

1 Thessalonians 1:1-101

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Love Letter to a Church

There is a stack of envelopes tucked into my desk drawer where I run across them every now and again. They are turquoise and covered with the handwriting of my grandmother. Inside these envelopes are letters. Not greeting cards with “Happy Birthday” printed across the inside and her signature signed underneath, but letters. Real letters, written in her unmistakable handwriting, to me, in response to notes I sent to her. I treasure them. As a society, we don’t often receive letters anymore – not the ones that take time to write in pen and ink on paper. We communicate now by text and e-mail and phone; as times have changed, information is able to spread faster and we can share the news of our lives in real time, or almost real time, making letters even more special. Historians know the value of a letter. They know that contained in the seemingly mundane details of “so and so called this morning” or “I am doing such and such this afternoon” lie the details of the lives of the authors. Correspondence between heads of state can reveal much about political affairs of a time. For some, writing letters requires more effort than an e-mail or a text message. There is no easy correction if we do not find the proper word or sentiment - if we make a mistake, there is no way to erase all traces of it – no delete key or way to erase other than crossing out or changing letters. Letters require pre-planning and drafts and time. In their lines, our feelings for each other are reflected, good and bad, love and hate. In historian David McCullough’s book *John Adams*, it is through the over 1000 letters written between John and Abigail Adams that we see the foundations of our country come to life, and one of the greatest love stories of our history unfold.

Our epistle reading for today is also a letter from another time. And it is also a love letter of sorts. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy write to the Thessalonian Church. If we were to order the New Testament by the earliest authorship, the Gospels would not come first, but rather this letter

would. Scholar Beverly Roberts Gaventa, in her commentary, places the writing of this letter at around 51 C.E., making it the earliest Christian writing and the earliest evidence of Christianity known. The three write to a primarily Gentile group who has been converted to believe in Israel and Jesus as God's son. We hear this in the 9th verse where Paul describes them as "turning to God from idols." Thessalonica was a culturally Greek city that had been under Roman rule for over 200 years. Being a port city and on a major highway, the city was fairly cosmopolitan – the residents had been exposed to a wide variety of religions and practices, social and cultural influences. In this city of varied experience and influences there was the church at Thessalonica. And Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy have written them a letter. Our image of Paul is often of a solitary man carrying the gospel alone, starting churches all by himself, struggling to find just the right words to write in another letter to a church. Tearing out his hair as he tried to put ink to paper to write just the right thing. Paul alone in a jail cell, writing, reading, thinking. This letter begins by reminding us of something important - -Paul did not do this work alone. He was not a soloist, but part of a team who did the work of evangelism together. And in this letter, he speaks of evangelism as something that changes both those who go out and tell the story of the gospel, as well as those who hear it. While this letter is primarily in his voice, he did not craft it alone.

One of the first questions for readers to ask when reading a letter of Paul's is "to whom did Paul write, followed by the question of "why"?. Paul had spent some time in the city when he brought the Gospel and established the church. He intended to return, but was held longer than he intended in Athens, and so sent Timothy in his place. Timothy returned with a good report, which prompted Paul to send this letter to the church. It is not one of condemnation. It is a tender letter. One that was read and perhaps reread when the people struggled. Placed in a drawer to refer back to or posted in a public place so the members of the congregation could see

it. This letter was a love letter – Paul pours out his love for the Thessalonians in this letter, and as he pours out his love for them, he gives thanks for their love for him. It is a mutual love, a love that Paul declares arises from the love that God has for all.¹

Paul is writing this letter to a community with which he had a personal bond. He had been there, he had mentored them, and he had visited them. This letter is full of concern and care for the church that Paul cannot be with in person. It can be hard for us to see in translation and across time as writing styles change, but Paul was a masterful letter writer. He could debate well, argue, teach, preach, and console when needed. He was a wordsmith, and knew how to use puns and wordplay. This letter is one written with the utmost of care and compassion for people he deeply wanted to be with, and could not get to.

In my first call, I was friends with a number of ministers who were pastors of small Methodist congregations. At our weekly breakfast meetings, the topic of circuit riding pastors would come up – some of them served two point charges - -this means they were pastors of two small churches. Several of these ministers churches or two point charges had at one time all been on the same circuit – one minister would ride through the area and make his rounds –his, not hers. The circuit may take several months, depending on the area, and the pastor would spend a week or two at a church and then travel to the next one and spend a week or two there before moving on. In between, he would communicate to his other churches by letter. Some churches would only have a pastor in worship ever 8 weeks or so. In the between weeks, the congregations and their leadership would encourage each other, teach each other, preach, and lead as a community of faith. The letters from the pastor would also provide encouragement and support. Paul was a circuit rider of sorts – he was not able to be with all of the churches, but he

¹ Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. Interpretation, 1st and 2nd Thessalonians. 1-9 selected.

wanted to provide them with his encouragement, support, council, and wisdom. He had an interesting connection with the Thessalonian church – he deeply valued their friendship and relationship, and expressed some of that gratitude in this letter as well. Paul mentors a community of believers, but he also lifts his thanks for them as well. In fact, that is where the second verse begins - -“we always give thanks to God for all of you and mention all of you in our prayers, constantly remembering before God your work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul approaches this letter and this congregation with thanksgiving, not to them, but to God for them.

