

“A WORD FROM THESSALONICA”

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Friends, what does it mean to be the Church? What does it mean to be the Body of Christ in this time and in this place?

The apostle Paul is credited with shaping the early church. Several years after the life and ministry of Jesus, Paul, a persecutor of early Christians, became a believer. He became convinced that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish teacher and healer who was executed by the Romans, was the Messiah, the Christ.

Paul spent the rest of his life traveling around the Roman Empire telling people about Jesus, in places whose names we know because of him – Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, Corinth. People heard the good news and were baptized, and together they became a community.

Paul’s faith was the driving force behind everything he did. When he wrote his letters to the early churches, he could not have imagined that people two thousand years later would be reading them for advice. He could not have known how the work of the disciples (and later himself) would change the world.

The first letter to the Thessalonians is probably the first letter Paul wrote, around the year 50. It was written to a struggling, yet vigorous church that was only a few months old, made up of Christians who had just come to Christ under Paul’s ministry. It is a delightfully revealing letter, showing the heart of the apostle toward these new Christians, and also showing the struggles that were present in the early church.

Several lines in the text stand out: In verse 4, we learn that the sisters and brothers in Thessalonica are beloved by God, who has chosen them based on their response to the Christian message. The people excelled in hospitality (v. 9), one of the great Christian gifts. It is surpassed by the faith, love and hope mentioned in v. 3, but hospitality is essential in building up the church. We also note that Paul opens his letter with a double address for the church: one geographical, the other spiritual. The people lived in Thessalonica, but they are also found “*in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Of the two, the latter address is the more important. While you and I live and serve in our own city, let us see ourselves as primarily new creatures “*in Jesus Christ,*” and “*in God the Father.*”

To set 1 Thessalonians in context, according to Acts 17, Paul visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. This was an important city, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, located along the Egnatian Way, which was a 700-mile Roman built road which ran from the Adriatic to the Bosphorus. Many of the places where Paul preached have crumbled into ruin, but Thessalonica is still a thriving, bustling metropolis, now called Thessaloniki in Greece. In fact, the ancient gate through which the apostle would have entered the city is still standing.

Using the standard ancient letter format of initial greetings (1:1) followed by a thanksgiving or blessing (1:2-10), Paul writes, “*We give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers...*”

The apostle knew the Thessalonian believers. Paul, along with Timothy and Silvanus, had introduced them to the gospel and established the church there. Paul had

seen the transformation that had taken place in their lives through the redemptive work of Christ. As Paul began the letter, he could not help but express his love and gratitude for the work of God that was so evident in their lives.

"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 labour of love and steadfastness of hope in Jesus Christ."

These opening words are a powerful statement on the life of a Christian. Three things marked these Thessalonian believers – their work of faith, their labour of love, and their endurance in hope. Paul is continually thankful in prayer for these believers, because these three blessings, or graces, are constantly being revealed in the life of the congregation. These are the first identifiable marks in the congregation's life.

In the New Testament, faith, hope, and love are listed as fundamental characteristics of those who have come to know Christ. We are familiar with these graces from Paul's passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13 (written about 3 years later), where he concludes, *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."* There Paul elevates love to the supreme position, and indeed, it is the greatest virtue. But in our text the order is faith, love and hope. This seems to be kind of a natural order – as faith is anchored in something that happened in the past, love is something we practice in the present, and hope looks forward to the future.

And it is not merely faith, love and hope. It is a faith which works, a love which labours, and a hope which endures.

What is this *"work of faith"* that Paul speaks of?

He is talking about the effects of faith in the lives of individuals. Faith is not merely belief. True faith always leads to action. It leads to a changed life. The work of faith is the change that faith produces in the heart and mind of the believer. The work of faith is to open up our lives to larger realities, to new possibilities and new life. Faith moves us into a larger understanding where we recognize that all people are God's children and deserving of the same love and justice.

Faith comes first, but the next thing Paul mentions is love. Faith is directed toward God and Christ; love is directed toward others. As a result of the grace that the Thessalonians had experienced, they gave themselves in service to Christ. And thus there are the labours of love.

Paul is not talking about feeling love for someone. Paul is talking about a way of life in which we do what is best for others, whether we like them or not, whether we feel like it or not. These are the actions and deeds that we do out of love of God and for other people. Paul speaks of acts of compassion that grow out of our understanding and vision of life that is given by faith. In gratitude for God's love for us, we serve others in God's name. The works of love are many: giving a cup of cold water, providing food and shelter, forgiving others as we have been forgiven, seeking truth and reconciliation. And, of course, there is work on a much larger scale, on an institutional level and in the international arena. All of this is serving others in the name of Christ.

Paul says that the Thessalonians preached, taught, had fellowship together, and met the needs of others. Their faith and their works transformed their whole way of being.

And what is the steadfastness of hope? It is not easy work that we are called to do. Hope is what sustains us. The endurance of hope sustains faith and love through to the end. It is the conviction that what we are doing is the work of God and that God will sustain and preserve the work we do. The steadfastness of hope is a joy that brightens our service. Our faith and hope is a response to God's great love for us in Christ, and our hope is rooted in the promise that what we have seen in Christ is God's intention for all life.

As such our hope does not become exhausted, because our hope does not come from our own strength. Our hope comes to us from the grace of God we have seen and received in Christ. And in the wonder of God's resurrection of Christ, we continue to plant small seeds of goodness and justice in the conviction that they will grow into huge bushes of goodness and justice. We do not become discouraged when resources are low, because we work in hope and confidence that we are doing God's work.

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Friends, from these opening words of Paul's earliest letter we learn an important lesson about the nature of the Gospel message, and it is as applicable today as it was in the first century. People were convinced of the validity of the Thessalonians' faith, not just by what they had heard, but also by what they had seen in the Thessalonian Christians. For us this means that we have the same attitude toward our lives and the people around us throughout the week as we have when we join in worship. It means that everything we do and think is seasoned with our love for God and God's love for us. It means that we care for God's creation and are hospitable to all people. It means that we are committed to building as much of God's reign as we can on earth. Our Christian life is about growing in faith, love, and hope, but each of these demands work, service in order to be realized.

May God bless us with wisdom, courage, and grace, and may we be encouraged that what we do together we do so always within the guiding presence of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen