

Pastor's Message – 10/22/23
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

I had settled down last Saturday night and was scrolling through the TV guide and settled on an interesting movie called “Downsizing.” In that movie, scientists had come up with a process by which they could “downsize” people – purpose being to reduce the impact on the earth by increasing population. Smaller people – fewer resources.

The protagonist in the film had decided, with his wife, to undergo the process. He went ahead with it, but she backed out at the last moment. That’s not integral to the story, but brought up some interesting thoughts nonetheless.

Fast forward to the end, and the first community was moving into a vault because the earth had passed the point of no return, and they were going to form a new community for when the earth was ready again. The lights flashed, the alarm sounded, and just as the door was closing before it was sealed, the protagonist decided not to enter the vault, but instead stay with his new love and care for the people who were left behind. I don’t know if it was the point, but my thought was, “What good is tomorrow if you don’t take care of today?”

We read the opening lines, the first 10 verses today, of Paul’s 1st Letter to the Thessalonians. The Thessalonian church had been formed in reaction to a riot and had separated themselves from the culture of the time. The Thessalonians believed that Jesus was coming any day: today, tomorrow, or perhaps next week at the latest and they needed just to hold onto their faith and be ready for the end. They held the seeds of the new world, they were the vault, that would blossom when Jesus came again.

The Greek city of Thessalonica was a significant city, the largest in Macedonia. The city itself was approximately 300 years old and had been named after the half-sister of Alexander the Great. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is thought to be the oldest Christian document, written even before the Gospel of Mark. It has noticeably fewer Hebrew references, reflecting its Gentile audience. The frequent use of the words *brother* or *sister* and the many terms of endearment reflect Paul's great love for the small group of believers there.

In these first 10 verses of First Thessalonians, we learn that:

The Thessalonian Christians had been Gentiles before their conversion (verse 9), turning to God from idols.

The Christians in Thessalonica had been persecuted because of their faith; yet they continued to have joy in their faith (verse 6).

They did not hide their faith; it was known in many places (verse 8). Christian core beliefs were already emerging by the time this letter was written. The Christians in Thessalonica believed in the Resurrection of the

Lord Jesus Christ, in salvation from the judgment (wrath) of God, and they were anticipating the second coming of Jesus Christ (verse 10).

Paul writes to recall and celebrate the strengths of this congregation. In spite of their difficult beginnings, they continued to exhibit a faithfulness and steadfastness in Christ (verse 3), and an awareness that God has called them, and the Spirit has empowered them from the beginning (verses 4-5). They continue to live out with joy the way of Jesus they had learned from Paul and others (vs. 6-7) and show a willingness to share their conversion stories and their confidence in Jesus who "terrors of the coming judgment " (verses 8-10).

Timothy made a return visit to the Thessalonians to see how they were doing. He brought a favorable report to Paul upon his return. This was the occasion for Paul's letter.

The Bishop called all Wisconsin United Methodist clergy to a School for Ministry at the Green Lake Conference Center week before last. Among other things, it is a time to catch up with other clergy who we may not have seen or talked to for a year or more. A common question in that catching up is "Where are you appointed again?" "How are things going?" I am always grateful to report that this has been a good appointment and that I and the Church are working well together and it is a great place to be. It gives me the opportunity to brag about you and the amazing things you are doing. Kind of like Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians.

The Thessalonian Church, however, was preparing for the end of the world. It was a "doomsday church." The first-century Christians got that point, by the way, for they viewed the church as a place where the great virtues survive storm and calamity. One of the first symbols that the early Christians used to represent the church was Noah's ark, the vessel on which representatives of all living creatures found refuge during the catastrophe of the great flood. The ark was the place from which those surviving people and animals went forth to repopulate the earth. In similar fashion, the early Christians considered the church as the place from which God's message went forth to save the world.

The church needs to be the place where faith is offered without embarrassment. There is an old saying to the effect that Christianity is always only one generation away from extinction. I don't know who first said that, but the truth of the statement is evident: Without the passing of the knowledge about Christ and the testimony of faith from parents to children, from elders to youth, from those convinced of the faith to those who have not yet been persuaded, Christianity would eventually either die out altogether or be reduced to a curious historical phenomenon.

