

Palm Harbor United Methodist Church

November 1, 2020

Rev. Sharon Patch

THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS

2 THES. 1:1-4 & 11-12

Today is a very special day in the life of the church. It is communion Sunday when we remember Jesus and his sacrifice for us. Today is also All Saints Day and we remember those from our congregation who have died within the last year. Many of these persons gave of themselves in service to God and to this church and we give thanks for their faith and their witness.

This morning we are starting a new series entitled, "Are you loyal?" Today I want us to look at our loyalty to those who are grieving, those who have endured a tragedy, and those who are going through a difficult time.

You know, I have told you how I preach sermons I need to hear. Well, that became painfully obvious this week. A friend requested prayer for a family member and I told her, of course, I would pray for her. Well, immediately after our conversation, I became distracted by one of a million things...not nearly as important...and forgot my promise. As a matter of fact, I totally forgot the conversation. I also told you I am sometimes forgetful. But, when I was reminded of her sister's pending surgery, I remembered her request and I was truly distraught. This was my friend! How could I, a pastor, a friend forget something so important?

It is easy to tell someone we will keep them in our thoughts and prayers. But, saying it doesn't matter if we don't do it.

"I will keep you in my thoughts and prayers" is a phrase that seems to just roll off our lips when we don't know what else to say. The question I want to explore this morning is whether or not we mean it, and exactly what we mean when we say it.

In our scripture lesson for this morning, Paul has heard that the church in Thessalonica was suffering. What can he say that will be helpful. The phrase, "thoughts and prayers" had not yet come into vogue. So, Paul begins by giving thanks for the Thessalonians. He gives thanks for their faith which is growing day by day and as their faith grows, so does their love for one another. He applauds their perseverance and he prays that God will enable them to fulfill every good purpose and every act prompted by their faith...all for the glory of God.

Whether or not the phrase was in vogue, Paul is telling the Thessalonians that he truly has been thinking about them and praying for them. He understands the pain and suffering they are enduring. Paul doesn't tell us what kind of persecution the Thessalonians were experiencing. However, the Christian message Paul and his followers had been proclaiming in the Jewish synagogues was not popular. Paul wanted his Jewish brothers to understand that Jesus was their long awaited Messiah. This message created chaos in Jewish houses of worship. The Christians brave enough to offer this message suffered verbal attacks, beatings, fines, expulsion, and imprisonment. This is the pain and suffering the Thessalonians were experiencing.

Yet, Paul does not tell them it is time to give up. Instead he cheers them on. He is encouraging and supporting and inspiring these new Christians. Sometimes when we are going through a difficult time, we really need someone to simply give us some encouraging words.

Jim and I use to attend his daughter, Amanda's soccer games. She was in middle school and she was the goalie. They were terrible. Yet, even when they were down 8 to 0, Amanda would be yelling

encouraging words to her teammates...we can do it. Come on team, we've got this! She was fiercely loyal to the team and she had an encouraging word even when others were ready to give up and quit. Loyalty to the message of Jesus Christ was so important to Paul and the Thessalonians that they were willing to suffer in their efforts to share the word. Their faith and their loyalty to one another was resulting in their faith and their love for one another growing. Loyalty to our faith, our friends, our family and our neighbors is important.

When we say we are keeping someone in our thoughts and prayers, I think we are trying to express our sympathy and concern for them. But, if these are just words we say, and we don't follow through, they can become meaningless platitudes.

Instead, we need to stop and really think about the suffering of others. When we think about all the lives that have been lost during this time of COVID, we find it hard to know what to say or what to do. When we think about the disasters that have occurred...the earthquake in Turkey just this weekend, the stabbing in a catholic church in France, the people on the Gulf coast who have suffered through one hurricane after another, and the people on the west coast who have lost so much to the fires that have raced across their lands...we don't know what to think or what to do. We feel helpless. We are often asked to keep them in our thoughts and prayers.

