliban had her in their sights, had marked her for death. And she said she thought about what she would do if one of them came after her, and she said to herself, well, I will hit him with my shoe. And then she said this, *"I thought, no Malala, if you hit a Talib with your shoe then there would be no difference between you and the Talib. You must not treat others that much with cruelty and that much harshly, you must fight others but through peace, and through dialogue and through education. So I thought, when he comes I'll tell him how important education is and that I even want education for your children as well. Now do what you want."*

Her face still swollen from where the Taliban did shoot her, Malala reminded us all of what Christlikeness looks like, in the

person of a 16 year old Muslim girl who goes out each day into the world in peace, has courage, and holds fast to what is good.

And what I loved was that the next day, when the video of her statement was making the rounds, what I loved was the number of people who sent it to me and said "we need to show this at church" ..."you need to talk about this at church"... "this is what we believe in at our church."

It is, it **is** what we believe in at our church. Have courage. Return no one evil for evil. Honor all people.

Stewardship season isn't actually about asking for money, though it will be asked for, sure. Stewardship season is really about how we live our lives, and what empowers us to live them right. This place, this church, is **where** we are empowered to live out God's calling. In scripture and song, in the words and love of the people around us, in the strength of shared faith, and yes, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Here is where we are inspired -- by a story like Malala's, or by the story of a little boy named

Simon [as mentioned in David's sermon previously] and a wonderful old veteran named Noyes Spelman.

We need this place, because this is where we are called to attention, just like my pesky 10 year old self, called to attention, challenged, and empowered.

And then from this blessed place we do go out into the world in peace, with courage, to help the suffering and honor all people, and to love and serve The Lord our God.

Amen.