

Sit and Be, Go and Do

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13



Sit and be. Sometimes that is what is most needed. Remember the story of Mary and Martha, Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, paying attention to each word, while her sister Martha scurries about preparing the meal, taking care of all the hostess responsibilities. Finally, exasperated, she tells Jesus to make Mary help her. You remember his words, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried over many things, when one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the better part and it shall not be taken from her."

So sometimes the better part is to sit and be.

And yet, in another meal scene, at table in the home of a Pharisee, a woman comes into the house, pours expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, and, weeping, wipes his feet with her hair. It is possible she is this same Mary, though in this account she is unnamed. When the host is horrified at her actions and that Jesus is allowing her to do so, Jesus responds, "I entered your house and you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment."

So, yes, sometimes it is better to go and do, to rise up and work.

Our text for today is tricky because it seems to land squarely on the "go and do" side of the ledger. It is tricky also because of the way it has been lobbed like a grenade at the unemployed or people who are in need of support. "See, Paul says it right there in Thessalonians. If someone won't work, don't let them eat."

When you run up against a text like this, it is wise to apply what the Reformed tradition calls "the rule of love." If you are reading something and it appears to go against the Spirit of Christ, you may be missing something. Fred Craddock puts it bluntly: "Read the Bible through the spectacles of the grace and goodness of God. If in reading the Bible you find justification for abusing, humiliating, disgracing, harming, or hurting, especially

when it makes you feel better about yourself, you are absolutely wrong. The Bible is to be read in the light of the character of God.”

So we go to this text again, which seems at first blush to be about lazy people idling about, eating food for which they have not paid. And the first thing to notice is that this is a problem in the Christian community Paul is writing to, and not intended for all of society. There are people in the Christian community who are “atakos.” That Greek word means more than just “idle.” It is actually a word taken from the military that means disorderly or insubordinate. Paul is speaking to members of the community who have intentionally broken with the traditions of the community – in this case the tradition of the apostles supporting themselves through work.

This is Paul’s concern, one that is deep enough to cause him to make bold statements in the name of Christ. The community itself is damaged when those within it no longer respect one another. Biblical scholars note that more than likely the people who are being disorderly and disrespectful in Thessalonica are doing so for a very particular reason – they believe that Jesus is coming back any minute. It seems one group has decided that if Jesus is coming back, the community should withdraw from the world. So the second letter comes as a corrective. No, says Paul, we are to be in the world, as a community, bound together in Christ.

I wonder what Paul would write to us? We are far removed now from those promises of Christ’s coming, and his kingdom at times seems so far away. How would Paul address a community of faith that gathers on the Sunday after an election that has so clearly revealed a significant conflict – those who are jubilant and those who are horrified; those who feel a new sense of empowerment, and those who are genuinely afraid; those who are joyful, and those who are grieving. And these two groups coexist in this nation, in workplaces, in families, *and* in churches.

I have gotten all kinds of advice for this Sunday’s sermon, which I welcome, since I was not at all sure what to say.

“You have to go off lectionary,” one person told me. “Just pick a text that speaks to the moment.” He went on to say, “Tell them this is not okay, what’s happened in our nation.”

Another said, “You should remind people that the American people have spoken, and they’re just going to have to get over it. I’m sure you will find a pastoral way to put it, but that’s what needs to be said. These protests are ridiculous.”

And yet another, “This is not a day to preach unity. If you preach unity, you are being dismissive of the people out there who are really grieving.”

And one more, “I wouldn’t say a dang thing, man. Have you lost your mind? Ignore it. It will pass. We’ll be fine.”

That’s how it’s been, all week. Lots of people with deep concern about what gets spoken, or not spoken, from the pulpit.

Of course, the only thing that should ever be spoken from any pulpit is the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when times are deeply conflicted that gospel should be spoken ever more clearly. And what is the gospel of Jesus Christ, but a call to radical love, extravagant grace, and eyes to see the kingdom of God being born in our midst, to, as Ted Wardlaw puts it, “See the world as God sees it, to see each person – rich or poor, Republican or Democrat, gay or straight, black or brown or white, male or female – as a child of God.”

And the gospel of Jesus Christ is clear when it comes to the one thing I have seen after this election that has troubled me the most – the ways we have been dismissive of one another. Those who are happy with the election have been dismissive of the genuine grief and fear of those who are not. And those who are not pleased with the outcome have been dismissive of those who voted the way they did. We have imputed motives to others that may not be true. We have been reluctant to listen, really listen, to what our brothers and sisters are saying.

Paul lifts to the church at Thessalonica the tradition of Christ, which places all other traditions in their proper perspective. And he enjoins them to respect one another enough to live in genuine community, to not grow weary in doing what is right.

I feel like this is a sit and be moment for the church, for the nation. We need, desperately, to sit down with one another and really listen. We need to sit and be in prayer for President Obama, President-elect Trump, the Congress, the courts. But, mostly, we need to, like Mary, sit at the feet of Jesus for a while, get our bearings. If we do, we will hear his watchwords for the moment when it is time to go and do.

Over and over in his letters, Paul set a table in the midst of an anxious church by reminding them who they were and their call in the world in the name of Christ. We could do worse than these, far worse:

Go out into the world in peace;

have courage;
hold on to what is good;
return no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted;
support the weak and help the suffering;
honor all people;
love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As your pastor, I pledge to, with God's help, go and do these things. I pledge to live by these lights as I live out my citizenship in this nation. I pledge to hold others accountable to these values, which are not mere words, but the very traditions that have been given to us, the way that makes for life. I ask you to pray for me, and I pledge to pray for you as you walk the way of Christ.

That way is shown to us once again as we break bread and remember Christ's broken body, as we drink wine and remember his shed blood, as we do so together – one communion – one bread, one body, one Lord of all...

That way remains the way of life, yesterday, today, tomorrow, and forever. May we embrace it for the living of these days. Amen.