

Preserving Our Inheritance

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1 Thessalonians 1:1-8

The Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 13, 2013

Scripture Introduction

In continuing to consider Practices for our Time, the “Our Time” shifts for a moment. We’ll be thinking not so much about the squeeze on our time, but that *this is our time*. This is our generations’ time to step up. And all of the practices in these next three weeks are a part of stewardship, all related to stewarding what we have been given.

This letter, First Thessalonians, is the earliest writing we have on what the phenomenon of Jesus Christ is all about; and it turns out it’s about the church. The first word we have about Jesus is a word about the church. Paul is writing to a church. His letter begins: “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the *church* of the Thessalonians...” And you’ll hear in it, too, in this earliest letter, reference to the core Christian practices of faith, love, and hope.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-8

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 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*. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because 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. And 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, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For 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.

* * *

I want to tell you part of our family’s lore. When our boys were little, Karen’s grandmother died. Dusty, our younger son, was three or four, and he said to Karen, “Your grandma just died, right? So, when I have children, you’ll die.” She said, “Yeah, it works something like that.” He said, “I’ll write your name on a piece of paper, and I’ll keep all your things.”

That’s what we want. We want to remember. We long to hold onto something, to preserve what we’ve been given. We want to preserve a legacy. But that legacy is ephemeral, isn’t it? We know that, even if we write it down, it can be lost.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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I have been trying to imagine the church of the Thessalonians, when this letter was written to them, which was about the year 50. Very likely it was a tiny church. We don't know for certain, but it is a good guess that the church of the Thessalonians was a few handfuls of groups. Imagine fifteen at one house-church, twenty-three at another, maybe thirty at a third location. They gathered in the larger homes, where they might fit in one or two rooms.

There really isn't much archeological evidence of these house-churches, because they were just homes. It was a few hundred years before specialized buildings were made for church gatherings.

In this particular group of house-churches in Thessalonica, we know from Acts that Paul, the founder of the church, had been recently run out of town. The church members, too, are being persecuted. Their existence must have felt tenuous at best. If you added up the whole church, there were a hundred of them, maybe more, maybe fewer. It must have felt as tenuous as a piece of paper.

They do seem to have fervor. Again, Paul says the gospel came to them not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. They have conviction. They are somehow inspired, but we know those things – fervor, conviction – can be tenuous too.

A Tiger fan asked me what happened to my San Francisco Giants this year. They did not do well. They ended ten games under .500, two games out of last place. For me, the question really is what happened *last* year. Somehow the players' ritual of getting fired up, and talking about how much they didn't want to stop playing together, and throwing sunflower seeds in the air – an inspiration that got them to win six elimination games – went cold. Inspiration and conviction can be tenuous too.

So, imagine handfuls of people gathering here and there in the city of Thessalonica, huddled in homes, telling stories they've heard of Jesus, reminding each other what Paul taught them, living as best they can their faith, love, and hope. Tiny, tenuous.

How did they figure anything would last?

You want something you can pass on. I have a Bible, given to me by Riley Jensen, who received it from Bill Evertsberg, who received it from Jack Stewart. But after me, somebody might lose it. It is paper. Eventually, it *will* rot away, like the original letter from Paul to the Thessalonians. The original is gone.

Wendell Berry wrote to this effect – I've adapted it for today: You and I live "in the neighborhood, not just of those who now live 'next door,' but of the dead who have bequeathed this" to us, and of the unborn who will inhabit the church after we do. How can we behave in a neighborly way to those who are not yet alive? "The only neighborly thing we can do for them is to preserve their inheritance..."¹

¹ Wendell Berry, "Renewing Husbandry," Orion Magazine, Sept/Oct 2005 – as cited in an unpublished paper by Carla Pratt Keyes for the Moveable Feast – Louisville: January 2013.

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“Preserve the inheritance.” So, what is that inheritance we are to preserve?

As Paul indicates, the inheritance we have received from the Thessalonians is the church. And this is our time, our time to do what they did to preserve the inheritance, to preserve it for the unborn yet to come.

Our call is to preserve this gift of the church, to preserve the legacy. But the church can't be brined or pickled. It can't be cooked and canned. We've all seen canned church, and it's not church—it's dead. The church must be preserved, but you can't even write the members' names on a piece of paper and keep all their things and preserve what the church is. We don't even know their names in Thessalonica—they're called only “sisters and brothers.”

So, then how? How did the church get from the unknown dead to our time, and how will it be preserved for the unborn yet to come? It's both simple and demanding.

For now, it is preserved in us. There isn't another container for it. We are the legacy, and we pass on that legacy the way the early church passed it on to us: by the very human practice of faith, love, and hope. Paul called it *the work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope*.

That's the legacy. That's our inheritance, and that's what we're called to preserve. I noted earlier that there are no archeological finds that can establish where these house-churches met. They're gone. The houses were real. People patched the roof, they fixed the windows, they set out meals and cleaned up afterward, they banked the fire and relit it, but all of that is gone—like an evening gone, short as the watch that ends the night. But they would not have preserved it at all without fixing their roofs, lighting their lamps, cleaning their dishes. Nevertheless those tangibles are all gone. Those tangibles were precious at the time, as precious as the Bible is to us—or as Dusty's paper with his mother's name on it.

The bronze plaques at the back of our sanctuary, the names in the stained-glass windows—all are precious, and yet all that can and will likely go to dust. You may not even be able to find an archeological record of it in another two thousand years.

But the legacy of the Thessalonians isn't like that. We don't go to the archeological record to find their legacy. That's not where you go to find the church. You don't even go to Greece. If there *is* an archeological record, it's here. Here is the church. You are the Body of Christ. Just like that first letter about Jesus—it turns out to be all about the church.

