

“Dearly Beloved”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 29, 2023

Rev. Dr. John Wahl Psalm 90:1-6, 14-17 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

I was once at a wedding – as a guest, not the officiant – where, in the vows the couple wrote to each other, one said to the other: “I take you as my captain; I will be your first mate.”

There are a number of reasons that – when I am the officiant – I encourage couples to meet with me for several wedding planning sessions. It is helpful for us to discuss together how they want to personalize their ceremony to reflect their own understanding of what this marriage relationship means. I also encourage them, if they choose, to compose their own vows. But one thing I rarely do is officiate a wedding where those personalized vows have not been shared with me beforehand. More about that later.

In this second chapter of I Thessalonians, Paul and his companions, Silvanus and Timothy, try to bring definition to their relationship with this Christian community that has been born and – as we learned last week – is doing well but has room to be even better.

God has entrusted and empowered Paul’s apostolic team to preach the gospel and to be leaders for the Thessalonian community. To continue in the way of life to which they have been called, the people must trust the message, and so must trust the messengers. To prove that they are worthy of this relationship of trust, Paul seeks to defend their selfless, good intentions and loving work among them.

First, Paul contrasts himself from other preachers: the charlatans who come with “impure motives and trickery.” Like many of today’s TV evangelists, these itinerants would flatter people or play on fears for financial gain or other self-indulgent purposes. Paul argues that they came to the Thessalonians not out of greed or personal ambition, but because they are servants of God. Because their motives are trustworthy, the message they bring can also be trusted.

The proof Paul gives that they are different from these other kinds of teachers comes in the story of his sufferings. As described in the book of Acts, Paul and Silas come to Thessalonica after already enduring a great struggle in Philippi (literally, in

Greek, a great *agoni*). If Paul had been an evangelist focused on his own comfort and betterment, he was obviously preaching the wrong message.¹

To drive home his argument, Paul uses the surprisingly gentle image of a nurse caring for her own children. Not only are they innocent of the impure motives and greed characteristic of rival preachers, they care for the Thessalonians like their own infants: teaching, nurturing, and protecting them because, Paul says, “because you have become very dear to us.”

We have become pretty cynical about public people. *Why is this person being so nice to me?* we sometimes wonder. *What are they looking to gain?* As defense against such cynicism, Paul argues that he never employed flattery to win over his audience, never used the gospel as a cloak for greed, and never sought praise for himself. The sole reason he came, and now reaffirms why he had come, is to share the message of the gospel and build up this community in love.

Paul also understood cynicism about the institution of the church. Many people today say they love and trust the message of the gospel but have lost faith in its messengers. In some ways, it is difficult to blame them, and not least because of the modern-day charlatans like those mentioned before. Still, there are plenty of other reasons people have become disillusioned from or injured by the church: from lack of acceptance to scandal to financial malfeasance.

And the church is not alone. In our lifetimes, there has been a breakdown of public trust in various authorities and institutions including governmental agencies, education, science, and media. Revelations of abuse, corruption, or self-interest have produced growing distrust and suspicion. Truth in society depends upon a circulatory system of trust; thus, the breakdown of trust has produced the crisis of truth that we currently face.²

A community marked by the strength of truth and trust is what Paul presents to us in this letter to the Thessalonians. He describes a congregation where God had entrusted truth to human messengers, who entrust themselves to the recipients of their message, revealing to power of the communication of truth itself as a social bond. Just as untruth and distrust can cause a society to disintegrate, so truth and the mutual trust it produces enhance a community’s health.

A large part of our participation in the Thriving Congregations program has involved conversations (either one-on-one or in small groups) to encourage trust and truth. By engaging in these conversations, we have sought to get to know one another

¹ Amy L.B. Peeler from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Alastair Roberts, “The Politics of the Communication of Truth”

on a deeper level: what brought us here and brings us back, what are our passions and deep commitments, and what we hope to see and to become. Learning these things about one another has the dual purpose of gathering data to analyze and put to use (something we are still learning how to do), as well as to discover shared truth and develop greater trust among us.

What we have discovered so far (and there is still much more work to do) is that there is – within this congregation and beyond – both an appreciation of and a longing for connection. The bonds of community, often described as being like those of a family, are both precious and sometimes elusive. As a team, we are beginning to investigate what obstacles might keep us – or others – from experiencing community: how might we better communicate, invite, and welcome people into relationship and inclusion? What is God calling us to be as a community?

And because we have communicated that our intentions are pure (wanting to build up a closer community that better understands its identity and purpose) and carry out this work in a way that shows how dear you all are to us, we have entrusted ourselves to you. You could choose to disengage or to cynically wonder why we are investing all this time and energy; what we have to gain, and the process would probably fail. Surely, you can think of examples in the church or some other institution when you were asked to share your thoughts or ideas and were not really listened to, or the leaders were corrupt, or the truth was distorted.

Community-building is a corporate, an institutional task. As much as we might tend to distrust and question truth, stronger bonds can only come through participation and trust. When we think of our divided nation or conflicted world, this might seem too large a project to tackle. So, instead, for now, let's return to the image of a couple preparing for their wedding.

As I said before, there are a number of reasons that I encourage couples have meetings with me prior to the wedding. Some are logistical: it is helpful to discuss whether there will be a program, what readings they will choose, and what music they prefer. But, beyond these nuts-and-bolts issues, I try to assure them that – as the officiant – I want to know them and learn their stories and values to best craft an appropriate service. Some folks I already know and some I do not; but in order for them to know that I care about them, I need to be able to show them.

And so, we sit and talk. Rather than doing what is traditionally known as *Pre-Cana*, or “marriage preparation,” I ask them questions, both during our meetings and as homework between sessions: such as, *why do you want to be married? why do you want to marry each other? why do you want to be married in the presence of God?*

what traditions from your family do you want to make sure to retain? What new traditions do you wish to create together?

In these conversations, while the couple shares what, for them, constitutes truth about marriage and their relationship, trust is built. They, hopefully, begin to hold trust in me – their officiant, the messenger – which will engender trust in the marriage ceremony, the message that I will be sharing. My belief is that by entrusting the couple to verbalize the truth about their own relationship, they will be better equipped to build up and persevere in this community of love.

Back to couples writing their own wedding vows and sharing them with one another without sharing them with me first. I do not caution against doing this out of selfish motives; as wedding officiant, I'm not worried about garnering praise or seeking to avoid looking foolish. I feel that – like a good umpire or referee – you are at your wedding best when no one notices what you've said or done.

Instead, to follow Paul's image of the caring parent, it is sometimes possible (and necessary) to allow the couple – like your own child – to exercise their own freedom because you have already offered them all of the nurture, support, and wisdom that you have. And after emptying yourself for their sake, you step back and trust that they know what is true: that you love them enough to trust they know how important the loving relationships of community are.

It is, indeed, from these small, intimate examples of community that we learn how to trust (or regain trust) in larger, seemingly less intimate institutions. Every community – including the church – is made up of many smaller, constituent communities. The (sometimes difficult) truth is that what happens in couples and families and small groups gets mirrored in wider bonds. When, through conversations and care, by invitation and inclusion, we invest in these relationships, we learn how it is possible to find truth in the broader relationships of community.

And so, today, even we pray for the state of the world and the nation, even as we seek to be peacemakers and change-makers on that grand scale, we also commit seeking to discover a greater measure of truth in our local contexts; and we pay attention to the conversations and care needed to build (or rebuild) trust in our interpersonal relationships. May we – as Paul wishes for the community in Thessalonica – continue to do good and strive for even better. Amen.