Writer, Andrew Klavan, says, "When tragedy or atrocity strikes...thoughts and prayers are not just an expression of compassion. They are an expression of humility and helplessness." They are a way of saying, "There is nothing we can do in the face of this...but we stand in solidarity with the victims and ask God to comfort their families in their sorrow."

So, we offer them our thoughts and prayers. What do we think and what do we pray? Thoughts are work, because they push us to view what's happened not from our point of view, but the view of those directly affected.

Prayer is also work. Prayer deepens our empathy and puts us in a place where God can change us and lead us. When we pray, we are putting ourselves in a place to see beyond our own horizons and walk in someone else's shoes. When we pray for others, we are seeking God's grace for them at a time when they may be so wounded that they can't even pray for themselves. So, when we actually pray for someone, we are shouldering some of the burden for them. We are speaking to God on their behalf. Sometimes, we really don't know what to say in our prayers. But, Paul tells us in the book of Romans that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and even when we don't know what we ought to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. When we don't know what to pray, the Holy Spirit will pray through us. You are asking for God's help, not for yourself, but for someone else.

Pope Francis says: "Prayer that doesn't lead to concrete action toward our brothers is a fruitless and incomplete prayer. Prayer and action must always be profoundly united." This resonates with me. I want to do something to help. I want to make things better. If you tell me you need something, I will walk across hot coals to do whatever you ask. For those of us who are doers of the word, we are happiest when we can actually do something to help. Make a casserole, bake a cake, make a donation...Of course, there are many times when we don't know what to do. So, what can we do?

Ashley Kappel says that when she is faced with a situation where she can't directly help, she turns to how she can put out more love to those around her. In the face of oppression, we love. In the face of anger, we love. In the face of violence, we love. And, in the face of tragedies, we love. We express our love through our actions and through our prayers.

Let's think about the actions that we might be able to offer. If someone is grieving, could we offer to help with the kids, or with an aging relative for whom they are the caregiver? Is there some task we can take off their plate for a little while...grocery shopping, laundry, making arrangements. Instead of saying, "Let me know if I can help." How about saying, "What can I do to help?"

Stan Purdum, was the pastor of a little country church where several members were dairy farmers. One day, a child of one of those farmers died suddenly. So Purdum rushed to their home to offer what comfort he could. When he got there, he found the father and mother of the child in the house, with their other children around them. He knew at that time of day, the father would normally have been in the barn, milking cows, a procedure that needs to be done twice a day without fail. But a family member told Purdum that two of the neighbors, farmers themselves, had come to handle the milking without being asked.

Their thoughts about the grieving family had led them to do what they could to help.

Now, if you need help with milking, I haven't done it in years but I'll give it a try. Unfortunately, in our society today, the needs of those who are suffering are often more complex and require us to think deeply about how we can help.

When it comes to the tragedies on both the Gulf coast and on the West coast, we want to help. We can contribute to their recovery, or perhaps join a work team that is going there to help but for those of us who are advanced in age, there seems little else we can do that would be of help, except to keep them in our thoughts and prayers. Being some distance away only increases the difficulty in being able to help.

When Paul heard of the suffering of the Thessalonians, he was also some distance away...not close enough to be with them in person. Often just being a loving, caring presence with someone who is suffering is as important as any words you might say or anything you might do. Unfortunately, being present with one another during this time of COVID is nearly impossible. Yet Paul shows us that just communicating support and encouragement can help.

When Paul was thinking about the Thessalonians, he remembered how their faith had grown and how their love for one another had grown. When we think about the people who have suffered so much loss, we are humbled when we hear their stories of faith that is sustaining them; and when we hear about neighbors and even strangers who have pitched in to help, we are so thankful for kind, caring people. God has no hands here on earth but our hands and our hearts...filled with love bringing help and bringing comfort.

Being a loyal friend or neighbor or teammate, or church member, or just a fellow human being, means sincerely thinking about and praying for those who are suffering...even when it is difficult. The Thessalonians were truly suffering so Paul's sincere thoughts and prayers were just what they needed to help them keep on keeping on. Our sincere thoughts and prayers may be just what others need to help them keep on keeping on.