The Thessalonians' legacy is what Macedonia and Achaia heard about them: *your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope*.

In their time, they lived the gospel, they were the church, and they left us their inheritance, this legacy of faith, love, and hope. Now, of course, many others have also left us that legacy; the living word of the Lord has sounded forth all over. Some names we know; some we don't. So very, very many are unknown to us. So many. And here are a few that will be new to you, but they are the means by which our true legacy is carried. They are just examples.

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My friend Jim Lowry tells about a woman, Marguerite Finlaysen, in South Carolina. Jim led her funeral back in the mid-1970s. Marguerite had wispy gray hair in a bun that was forever coming undone, and sometimes her clothes were put together with a big safety pin. She was one who persisted in faith and love. Jim said, "I remember especially the day she invited my wife, Martha, and me to join her for Sunday dinner. Imagine our surprise when we got there to discover we were not the only guests. She had also invited six convicts from the work-release center: one a drug dealer, one a burglar, another guilty of man slaughter. It had caused quite a flap in the congregation when she first invited 'hardened criminals' to church. And she heard especially about the danger of having 'hardened criminals' in her home. They'd say, 'Fenny, there's no telling what those hardened criminals might do to you.' And, of course they were right, but the congregation met these men, and they began to think differently, not only of criminals but of everybody." And Jim said, "Some of those 'hardened criminals' were there for her funeral."² (She sounds like Peggy Hertel.)

And there was a man named Sid Query. Jim led his funeral back in the 1980s. Sid liked to hunt and fish and fix old cars; he was one of those who persisted in love. Jim remembered especially one Men of the Church Breakfast at the Mount Pleasant Church in South Carolina where, with a simple gesture, Sid gave witness to faith, love, and hope. "As it happened," Jim said, "we all suffered through the guest speaker that morning, a Navy Chaplain as I recall, as he ranted and raved at length about women being silent in church. When the speech was over, the chaplain asked if there were any questions. There was stunned silence. Sid Query, keenly aware that the chaplain had not spoken for a single man in the room but realizing further that every man in the room was, if nothing else, polite, stood up, dusted the flour off his apron, left there from having baked the breakfast biscuits, and announced to the crowd that he was sorry he had to leave early but he had to get home in time to cook breakfast for Mabel."³ (He sounds like Haven Davis.)

We still remember the names of those who gave us Westminster: Courtney Smith, Charles Henderson, James Grove – Harry Marshall, Virginia Schultz, Liz Hubbard – yet those of you who are new don't know those names.

But their legacy isn't their names. It's their love, their faith, their hope. That, as Paul says, is what abides. Faith, hope, and love abide, because they are of God's own self. It is what's in us that isn't lost. Faith, hope, and love make the church the Body of Christ. They are so in the heart of God that they're never lost. As Paul says, love never ends.

It never ends, and it's passed on by a spiritual contagion. You know how a contagion works. You can not only give it to your children but to strangers. Karen has the flu right now. And we've got this wonderful granddaughter now, Molly. But Karen's had the flu for a week and hasn't been able to snuggle Molly for the whole time. Talk about suffering – it's not the flu that hurts; it's the no Molly-snuggles!

² From an unpublished paper by Jim Lowry for the Moveable Feast – San Francisco: 2002.

³ *Ibid.*

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(That was a side-bar to give me a chance to mention my granddaughter!) The point is that faith, hope, and love are a contagion. We not only pass it along by living it, but God keeps calling new people to faith, love, and hope. The Thessalonians, whose names we don't know – who are just called “sisters and brothers,” caught the bug from Paul, and they passed it to those who eventually gave it to Sid and Marguerite, to Harry, Peggy, Virginia, and Haven – and you.

And God keeps calling people to faith, love, and hope through us. That's part of the legacy of church. How did Paul put it? “...you, Thessalonians, became an example, ...for the word ... 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.” They're catching it anyway.

Faith, hope, and love are a legacy and a contagion. God keeps calling people to this church. We met with about fifteen, the size of a whole Thessalonian house-church, on Wednesday evening, each with a story about how she or he felt called here. God keeps calling young adults, whose witnesses you read in the October *Chimes*. And God keeps calling forth those in our youth groups. If ever there was a witness to our legacy, it is in the youth groups. Oh, my. Let me share just one story from the youth retreat last month.

One of the first things we do is set a covenant – how we will be with one another in youth group. I heard the values of inclusion, and gentleness, and safety come from them with such grace. And then they divided into random groups. They were to address these two questions: What would you like to preserve from what we've done in the past? And what new ideas would those of you who are new, you freshmen especially, like to bring to the group? In other words, what would you like to see as we go forward? In one group there were three freshmen and one senior. The first to speak was the senior who said, “I don't want to say anything about what I've liked here until the three of you have a chance to speak first. I want to hear from you.” That's the kind of contagion, the kind of inspiration that can lead to championship seasons... and it's being kindled anew. That's the legacy; that's the contagion.

That's the living legacy of the Church: faith, love, and hope. That is the legacy of the Thessalonians – church.

And now is our time. These are the practices for our time. That is how we preserve the church for the unborn yet to come.

We still can't pickle it. We have to live it. *We* have to live it. God has called *us* for this time.

Infant baptism – I don't just *believe* in it; I've *seen* it done. And you have too.⁴

God calls people to be the Body of Christ. In the same way, I don't just believe in it; I've seen it happen!

God has called you to be the Church – to carry the Thessalonian legacy of faith, hope, and love – to bear that legacy in your own practice.

⁴ The congregation baptized a child earlier in the service.

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You are their legacy. You are the Church.

You are those called to be the church **for our time**, to preserve the legacy of the Thessalonians in your frail flesh by your work of faith, love, and hope.

You are the Church. You are the Body of Christ. Let the people say, Amen.