

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
October 22, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Our second lesson is Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica, which was a trade center and the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. People of the city honored Julius Caesar as "God" and worshiped Emperor Octavian as a "son of God." Paul praises this early Christian community for its turn from Roman civil religion to the worship of the true God, despite persecution, and he encourages their faith in the resurrection of Christ.<sup>i</sup>

Paul's letter continues to speak to the church today offering guidance in its call to live in a distinctive way as it cultivates a fellowship of faith, hope and love. Matthew Skinner writes, "This is not a gospel message that compels people to ignore or forsake the world; instead it calls them to live in it with a distinctively Christian hope."<sup>ii</sup> For Paul that distinctively Christian hope is none other than the Word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection opened the way to everlasting life. He is the incarnate word of God. That is, Jesus is God manifest in human form.

This introductory passage from 1 Thessalonians, which is essentially nothing more than a prayer, one of the things I note is the theme of relationship lifted up.

It is evident at the beginning in that we hear the letter is from Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy all working in relationship in their call to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is reflected immediately in the very next line, "To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This is not simply a group of people called and gathered together but what makes them unique and establishes their identity as a people is their relationship with and connectedness to the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is at work in these relationships not only bringing the word, that is the good news of Jesus Christ, to the people but the Holy Spirit has worked in these relationships to equip the faithful people to become imitators of Paul and of the Lord to become an example to all believers.

That very same word we too have received is reason to rejoice and give thanks and praise to God always. It is and has to be at the very heart of all we do as a called, gathered, and sent people of God. That good news is Jesus Christ crucified, died, and risen. That good news sustains us in the midst of evil, illness, and death. That good news triumphs over the powers of the world that attempt to thwart God's reign. That good news gives us the remnant of hope to cling to when life seems to be unraveling around us at the seams. That good news is revealed to us most certainly by the power of the Holy Spirit in ways we can't

always understand but that good news is also revealed to us by the Holy Spirit through our relationship with one another.

It is why it is so vital to remain connected to each other; even despite our differences and disagreements. It is why it is important to remember the church is not a building but rather it is the people called to bear the light of Christ to the world, called to be the voice of God proclaiming faith, love, and hope. Called to be the hands of Christ bringing compassion, forgiveness, and hospitality to all but especially to those who stand on the outer edges of society: those who seem different, those who are oppressed, those who are outcast, and those who are ill, afflicted, and downtrodden. It really is powerful when we stop and think about it – God uses us. God comes to us through one another. We have been entrusted with the word of God, created in God’s very image, and are to become imitators of our Lord.

That’s pretty amazing stuff. Yet, that’s also a bit daunting of a task and it will very often lead us down a very lonely road that we would rather not traverse. It will lead us to stand with the suffering which ultimately might mean we suffer as well. It will lead us to pray for our enemies. It will lead us to speak out for those without voice. It will lead us to proclaim life in the midst of death. It will lead us to extend hospitality to the stranger no matter who she is, what he looks

like, or where she comes from. It will lead us how to discern how we give to God what is God's while also living out our lives in the world in which God is at work. We don't live in a spiritual vacuum. God is alive and at work in the world in ways and through people and means we can't always perceive.

That calling always begins with who we are. We are God's created in God's image. In the same image all people were created. Bearing that image calls us to live out and proclaim the word we have received and been entrusted with to the world. However, often times the word we bear is not the word God intends and revealed to us in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Too many times our words and actions confuse those who have not received the word or turned from the word. They don't reflect the word of God we are called to bear but rather proclaim quite the opposite.

Living as faithful people of God calls us in our lives of faith to always put that at the forefront of words we speak, write, and actions we take. Do they reflect the gracious word of God spoken through the Son? Do they proclaim God's life-giving power? In all that we do as a community of faith, is proclaiming the love of Christ for all God created at the very core of why we are doing it? If not, then how can we make that happen? Today, we will bless, pray for the hands that carefully crafted them and also pray for the hands that will receive them.

And then as they are sent out we will include a copy of the prayers we are about to lift up, a word of God's love for those who receive these quilts, and on that will be our first names as each of you are invited to sign this sheet of paper. Not only are we doing God's work with our hands and are these quilts a reflection of the love we have for our neighbor through the love we have received from God, but we are also doing God's work through the spoken and written word. More than likely, we will never meet those who receive these quilts but they will know these quilts were made with a purpose by people who have been given a purpose to partner with God in loving the world. What would it look like if we carried this over into other areas of ministry here at Bethany? What if every box of cookies we handed out in December were stamped with the proclamation that God loves the recipient of those cookies? What if we took some of those cookies out onto the streets of our community, into Crestview, or even to the homeless in Iowa City to let them know God loves them? What if at our community meal tonight each person that walked in the door heard time and time again that God loved them? Too often, we are fearful to make this proclamation – myself included. Fearful we will offend. Fearful people won't come back. Fearful they won't talk to us again. Paul is urging the faithful church in Thessalonica not to give into fear or persecution but to remain faithful in sounding out the good news of Jesus

Christ, the word of God as he reminded them they have done in the past writing, “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia (a-ky-a), but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.”

We have been created in the image of God and each of us has been equipped by the Holy Spirit to be light burning brightly in the darkness, to be a vessel of God’s grace, to be an imitator of the Lord. It’s intimidating at times yes but it’s also amazing and awesome that God enters into relationship with us and through the power of the Holy Spirit calls us, chooses us, uses us, equips us, and sends us forth to bear the good news of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, to each other and to the world. Thank you faithful people of God for your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *Sundays and Seasons Preaching Year A 2017*, Augsburg Fortress, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew Skinner, [www.enterthebible.org](http://www.enterthebible.org)