The church needs to be the place where hope is nourished without delusion. Certainly, there are ample reasons to lose hope in life. In fact, it's fairly

easy to preach about despair, for in the day-to-day it often seems so much more credible than hope. There's generally plenty of evidence around us to encourage and engender despair. But the church understands that hope is not rooted in what happens in the present moment. The hope the church shelters believes the Bible's report of the kingdom of God to come — without denying life's sometimes tragic character or attempting to explain away tragedy as "God's will."

Finally, the church needs to be a place where love is exercised without limits. Jesus told us to love our neighbor, and as we in the church understand that, he wasn't talking about emotions but about behavior. He was talking about acting in ways that support the well-being of others. And when we really grasp its meaning, we realize that none of us does it perfectly. But it's a driving force in the church that will not leave us at peace if we exclude and ignore people in need.

We should note that Paul's expressions of thanks are addressed not directly to the Thessalonians themselves, but to God on their behalf. Writing not only for himself, but also for Silas and Timothy (1:1), Paul says, "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2-3).

We should also note that Paul is not saying he's thankful that the Thessalonians are nice people; he's much more specific about his reasons for thanking God for these folks: He's thankful for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope." Because we're familiar with Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13, we already know that he considers the trifecta of faith, hope and love to be the highest of virtues, so we're not surprised that he also refers to them here.

But when he includes these three in his thanksgiving for the Thessalonian Christians, he does not talk about them as virtues in isolation, but gets more specific: He's thankful for their *work* of faith and *labor* of love and *steadfastness* of hope -- in other words, Christianity in the living of their lives. Their faith is grounded in the salvation presented by Jesus, but it doesn't stop there. It gets translated into what they do, how they act toward one another, the way in which they face the troubles of life, and their attitude about how things will come out in the end. Christianity is not a static belief for the Thessalonians, but a dynamic force that permeates all they say and do.

In a way, today's church must pattern itself by this ancient example. When the world around us is in a doomsday frame of mind, the message that faith, hope and love abide survives with us who follow Jesus. And it's not just our own salvation that we are talking about; we are talking about the salvation of the world.

This fall season of the year is a time when many United Methodist Churches are preparing for and holding Church Conferences. It is a time to “take stock” of the work of the Congregation, to look back on how the Church has lived out its call from God and where it is going in the future. It’s a time to reflect on the Church’s ministry and on our own individual responses to God’s call.

If you were to write a letter to your church, take a snapshot of the state of the Church, what sorts of things would you say about its faith and witness? What would you be able to affirm? Is the good news preached? Is it taken outside the walls of the church and into the wider community? How is it taken outside the walls?

This summer, the Staff-Parish Relations Committee worked on a new Mission Statement for the Church which you then voted on and the Church has been working on living out that Mission Statement. There is still and always room for growth, but you have been working on gathering and inviting others, growing in your faith, and then going out into the community to share that faith. Sounds kind of like the Thessalonians? The Church needs to be both a church of today and a church of tomorrow.

The church at Thessalonica, of course, was not merely a repository where faith, hope and love were banked away for retrieval after a calamity; it was surely a place from which the message of faith, the testimony of hope and the power of love went forth to work in the world every day. But at the same time, it was also a place where people lacking faith or feeling hopeless and unlovable could find those blessings. In that sense, the church at Thessalonica was a doomsday vault.

And in that sense, every church, including ours, *should be a storehouse where people in need of the great virtues can find them.*

Christians are waiting for the Son to return (v. 10). Waiting is not just sitting back and watching, but is an active state, where we work to have things as ready for his coming as we can. The lifestyle and activities of those who spread the gospel and live the gospel is an important part of the gospel message (vv. 6-7).

I encourage you to make it a practice of naming five things for which to be thankful for every night before sleeping – in your personal life and in the life of your church. Sometimes, that's hard, but making the effort is a discipline that can be a reminder of how God has been at work in your lives.

In addition to practicing the discipline at home, I have an easel pad in the coffee area. Before you leave today, write down just one thing for which you are thankful. For those of you who are offsite, send your statement of gratitude in the comments section today and we’ll write it down here for you and we’ll make it into a slide in our PowerPoint for next Sunday’s worship service. “The word of the Lord is ringing out from you to people everywhere, even beyond Waupun and Wisconsin,” so that the church of today is also the church of tomorrow.