

Becoming an Example

I hope the stories of Paul's missionary journeys are familiar to you. I think most of the Bibles I've owned in my life have had maps somewhere in them tracing those meanderings of the apostle through Syria, Asia Minor, and Southeastern Europe. Perhaps you remember that Barnabas accompanied him on the first journey but that they had a quarrel over whether to take John Mark with them on the second and so they split up with Barnabas and Mark headed for Cyprus and Paul taking Silas with him north and west from Antioch into what is now Turkey. Along the way, they picked up young Timothy, who became Paul's protégé, as well as Luke, the Beloved Physician, who traveled with them for a time. In fact, Luke joined them in Troas at just about the same time that Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia saying "Come over and help us." And so the four men did something that had a profound effect on the lives of many of us in this room. By now, the Good News of God's love through Christ Jesus was being preached in a wide swath of Asia and deep into Africa as well. But as far as we know, the visit of Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke to Macedonia and then Achaia was the first foray of the Gospel into Europe.

They began, as Acts 16 tells us, with some time in Philippi. Their visit there was marked by many successes – the conversion of Lydia, in whose house the new church was to meet, as well as the conversion of their fellow prisoners during a brief stay in the city jail, and of course, their jailer and his family. But they were also asked to leave the city by the authorities and it is only because we have the beautiful letter of Philippians that we know that their visit was ultimately successful. Likewise, Paul and Silas encountered opposition from some of the Jews at their next stop, Thessalonica, opposition that not only chased them out of that town but that pursued them to Berea, where Paul also had to flee, going to Athens. But as in Philippi, the strength of the opposition in Thessalonica belied the deep root which the Gospel as preached by Paul took in that town. We have not one but two letters from Paul to the believers he left behind in Thessalonica and the first is, according to most scholars, the oldest writing in our New Testament.

On the one hand, I find it rather odd that I have preached from this most venerable of New Testament writings only once in my years among you. Sizable portions of it do show up in the Revised Common Lectionary, although not contiguously. But as the shortest of Paul's letters to the churches, I and II Thessalonians fall at the end of that section of Paul's correspondence as arranged in the Canon, just before his Pastoral Letters, which have a doubtful provenance in scholarly eyes, so they are easy to overlook. Moreover, as Paul's earliest extant correspondence, they leave something to be desired when compared with his later letters when both his writing and his theology had matured. I Thessalonians, as we'll see in the next few weeks, touches on many of the same themes as Paul's later letters but they are less well thought-out and expressed. There is also, for me at least, the perception that both letters spend an inordinate amount of time on the topics of Jesus' return and the fate of those believers who die before the Second Coming. Early in the ministry of Paul, when he along with everyone else believed that Jesus' coming again was imminent, these were questions of some immediacy but nearly two thousand years later, we consider Christ's appearing either to still be far in the future or as metaphorical. The concerns of the audience for these letters seem very different from our own.

But upon consideration this week, I'm no longer sure that these reservations pertain. There is much in this brief correspondence that seems very timely to me, whether it is Paul's praise of his

Becoming an Example

friends in Macedonia, or his characterization of them as touched by “power and the Holy Spirit,” or his commendation of them as waiting for “Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” So, I’m ready today and for at least the next two weeks, to spend some time with Paul and his friends in Thessalonica.

Since you all know I’m always interested in context, I think it’s worth a few minutes to investigate who the Thessalonians were. I find some interesting parallels to our own time and place. For example, Thessalonica was an important city in its province, a port city connected to the Adriatic Sea in the west and Byzantium in the east by the Via Egnatia, built by the Romans not only for ease of trade but also to be able to send troops easily to the occasionally restive Thessalonians. Before it was a Roman city, you see, it had been the second city of the Macedonian Empire, named for the sister of Alexander the Great himself. At the time of Paul’s visit, Macedonia had only been under Roman control for 200 years. Seattle had its own history with the Coast Salish peoples before falling under the sway of the spreading United States. Given the political tenor of our area in comparison to the results of the last Federal election, we have gone from alliance with the progressive majority to an uneasy opposition to the other Washington. I have the sense that neither the inhabitants of Thessalonica then nor those of the Salish Coast now can be called overly happy with the overarching imperial power.

But regardless of how the Thessalonians felt about their political situation, they had bought in completely to the Good News that Paul was preaching. Using a triad of virtues that he would build on even further in later letters, Paul praises them for their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” So strong has their progress been in the time since he was forced to leave them, he is able to say that he and his colleagues “always give thanks to God for all of you.” I think this congregation matches well with the Thessalonians here, too. I’m in touch with several of your former pastors, including Good Shepherd’s founding pastor, Bernie Turner. All of them with whom I correspond or see on a regular basis feel this way about you, too. Whenever you come up in conversation, Bernie, Chuck Elven, Tom Nielsen, Dick Birdsall, Bill Painter, Jerry Sutton, Dave Roberts, and Judy Gay are open in their affection for you all and pride in what you have accomplished.

