

“Grace and Peace”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 22, 2023

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Psalm 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Introduction

If our ancient predecessors in the Christian faith had arranged the writings of the New Testament according to their date of composition, 1 Thessalonians would stand at the beginning. According to most scholars, Paul wrote this letter around 51 CE – about two decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus – which makes it the earliest known Christian writing.

The Apostle Paul, shortly after leaving the Roman provincial city of Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, apparently became worried about the community he left behind and dispatched Timothy to visit them. Timothy reported that many people in Thessalonica still had great affection for Paul, so Paul writes them to provide assurance and admonition, building up their faith and encouraging them to persevere in their Christian life – they are doing well but Paul wants them to do even more.

During this last phase of what – in the Christian calendar, according to our tradition – is called *Ordinary Time*, the lectionary selects five consecutive weeks of readings from First Thessalonians, starting today from the very beginning. Thus, we will have the opportunity, over these five Sundays, to dig in and explore what Paul appreciated about, and desired even more for, this Christian community.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

I began studying and training for ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, but after one year, I moved back to my hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. My home address there was 2044 Alta Avenue, while the address of the school I transferred to, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, was 1044 Alta Vista Road; same city and zip code. The two addresses – located several miles apart – were just close enough (one digit changed and one word added) that, ironically, I occasionally received mail intended for school at home, and could easily deliver it, myself, on my next visit to campus.

I never opened this misdirected mail, but – just by seeing who was writing to them – I got a pretty good idea about who was in contact with the Seminary: applicants, donors, sister institutions, denominational offices, etc.

We use a similar method of reconstruction when looking at Paul's letters (or Epistles) that are recorded in the New Testament. We do not have any record of correspondence that came to him. And, surely, these are but a sample of the letters that were shared by the Apostle to Christians in the various communities that he had or wished to visit. As we begin to read this first letter to the believers in Thessalonica, clues emerge about the audience, the author, and their relationship together.

The letter opens by identifying the authors as Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy; although later in the letter, Paul will speak alone – indicating his voice as most prominent. We also learn something about the audience: it consists primarily, if not exclusively, of gentiles. Paul recalls how the Thessalonians “turned to God from idols” (1:9), a conversion that would be inappropriate for Jews.

By the time Paul wrote, Thessalonica had been under Roman rule for over two centuries. As the capital of the province of Macedonia and its seat of Roman governance, the city had political significance. As a port city and located along a major Roman highway, its residents would have been exposed to a wide variety of social and cultural influences. Typical of a varied and lively religious life in the Roman world, Thessalonians would have honored many different deities.¹

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy brought what would have viewed as one more religious option into this bustling, cosmopolitan city. Some – we're not told how many – responded to their message. In time, something – we're not sure what – forced the disciples to leave the city. While Paul waits in Athens, he receives Timothy's report and writes the Thessalonians back, expressing his desire – though he has not yet been able – to return.

You might have noticed that the words I used to begin worship each Sunday are an imitation of Paul's greeting here: “grace to you and peace.” (v. 1) Here, as with many of his subsequent letters, Paul is playing with the traditional formulation used in Greco-Roman letters, changing “greetings” (*chairete*) to “grace” (*charis*) and adding the Jewish greeting “peace” (*shalom*).²

Thus, the authors of the letter are not addressing their audience in a dispassionate way, and not as just one religious option among many, but in a distinctly Judeo-Christian voice; offering, assuring, and encouraging grace and peace among them. Almost immediately, Paul introduces the same three Christian virtues that he will feature so prominently in his letter to the Corinthians, as he remembers their “work of faith, and labor of love, and steadfastness of hope.” (1:3) Paul goes on to remark that they received this message so wholeheartedly that they had become an example throughout the region –

¹ Beverly Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Interpretation Bible Study Series

² Richard Ascough from *WorkingPreacher.com*

imitators of God (and of Paul) who are now being imitated by others who hear of their faith, love, and hope.

People often lament that letter-writing is becoming a lost art. Even those among us who were diligently taught the importance of letters by our parents and grandparents, who were given personalized stationery and fancy pens as graduation gifts, and who sometimes even purchased fold-up international posts to send abroad; we now are much more likely to text or message someone than sit down and write a letter. Thus, while our correspondence might be captured somewhere in the cyber universe, we are much less likely than previous generations – going all the way back to Paul and his contemporaries – to have complete letters to look back to and read again.

