

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers, and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Today’s reading is from a letter written by Paul to the believers at the church in Thessalonica. In Paul’s day, the region in which Thessalonica was located was known as Macedonia. Today, it is northern Greece. The busy metropolis of Thessalonica was an important commercial and cultural seaport in the ancient Roman world. As was the case in many of the big cities, people practiced many forms of religion— often times they worshiped many, many idols and gods.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy went to Thessalonica to share the gospel during Paul’s second mission trip. On three consecutive Sabbaths they went to the synagogue and shared the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. They converted many people to the Jesus way, many of whom were devout Greeks and other Gentiles who understood Jewish faith, but who had not become Jews themselves.

The Jewish leaders were not happy about the conversions of these lost souls that resulted from the teachings shared by these by Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Conflict erupted, so Paul and Silas left for Berea and Timothy joined them later. Even so, a new church of believers was born in Thessalonica.

Some time passed, before Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to assist the church. Timothy took good reports back to Paul about how the church was doing. Timothy’s one observation that was a bit troubling, however, involved their understanding of the teaching of Christ’s second coming. They misunderstood what Paul taught them. Some thought that Christ would return immediately, so they were confused when their loved ones died because they expected Christ to return beforehand. Another reason for their confusion is that they were being persecuted. It didn’t add up to them that if they were following Jesus and Jesus was going to return, that God would allow them to endure persecution.

So, in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonian church he assures them that all believers will one day be united with Christ, even those who have died. And he told them that no one knows the time of Christ’s return. In the meantime, believers must live moral and holy lives, following the teachings of Jesus until he returns.

We find that a second letter was needed from Paul. It seems there was still confusion among members of the church about this issue. Clear communication can be really tough when one tries to do it through a letter. We know that is true sometimes as we try to communicate through modern technologies like email and texting.

The believers at Thessalonica still had questions about Christ’s second coming. They misunderstood again what Paul meant about the timing of Christ’s return. Because of mounting persecution, they thought the return of Christ had to be very soon. They began to question their faith, wondering if their faith was strong enough to endure the times until Christ’s return. So, some were near the edge of becoming idle in their faith.

These fragile believers needed some encouragement, and that’s what Paul gave them at the opening of this second letter. After Paul’s personal greeting, including prayers for grace and peace to be upon them, he said, as we heard read to us this morning, “We must always give thanks to God for you.”

The Greek word from which is translated “must always,” is “opheilo,” which suggest obligation, we ought to give thanks, we are bound to give thanks. This tells us that Paul was truly thankful for their growing faith and their love for one another, which was something the young church needed to hear.

Paul was wise enough to know that pessimistically agreeing with them about their faith would only make them more despondent about themselves. So instead, he lifted-up their positive qualities and achievements, hoping to give them some confidence in themselves because he believed in them.

When he was a young boy, the great painter, Benjamin West, decided to paint a picture of his sister while his mother was not at home. He got out the bottles of ink and started, but soon had an awful mess. His mother eventually returned and of course saw the mess. Instead of scolding him, she picked up the portrait and declared, “What a beautiful picture of your sister!” Then she kissed him. Later in life he said, “With that kiss I became a painter.”

Likewise, Paul, wanting to encourage and to build confidence in the Thessalonian Christians pointed out their strengths. He told them, “Your faith is growing abundantly.” Take note of the use of the present tense verb, “is.” Paul is telling them he is thankful for the faith they have now and the fact that it continues to grow abundantly. He was encouraging them to keep nurturing their faith through worship of the one True God, prayer, and study of Christ’s teachings. They were on the right track.

Paul also praised their efforts by stating “the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.” The Greek word used here for love is *agape*, meaning, the kind of love that involves concern for the welfare of one another. Being the church involves service to one another. Although it may begin as satisfying the feeling of a sense of duty, it swells, it grows into producing a deep feeling of great joy to serve one another, and it strengthens the bond of the church body.