When I was thinking about you all and Paul’s description of the Thessalonians as being seized by the Gospel message “in power and in the Holy Spirit,” I confess I was temporarily nonplussed. Both early in my life and recently, I’ve spent enough time hanging around charismatic and Pentecostal Christians to associate that kind of language with a style of worship very different from that we generally practice together. We rarely raise our hands when we sing or pray. We tend towards older hymns rather than praise choruses when we sing. And it’s like pulling teeth to get an “Amen” or two out of y’all, much less an “Alleluia” that’s spontaneous. But our more demonstrative sisters and brothers in the faith do not have a corner on power or the Holy Spirit. I think this congregation is very strong in what Paul promoted as “the fruits of the Spirit;” which is to say, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Nor is ecstatic worship the only way to express the presence of the Spirit. Some of our newer members have told me that they were attracted to join us by the serenity which pervades our gatherings. That, too, is a mark of the Holy Spirit. It won’t be my little secret any longer but I can tell you that on Sunday mornings and other times when our building is empty, when I open the doors to this room and walk in, I am almost bowled over by the strong sense of God’s

Becoming an Example

presence in the silence, in the sense of warmth and love that have soaked into the bricks and mortar of this Sanctuary, by the reminder, as Rev. Steven Guantai pointed out last Sunday in Sunday School, that the “old, rugged cross” hanging above me now provides a visceral link to Christ crucified. The power of the Holy Spirit is manifest in this place and it is manifest, too, in the love you all bear for each other and for our community. I cannot explain the long-term ministry of this church in offering gardens to our neighbors, or space under canvas to homeless students, or the still-astonishing success of the Shepherd’s Garden project without reference to the mighty power of the Holy Spirit which motivates your hearts and hands.

There was another phrase which gave me pause when I decided to tackle this passage today – the last words of the chapter: “Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” As you all have probably noticed, I don’t preach much about the wrath of God. When I look at the world and all the different sorts of evil cooked up by humankind, I don’t doubt that there are things that anger God. But I believe that the love of God is what characterizes God’s relation to God’s creation and I think that message is far more important for us to remember and to pass on. And, ultimately, I don’t think that a hermeneutic of threat and punishment is effective in changing people’s behavior or helping them appreciate the God who is love. So how, I wondered, could I authentically preach this passage in which this image is not only last and memorable but, it seems to me, important in Paul’s argument?

The answer lies in what comes before Paul reaches his final words in this opening chapter. He is writing, remember, to a group of Christians whom he believes have done the right thing in becoming “imitators of us and of the Lord...” Believing and behaving as they do, they are in no danger from God. But to follow Christ, they have turned their backs on the local gods and, ultimately, upon the emperor. They may fear retribution from these sources but they are saved from destruction by Jesus. As Jesus himself is quoted in both Matthew and Luke: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul...”

Like the Thessalonians, we live in a culture that demands allegiance to things besides God. We are told we must pledge allegiance to the flag, to our country, to our President. We are told to put things ahead of people, money ahead of love. And when we do not follow the dominant culture in their obsessions, people will become angry with us, dismiss us as “otherworldly,” speak ill of us and attempt to destroy our reputations. Believe me, I know. And if the current federal administration and their state and locally-based allies are allowed to persist in the kind of anti-dissent rhetoric and activities which we have seen since the late campaign, we may see worse than a war of words. Have no doubt, my friends, we may well be facing “Days of Wrath” but it is not the wrath of God which threatens us any more than it threatened the Thessalonians. But if you think I am being alarmist, remember, we all face “Days of Wrath” throughout our lives – the wrath of the boss who wants us to do something we believe is unethical for the good of the corporation or, as we have been dramatically reminded in the last week, the wrath of the boss who wants us to do a little something special just for him. We face the wrath of the family member who can’t understand why we’d put our faith and ethics above their desires. We face the wrath of the crowd who wants us to go along to get along. Jesus saves us from them all for while they may hurt us, Jesus can heal us.

Becoming an Example

Since Paul is adamant that Jesus has saved the Thessalonians and therefore by extension Jesus has saved us, the question that rises for me is, what has he saved us for? Let's return from the ending of this pericope to its heart in verses 6-8: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it." Just as the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah chose the Children of Israel to be an example to the nations, so Jesus has saved those who call on his name to be an example in their time, in our time.

What does it mean to be an example? Paul says of the Thessalonians that "the word of the Lord has sounded forth from (them)." In this context, he probably meant that they had shared freely about their faith with their neighbors, who would not have heard the Gospel yet. In our context, there are a couple of ways we can "sound forth." One is indeed with words. Most folks in our culture think they know what the Gospel is all about but the fact of the matter is that if they are pressed, they really know very little of the Jesus story or what it means. There's an awful lot of preaching and sharing about God's wrath out there and I hope you remember what I just said about that. There's an awful lot of talk out there about who Christians, and supposedly our God, hate and disapprove of. We need to combat that kind of talk with our own understanding of the story, with our witness that we serve a God of love and forgiveness.

The other way that "the word of the Lord" can "sound forth from us" is through our actions. We all know the saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." I can tell you that it is the actions of this congregation that makes us known in Lynnwood, and in Edmonds, and all across Puget Sound, just as the Thessalonians were known in Macedonia and Achaia. I've already mentioned the great works you have done together with the help of God. But we cannot rest on our laurels. We must continue to act our faith in the Living God. We must continue to walk in the Jesus Way. Both our words and our actions are important but if we must choose one over the other, we should choose action.

My sisters and my brothers, I cannot preach like Paul. I cannot pray like Silas. Having turned 57 yesterday, I am far too old to be considered a Timothy. But to you, the Baptist Church of Good Shepherd in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. I always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in my prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For your faith, for your hope, for your love, thanks be to God!