For those of you who still hand-write postcards when you travel and thank-you notes for gifts received and pen well-structured letters to the editor and send Christmas cards and other correspondence with friends, I applaud you. The letters sent each week by the Men's Prayer Breakfast that sit on the bedside tables of many people I visit amid health crises or periods of loss attest to their ongoing impact. It swarms the heart to discover a hand-addressed letter among the bills, catalogs, and circulars that typically fill our mailboxes.

But I also sense the frustration expressed here – and, reading between the lines in others of his letters – by Paul because of his separation from the people with whom he so wants to be in relationship and communication. Because of the high cost and slow pace of travel in the ancient world, and because it was not possible to just pick up the phone or send an email or text, letters were Paul's only option. Given the choice, I imagine he, indeed, longed to see them face-to-face but, if not, hear the inflection of voice on the phone, have a zoom meeting, or even update them through a blog.

For if, as Paul insists, it is important for Christians to be “imitators” of those who teach us the faith, then – I would propose – the more frequent, the more intimate, and the deeper communication, the better. At its core, this is the reason that we gather together as people of faith, as a Christian community; because – as in ancient Thessalonica, among all the options for idols to worship and belief systems to adhere to – we have chosen to be imitators of Jesus Christ. Thus, in order to best know who Christ is and how his followers are to live their lives, we learn from one another – from our ancient forebearers as well as the saints who reside among us now.

Two Sundays ago, when a handful of us drove down to North Church after our service here had concluded, we arrived while worship there was still going on. Since there were plenty of hands getting the meal ready to serve, I slipped into the service and heard the sharing of joys and concerns and prayers of the people. If you are familiar with church here, you know that on a typical Sunday, during the sharing of joys and concerns (at the beginning of the service) and the prayers of the people (which happens near the

end of the service), typically one, two or maybe a few folks will voice aloud a specific prayer request or a name. At North Church, it's different; there, folks in the congregation, many of them homeless and facing challenges like poverty, addiction, or mental illness, stand and share more fully – and more freely.

The Sunday I was there, one of the men stood and shared that this was only the second time – the second week in a row – that he had been to church in the last ten years. He had moved to several different cities, had been in a variety of different shelters or in temporary housing or on the streets. But the week before, someone had gone out of their way to invite him to North Church, and to assure him that he would be welcome there, and that he could find people there to help him find hope. So, he came, and now he had come back; and he stood to give thanks for his life and that for the first time in a long time he felt that God was there with him.

I think North Church is a special place because it offers a unique opportunity to impact people who might not feel or – to be frank – be welcome at some other churches. But just as the churches in Corinth and Thessalonica were not – according to what we can decipher from Paul's letters – located in the same context or possessing the same gifts, this church has unique gifts and provides opportunities to welcome some people who would not feel or – again, to be frank – be welcome elsewhere. I know that is true because of the stories I hear from some of you, and the ways I see you imitate Christ in ways that are revealed to others.

Few of us are capable, frankly, of writing letters on par with those from Paul that are collected in the New Testament. Many of us lack the language skills, the theological understanding, or even the time to pen such testimonials. But, I'm convinced that if Paul and his companions enjoyed the opportunities for communication that we have – whether electronic, by phone, or in-person – they would have taken full advantage of them. “Grace and peace” would not just have been a written greeting at the top of a letter, but a staple of more frequent and intimate communiques. Their calls to “imitate” God and each other would not just be words on a page, but daily, regular acts of grace, love, and hope.

So, write your letters and emails, send your texts and messages – in our day, these are all vital means of communicating and building connections. But, unlike Paul, we also have the added advantage of gathering as the body of Christ, strengthening and deepening bonds through our personal, face-to-face relationships; with those people we already know, and with those strangers sent into our lives, who – as Matthew's gospel suggests – may represent the face of God to us. As we imitate Christ with and for one another, we provide a place of welcome for the very people – though we may not know who – that are searching to know that God, indeed, is with them. Amen.