What would it look like for us as a church to take a moment and think about giving thanks to God for our church family – to thank God for our works of faith, labors of love, and steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ that God has made possible through us? In offering the thanksgiving Paul makes a subtle, but critical distinction - -while he is thankful for the church, he is thankful for the ways God is at work in the church, the ways God is calling the body of the church to be the church. Paul looks for God to be active in the life of the church, and proclaims that he sees God at work in the life of the church. Looking at the heart of our verses for today, we see a description of how this church, this church chosen by God has been doing the work of God. God chose them to carry the message of the gospel, and it has been carried not only by them, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. The action that has been empowered was not just Paul’s idea, not just the ruling council’s idea, not just the members’ idea, but the movement of the Holy Spirit. The spirit inspires the church, the church responds and God is in the midst of that response. God causes the response. When Paul gives thanks for the work of the people of the church – for their becoming imitators of the Lord, their receiving the word with joy, their becoming an example to the believers in other places, their speaking the word and offering such

a welcome that the news about them has spread so that they do not have to speak but simply live
- -Paul thanks God for the ways God has made this all possible. Their activity is God's activity.
The primary agents of the Thessalonian church are God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

I want to invite us to take a closer look at the last three verses of the passage – 1:8-10.

“⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.”

If you noticed, way up in verse 3, we have mention of the classic three: faith, love, and hope.

These three words connect down to three others that we just heard in the last three verses – turn, serve, and wait. It is classic language for Paul - -remember he was an excellent letter writer and wordsmith, and so the phrase “, *and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven,*” would have caught the attention of those who heard the letter read aloud as being important and something to pay attention to. The first part, turning to God from idols implies a conversion of sorts - -a repentance that requires forgiveness. While this may be the case, it can also be interpreted as a change of heart and mind. Turning to God from idols can indicate the work of the Holy Spirit to change the mind of an individual to worship not idols, but a living and true God. The second word serve, is also worth looking at more deeply. The Greek implies not simple service such as you might get at a restaurant or hotel, but true servant-hood, or perhaps something deeper. The relationship between a person and God, when the person serves a living and true God is one of total and exclusive commitment to the relationship. It is understood through the discussion of Jesus' death and waiting for his

return that salvation has already been accomplished through his death, and that it is Jesus who will deliver the Thessalonians from the coming wrath described at the end of the passage. Which is where the waiting comes in - - a society and church that are perhaps in need of encouragement need to hear that it is OK to wait for the return of Jesus. That there is another one present in the midst of the turning and serving, and he will come again. We are in the hands of God who calls us to be in mission and service, to tell the good news and be examples as we wait for the return of Christ.

Looking at these last three verses brings to my mind next week for us - -it is our annual church Barbeque and also Bring a Friend Sunday. These words got me first thinking about it: *“⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you,”* It was through God that the word of the Lord sounded forth. Are we allowing God to use us to show our faith in God? That can be really scary, really non-Presbyterian, really not something we like to think about doing, and it may have felt the same way to those Paul was writing to as well. But this letter is a reminder that just as those who hear how God changes lives are changed, so are those who tell the story. As we have moved through our Imagine 2020 process over this year, I have been privileged to hear some wonderful stories of why this is your church. We have wonderful stories of how God moves through this place and through our people, how God uses us to support and nurture one another. Do you know someone who needs to hear that good news? Do you know someone who needs to feel the welcome we have to offer here? Can God work through both of you - the storyteller and the listener - in that experience to help you share your faith? And then, how are we as a congregation welcoming anyone who comes in our

doors? Not only to Sunday worship, but to any of our events? “The people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you...” That goes both ways, you know. I encourage each of you to ask yourself how God might be working through you to welcome the stranger into our home, and provide a welcome, to share with someone why this is your church and your faith, and invite them to come experience God at work in our midst.

I met a retired minister this week whose calling is currently to send cards to those retired ministers, their spouses and survivors and spouses in his presbytery for birthdays, anniversaries, and pastoral care reasons. He shared a letter he received from a couple in response to one of his cards. It was carefully folded, a little worn, and you could tell it had been read and reread – treasured. As he read the letter, he began to break down, just a little. He said “I send out so many letters each month, and get 5-7 responses. And each one means so much to me. All these people who take time to write a letter. It means so much, these letters. They mean so much, they say so much. You can feel the love.” In our time when we can say it quickly with a text or e-mail, it is the letters that can convey so much emotion, encouragement and love. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians was a love letter to them, a letter thanking them for their friendship and support, as he offered his, giving thanks to God for the work God had done in them. Not only are those who hear the Gospel changed by the hearing, but we are changed by the telling. If we were to write a love letter to our church, what would it say? How is God using us to deliver the good news to others? In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen