

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 scripture 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 including the worship of innumerable 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 to the Jesus way, many of whom were devout Greeks, Gentiles, understanding to the Jewish faith, but who had not become Jews themselves.

The Jewish leaders were not happy about the conversions that resulted from the teachings shared by these missionaries. 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 passes and 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 was surrounding their understanding of Christ's second coming. They misunderstood Paul's teachings on the second coming. 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.

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 on 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, they risked becoming idle.

They 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 from the NRSV bible, "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.

Luciano Pavarotti, the famous opera star, almost missed his calling. As a young man, he taught elementary school and sang only occasionally. But several people made the difference for him. One was his grandmother who, when he was a boy, would hold him in her lap and say, "You're going to be great, you'll see." Another was his father, who encouraged him to devote more time to singing. Another was his voice teacher, who helped him to develop his great talent.

Pavarotti says, "If I hadn't listened to my father and dropped teaching, I would never be here. And yes, my teacher groomed me. But no teacher ever told me I would become famous. Just my grandmother."

Paul, wanting 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 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 obliging the feeling of a sense of duty, it increases, it grows into producing a 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 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. The closing of this chapter affirms this for me too.

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 nurtured to grow 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 evil.

Several years ago a man reported his observations of the effects of a hurricane on a southeastern Gulf coast town. As he walked up and down the ravaged streets, he observed that the palm trees had been uprooted and flung about. Once tall and majestic, their root systems were too shallow to withstand the hurricane force winds. But as he proceeded, he came upon a lone oak tree. The leaves had been blown away and some of the smaller branches ripped off, but the roots had gone deep, and the tree held its position. And in due season it would again produce leaves.

So it is with us. If we are to endure in times of great stress and difficulty, we must beforehand have put down a depth in our faith that will sustain the blows of the trial.

And, church, we cannot be idle with our service and other building-up expressions of our love for one another. We need each other. The prayers we offer for one another and the help we provide through acts of service, assure us of 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.