

Spiritual Slackers

We've really already heard God's Good News this morning from Cynthia and Bruce but I wanted to make just a few comments on this passage from Paul's correspondence with the church in Thessalonica that I'd chosen for this morning before I knew they were going to be with us.

I've heard these verses used many times over the years to defend the sort of selfishness that would have us turn our backs on people in need. But this passage isn't about sniffing out "welfare cheats" or reducing benefits to the chronically unemployed. What this passage is about is gently correcting those who ignore their duty to the community, who ignore their duty to Creation and who ignore their duty to God. Let me explain what I mean.

The situation in Thessalonica when Paul wrote this letter is one that has repeated many times in the history of the Church and in other religions as well. A small group in the church had become convinced that Christ's return was imminent, likely to come not only within their lifetimes but within less than a year. As a result, they had given up working and simply gathered each day to await the *Parousia*, the "Second Coming." Human nature being what it is, of course, they didn't manage to spend their time completely in worship or singing praises or other positive activities but fell to gossiping and bad-mouthing those "less faithful" members of their church who were still going about their daily business. To add insult to injury, these spiritual slackers were relying on not only their own savings to keep them alive until the day of Christ's appearing but also on regular donations from those still working. The early Church, after all, was famous for sharing among its members, caring for the poor and needy, orphans and widows, the sick and disabled. Surely, these First Century adventists thought, they would be supported in their faithful waiting by those who were less resolute. These were not folks unable to work because of a bad economy or lack of training or mental or physical infirmity. They simply chose to let others care for them while they indulged themselves in feeling superior. They ignored their duty to the community.

Now, we don't have situations like this very often in our own day and when people do stop working and retreat to a hilltop to wait for Jesus or the Mothership, it makes news and attracts mental health care professionals. But we do still have those who ignore their duty to the community by not helping those who are less able to care for themselves, by getting all that they can regardless of consequences to others, by focusing so hard on their own desires that they cannot see the needs around them. If we are looking for an application for this passage in our lives, that's where I would begin. We need to hold each other and all those in our lives accountable when we or they turn a blind eye when we have resources to help and do not use them.

Eagerness for the Second Coming does still inspire people to do odd things, though. Although their numbers are dwindling, there are still Christians who say, "We don't need to worry about pollution or global warming because Jesus is coming soon and all this will be changed anyway." I think Paul's response to them would be very similar to what he wrote to the Thessalonians: "Do your work." These modern spiritual slackers seem to have forgotten one of God's very first commands to humankind. Genesis 2 tells us, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." We need to be about reminding folks that the word "keep" in Genesis 2:15 is the same as the word "keep" in Numbers 6:24: "The Lord bless you and keep you," the great Aaronic Blessing. The Hebrew word is *shamar* and means a caring, loving,

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sustaining keeping. Those who have decided that the Earth is disposable are misreading and ignoring the mandates of Scripture. It doesn't matter how "spiritual" they are; they are slackers. If we do not care for and love God's creation, we are failing in our duty toward it.

Finally, one last thought about the proper work of God's people. When we gather together for worship, we follow a plan of action, an "order of worship" that leads us through a time of praising God, a time of sharing with each other and with God our joys and concerns and resources, a time of consideration of God's word to us for the day and for our lives, and any number of other important activities. Those who grew up in more formal traditions may remember that this "order of worship" is also called a liturgy. Did you know that the word "liturgy" comes from a Greek phrase meaning "the work of the people?" Our God-given work as human beings is not only to care for one another and to care for the rest of God's creation but also to care for our relationship with our Loving Creator by seeking the presence of God, by offering prayer and praise to God, and by learning as much as we can about God's will for our lives, all while in community with our brothers and sisters in the faith and those who come to us to learn more of what a relationship with God can mean in their lives. Those who do not do this are spiritual slackers – ignoring the needs of their spirits.

And so, my brothers and sisters, we called to heed the words of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians: "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right." Let us not be weary in doing the work that we are called by God to do. Let us not be weary of doing what we can to help our neighbors, loving them as we love ourselves. Let us not be weary of doing what we can to tend and keep this beautiful garden that has been entrusted to us as stewards of the Creator. Let us not be weary of bringing our praise and our prayers and our questions to God, enjoying the company of God and each other and strengthening our spirits for the other work. We are confronted on a regular basis by the forces of chaos and destruction in the world; battered, it sometimes seems, by gale force winds of trouble. But if we persevere in love to God and allow God to empower us to persevere in our love for our neighbors and for Creation, then surely God will be faithful in drawing us at last to the peace and joy of the realized Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God. For God, after all, is no slacker. Thanks be to God!