Then in verse 4, we read Paul says, “Therefore”, meaning because they have this growing faith and this increasing love for one another, he goes on to say, “we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.” He dispels their self-doubts and assures them that they are successfully enduring the difficulties of the times as they await Christ’s return.

The lectionary, for some reason then, skips over verses five through ten, and we’re not sure why. These verses pick-up on Paul’s mention of the persecutions and afflictions the Thessalonian Christians were enduring. It’s a discussion on the “righteous judgment of God.” He says that as Christians await the return of Christ, there will be suffering, hardships, destruction, and persecution; but in the end, when Christ returns, God will reward their faithfulness and punish their persecutors.

Paul never gives a day or time when this will happen. He can’t, because no one knows, except God. He just clearly states that this WILL happen “WHEN the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.” (verse 8)

Perhaps, this portion of text was left out of the lectionary because of the controversial discussion of the end times that it stirs up. I’m okay with that. For me, the focus is not on the how and when, and all the signs of the times. For me, it’s all about what Paul highlights to the Thessalonian church, Christ will return and justice will be won.

Church, we cannot be idle, simply waiting for Christ’s return, for God to do something to make this world better. When things don’t seem to be changing for the better in our own lives, or in the community around us or in the world, we should not allow this to cause doubt about the value of faith, or question the strength of our own faith. If we do, our faith may lie idle, and even fade. We cannot allow our faith to grow idle because a faith that is honored and put into action is nurtured to grow and gives us the wisdom and strength to endure that which we do not understand and that which we cannot change. Faith is a powerful weapon we have at our disposal to battle attacks of disappointment, insecurity, impatience and evil.

Unamuno, the Spanish philosopher, tells about the Roman aqueduct at Segovia, in his native Spain. It was built in 109 A.D. For eighteen hundred years, it carried cool water from the mountains to the hot and thirsty city. Nearly sixty generations of men drank from its flow.

Then came another generation, a recent one, who said, "This aqueduct is so great a marvel that it ought to be preserved for our children, as a museum piece. We shall relieve it of its centuries-long labor." They did; they laid modern iron pipes. They gave the ancient bricks and mortar a reverent rest. And the aqueduct began to fall apart. The sun beating on the dry mortar caused it to crumble. The bricks and stone sagged and threatened to fall. What ages of service could not destroy idleness disintegrated.

So, it is with us if we allow our faith to become idle. If we are to endure in times of great stress and difficulty, we must beforehand overcome the temptations to submit to lies and uncertainties that challenge our faith and perhaps make us lazy in practicing and building our faith. If then our faith becomes idle, the church becomes idle.

And, church, we cannot be lazy with our service and our expressions of encouragement and love **for one another**. We should continually work on building up one another. We need each other. The prayers we offer for one another and the help we provide for one another through acts of kindness and service, strengthen our connection with one another through Jesus Christ, our brother.

Our worship, study, play with one another, the efforts we, as a team, put forth to serve our community, all of these, work together to increase our love for one another and creates a powerful bond, assuring each of us that we are not alone on this difficult faith journey. This powerful bond gives us strength as individuals and as a church to endure whatever befalls us.

At the close of chapter one, Paul prays for the Thessalonian church that they will not allow themselves to be distracted by any self-doubts, adversities, or temptations that the tempter may throw in their paths. He prays that they will hold the course as they continue their walk with Christ until that day when they are freed from their tribulations and stand side-by-side in the glory of God.

We can’t give up church! We need to hear Paul’s message to the Thessalonians as words of encouragement, giving us the confidence in our walk with Christ. Because God’s got this! In the end God wins and we need to trust that. Our growing faith and increasing love for one another will help us endure until that day comes. It also allows us to be a beacon for Christ while we wait. Maybe that’s why we still wait, could it be that God wants as many people as possible to be in his glory and joy when Christ returns. If that’s the case, then that’s all the more reason to take these encouraging words to heart. Oh, the wonders and mysteries of God and God’s plan. How great is our God! Amen.