

“Receiving God’s Word”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 5, 2023

All-Saint’s Sunday

Psalm 107:1-9

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

In what we call the Parable of the Sower, Jesus criticizes those people who receive his word with joy, but soon fall away under persecution. In that parable, he tells of a farmer who spreads seed on a variety of different soils: on a path or in rocky soil, among thorns or in good soil. Jesus compares over-eager recipients of his word to plants in rocky ground that cannot endure the blazing sun because they have no roots.

These Thessalonians, in contrast – by enduring hardship for the sake of the gospel – show that they are not fair-weather followers. They are, instead, like the good grain that hears the word and goes on to bear abundant fruit.

Paul and his missionary companions begin this portion of their letter by contrasting their ministry among the Thessalonians with that of religious freeloaders. Put simply, they worked for their daily bread; while those who came later expected to be supported by the community. “You remember our labor and toil,” the people are reminded; “we worked night and day.” As manual laborers – making tents out of animal hides, we believe – they worked long and hard for meager wages rather than be a burden on those listening to their message. It appears they took on this way of life as a choice, in order to live into the call to mission that God has laid upon them.¹

Whereas, earlier, Paul compared himself to a nurse caring for her infant children, now he likens himself to a father to them; urging, encouraging, and testifying to them so that they might live in a manner worthy of the word they receive. Thus, like a *pater-familias* – the head of the household – Paul labors for them, sets a good example, and attends to their moral formation. This trio of missionaries has done more than just start the Thessalonian church, they have contributed, also, to the growth and education of the community.

¹ Jane Lancaster Patterson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy conclude this portion by reminding their letter's recipients, "When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also a work in you believers." (v. 13) The Greek *logos* is related to the English word "logic" and has to do not only with God's spoken words, but with God's reasoning, God's practical wisdom as it can be discerned over time. God's word can be observed at work among the people who receive it, enabling them to live with an embodied hope, with courageous faith, and in self-offering love.

Today is All-Saints Sunday as we remember and recognize the hope and love of those many servants who have preceded us in the faith. Some, like Paul and his missionary cohort, helped to form the foundation of our belief systems. Others are known directly to us, and they provide examples that we strive to imitate: people who cared for us like a nursing mother, who guided our instruction like a loving father, and who toiled and labored for our sake and the sake of everyone in the community. Many of us will recall family members, ministers, teachers, and elders: the many faithful who provide warm welcome, who volunteer in nurseries, and who are caretakers of property. We remember those who prepare communion tables and count offerings, who make and deliver casseroles to families in grief. Or, we think, maybe, of those who taught us bible stories on flannel boards, took us on mission trips, or chaperoned lock-ins.

I think of the names of the charter members of this congregation, most of whom, now sixty-seven years later, have moved on to the heavenly realm. I recall Mary Ann DePew and Tom Bulanda and Ruthie Pumphrey and Ed Otten and many others, all with their unique gifts and ways that their works impacted this community and the world around us. On All-Saints, we recognize that the word we receive from God is *incarnated* – it takes on flesh and bones – when it is lived out in faith and works.

This incarnational dimension of the word comes to us where we live. It is proclaimed person to person within the context and in relation to human culture and experience; and it is shaped by the intersection of speaker, audience, and context. The word may revolve around a fixed point – in this case, Jesus Christ – but the incarnational word is new each time it is spoken and received; at a particular time, in specific social circumstances, depending on the physical space in which the speaker and audience meet. In that moment, the word truly becomes God with us.

As Christians in the Reformed tradition, we believe that this sharing of the word – which is exemplified by but not limited to the reading and exposition of scripture – is formative for our faith. As John’s gospel says, the word became flesh and made its home among us, full of grace and truth. The message that is proclaimed may be a human word, but we believe it to be a word that has its origin in the very nature and activity of God.

The Thessalonians are praised for not only hearing and receiving the word but, most especially, because the word is at work in them. What they believe is one thing, but what they do – their labor of love – counts as well. As New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa puts it, “they not only took the gospel, they took to it.”²

How do we know if the word is at work within and among us? According to Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, it will come alive in words that are expressions of our faith. Just as God’s power is manifested among us in life-giving ways, so, too, God’s incarnational word generates in us both the desire and willingness to engage in life-giving activity.

Each and all of us select the ways we can engage in these labors of love. Some choose to create beauty in their writing or music, care for streams or plants or animals. Others by cooking or sharing food with others, creating crafts or looking in on neighbors, tutoring in schools or building Habitat houses. And still others work to lead bible studies or mentor scouts or increase voter participation.

And because all of us receive the word in our own context, we each can impact our own unique community of family, neighbors, and friends. And because we have each been cared for and nurtured by such a great cloud of witnesses – by our spiritual mothers and fathers – we can be like that seed which falls on good soil; for when the sun rises and adversity comes, we will persevere by drawing upon our deep roots of faith to grow and produce abundant good fruit. Thus, we will be known not only for the word we have received, but for the incarnational, real-life, flesh and bones word of God that is at work within us.

And so, as we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, let us remember the gift of Christ’s own body – broken and given for us – and for good and faithful work of all the saints in Christ who labored in love and ran their race to the finish. May we be so blessed by the bread that we eat and the cup we drink that it may be for us the body and blood of Christ; that we might become the body of Christ for

² Beverly Gaventa, “First and Second Thessalonians,” *Interpretation Bible Commentary*

the world, seeking – through our labors of love – to feed all who hunger for love, for acceptance, for opportunity, and for home.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, and in the unity of the Spirit and the communion of the saints on high, we give all glory and honor to God almighty.
Amen.