

“Growing in Love”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 12, 2023

Stewardship Dedication Sunday

Psalm 70

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

I Thessalonians 3:6-13

Introduction

For four weeks, now, we have been looking at this first epistle to the Thessalonians, this letter penned by three early Christian apostles – Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy – to the Christian community recently founded by Paul and his traveling companion, Silas. The book of Acts tells the story of how Paul and Silas brought the message of the gospel to this Macedonian city during their second missionary journey, and then how they were suddenly forced to leave. Exactly why that was we are not told; and though this letter reiterates Paul’s desire to return and be with the Thessalonians again, why he has not we also are not sure.

Instead, when, as Paul says in verse 5, Paul could “bear it no longer,” Timothy was sent to get a report on how things are going in Thessalonica. Now, he has returned with his report. We pick up our reading today in chapter 3, verses 6-13. Listen for the word of God.

Read I Thessalonians 3:6-13

“Night and day, we pray earnestly that we may see you face to face,” Paul writes, “and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.” (v. 10) Hmm...up to this point, recollections about the apostles’ founding of the church in Thessalonica as well as Timothy’s report back from a recent visit have been glowing – filled with thanksgiving and mutual love. Not even the stressors of persecution have dampened the encouragement that Paul has expressed – “How can we thank God enough,” he asks, “for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?” (v. 9) The source of Paul’s joy is the ongoing faith of the Thessalonians church.

Then, there it is; some aspect of faith that is lacking and needs restoration – or, as the *Common English Bible* puts it – there is still something that needs to be

made complete. The original Greek word for “restoration” is the same used in the gospels for the mending of fishing nets. In order to function as they are intended, fishing nets periodically require maintenance. So, too – it seems – does the faith of a church community; every once in a while, it is necessary to pull up the nets and make sure they are still intact, and not in need of mending.¹

As the church, we are the body of Christ, the ongoing presence of the One who was, and is, and always will be. You and I, together – in communion with God’s people in every size and place and tradition – are the source of one another’s joy; the reason for thanksgiving before God for one another. Human limitations, incompleteness, imperfection – none of these negate what community provides as reasons to rejoice before God. We give thanks not because something is one hundred percent perfect and complete. We rejoice because of the ties that bind, and that God is at work in and among us.

As a congregation – this particular and local expression of the body of Christ universal – we acknowledge our human limitations, incompleteness, and imperfection. Sometimes, we need to pull up the nets and check to check out what needs mending. One of the ways we periodically do this is to talk about our stewardship and the ways that we respond with thanksgiving to God’s Economy of Generosity.

In a recent edition of *Sojourners* magazine, author Jose Humphreys III writes about this concept of God’s Economy of Generosity and how, as Christians, we can understand money as a gift rather than a commodity. Rather than asking questions such as *How much is enough?* and, *Will there be enough for me?* we might, instead, think about how freely – as a congregation – we accept and offer gifts. This may involve thinking more deeply about issues of environmental justice or an acknowledgement of whose land or labor was exploited to build our churches.²

One of the formative stories I learned about this church was how – in its early days – Valley would open its doors to truckers who would often get stuck in winter snow or mud while traversing the hills of Route 306 in those years before it was paved and there was a grocery store across the street. Invited to come into the church and get warm, or even to stay the night, the drivers sometimes picked from

¹ Michael Joseph Brown from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Jose Humphreys III, “God’s Economy of Generosity: How the Church Can Reimagine the Story of Mondy” in *Sojourners*, November 2023

the produce they were transporting and created something like a stone soup to tide them over until it was dry enough to get their trucks back on the road.

Thus, decades ago, the gift of this congregation's location allowed it to serve as a place for feeding those in need. Likewise, our location today – situated on this beautiful ten-acre plot of land – provides the opportunity to feed people that are in, or might be travelling through, our community with food that we grow in the garden right outside the sanctuary windows and donate to the Geauga Hunger Task Force and the Chagrin Falls Park Community Food Bank. I see the same dynamic at play with the Pass-It-On resale store, where donations given by people in the community are sorted and either passed along or sold to provide an even greater ability to share gifts throughout the wider community. Rather than asking, *Will there be enough?* we trust that our opportunity to give comes to fruition through the gifts we receive.

Of course, faith is not something that belongs to the individual believer, nor even to the local congregation or wider church. Faith is public in the sense that the beliefs and actions of individuals have ripple effects on those around them. In the final verses of today's passage, Paul offers this prayer of thanksgiving, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love, for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you." (v. 12) Love is mutual – it is meant to be expressed for one another – but not only in a closed system; it is also intended for all. To the Corinthians, Paul makes the radical claim that without love, we are nothing. (I Cor. 13:2) And Jesus made clear that the first thing, the most important of all the laws, is to love God, and to love one's neighbors as you love yourself. Love cannot grow unless there is both the lover and the beloved; it is literally impossible to fulfill the law alone.

So, what does Paul have to teach his beloved congregation in Thessalonica – this church that he longs to visit again so that their love might continue to grow and whatever is still lacking may be restored, or mended back together? Three prominent themes recur throughout this letter, like conversation topics that come up again and again.

This first is this desire for reunion. Timothy was sent to visit the church has reported back to Paul, who now writes them back, saying, "He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us – just as we long to see you." (v. 6)

A second theme is encouragement. Paul is encouraged by them, just as he hopes that they are encouraged by him. The Thessalonians have experienced suffering, just as Paul has suffered. It might have been easier, given those circumstances, to call the whole thing off and each go their separate ways. But this is not what happened. Instead, they continue to love, and support, and encourage one another. When life is rough, which it often is, relationships matter; to know that you are loved, prayed for, and supported in the midst of suffering is joyous experience.

And a third theme is imitation. There are three general ways that we learn: through information, through immersion, and through imitation. It is true that we need information; the knowledge gained in reading and study and sermons; Paul viewed himself as a teacher who had brought the story of the gospel to the Thessalonians. We also need immersion, the experience of being thrust into multi-sensory environments and contexts that can change us.³

But Paul writes to the Thessalonians also about imitation. He does so not in order to brag about his influence or importance, but because he knows that we sometimes learn best by having models for our thinking, doing, and believing.

Many of us have learned Christian service by witnessing our parents and grandparents – or the people sitting around us in these pews, or the saints who preceded them – extending the hand of generosity to the hungry and homeless and needy; humbling helping to build up and maintain the congregation; or seeking reconciliation and peace. This cloud of witnesses has helped us develop habits of generosity, providing us visible examples of how, as Paul says, we “abound in love for each other, and for all.” (v. 12)

Like every congregation I’ve ever known, we are not perfect or complete. And still, we grow in love as we continue to learn and inhabit the gospel: for, beyond the information and our immersion, there is imitation – we love because God first loved us; thus, we give in thankful response to the gifts we have been given. All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

³ Kenneth Carter, “We Are Yet Alive” from *DayOne.org*