

“SHOWING OUR SPIRIT”

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 October 22, 2017

Do you have a favorite sports team? –in addition to our own Hornets of course! If so I want you to lock that team into your mind for just a moment. Perhaps you graduated from the University of Wyoming or have family attending there now. Maybe you are a huge Bronco fan?!?! If so, God bless you. What happens when your favorite team wins a big game? You respond like this: “WE DID IT ! WE WON!” You may run around the living room high-fiving, chest-bumping, and doing a little jig. Now my question is: What role did you play in this victory? Maybe you bought a jersey or a cap, but the truth is you didn’t do anything that contributed to your team’s success. Yet you feel intense ownership because this is YOUR team.

If you and I can feel this strongly about our favorite sports team, how much more intense should our feelings be for our local church? We need to think of church as “we,” not “they.” Although churches are made up of individuals, when you and I speak of the church we must never say “they.” Instead we should say ‘we’...for we are the church!! In the book of 1 Thessalonians, we will learn about a church that will excite us. Although there are no “perfect” churches, the church in Thessalonica is a model church. As we study this church, we will learn how we can be a church that glorifies God and leads a world to Him. Specifically, in 1 Thess 1:1-10, we will see that God uses the church to encourage leaders.

Encouragement is found in the lives we live.

In this second Sunday in our three-week series , Habits of Hospitality” we are looking at these questions: *What does it mean to become “imitators of us and of the Lord” and to receive “the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit”*

so that we may become examples to other believers? What does it mean to be truly welcoming, receiving all people and their gifts, even as we serve a living and true God and wait for the coming again of Christ in final glory?

As we ponder these questions this week we might wonder if, in our zeal to grow in number as congregations, perhaps we have lost sight of our mission to be disciples of Jesus Christ who are transforming the world. Don't get me wrong: this is not an indictment in any way against seeking new people for Christ, or adapting our practices (worship and otherwise) in order to attract new people to our church, or experimenting with innovative ways of reaching people who find no relevance for their own lives in the message of Jesus Christ. But I do want to suggest that our discipleship is deeply connected to our understanding and practice of hospitality.

Last week we talked about the qualifications for discipleship Jesus named as he commissioned a group of followers and sent them out ahead of him. He sent them out in pairs instructing them to prepare the townspeople for his coming. He told them to go forth with an attitude of hope, an expectation for a plentiful harvest. He warned them that they might be met with rejection, but not to be discouraged by naysayers. He urged his followers to go to each house; to be gracious in each context they encountered; to not be in too much of a hurry; to offer ministry according to the needs of each situation; and to proclaim that the kingdom of God had come near.

This week, as we move into the greeting from Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica, we find Paul taking on this yoke of hospitality described by Jesus. Look at how he begins his letter to them. He announces no agenda. He thanks God for them. He embraces the giftedness he has found among them.

Welcoming all begins with such embrace.

The people of the Thessalonian church have also clothed themselves in these same garments of Christ's loving hospitality. In fact, they have done this so well that their witness has become an example for others. Paul and his friends have heard reports from all over the region about the welcoming manner displayed by the good people in the Thessalonian congregation.

Paul's first letter to Thessalonians is the earliest writing in the New Testament. Paul's very first letter is very personal and reflects not only Paul's familiarity with and deep affection for this community of faith, but also his genuine affection for each of its members. He founded this church, and he knows these people.

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. The letter addresses the Gentile believers who, through Paul's ministry, had come to know the gospel message of Jesus Christ that he proclaimed. Part of the letter's purpose is to encourage these new disciples who were facing persecution and adversity from their neighbors to remain strong and not waver in their conviction. They were under threat, not just in terms of social pressure to return to the beliefs and values of Roman culture, but had sometimes faced physical violence for their non-conformity.

A critical thing to understand about Paul's message is that for Paul, conversion was not simply about hearing the story of Jesus and his saving love proclaimed. Receiving the good news carried power that could be seen and experienced. The very power of the Holy Spirit was made manifest in those who accepted the gospel.

In 1:3, Paul shares three characteristics he appreciates about the

Thessalonian believers. First, he mentions their “**work of faith.**” Salvation is God’s gift. Faith rests upon the work of God, not our work, God produces His work in us. Paul blesses these believers because of the works that followed their faith. *Encouragement is found in the lives that we live.*

Second, Paul refers to their “**labor of love.**” The word “labor” denotes wearying toil involving sweat and fatigue to the point of exhaustion. It is a love of blood, sweat, and tears. Rev. Keith R. Krell tells this story: When I was in Bible College and seminary, I worked for Neptune Swimming Pool Co. in Clackamas, OR. During the summers, I was responsible for unloading several palettes with 100-pound sand bags. I can remember these days of mid-90’s heat, unloading these bags of filter sand. It was hard work. I labored because I had to, but I also labored because I wanted to. You see, I was saving money for my honey-moon and upcoming marriage. This was a labor of love. I know many individuals in our church who work their tails off. Like most people, these folks have a spouse, children, and work responsibilities. Nevertheless,, they refuse to say, “I don’t have time to serve the Lord. I have family responsibilities, I have work responsibilities, and I need my free time.” These choice people are concerned about all of these responsibilities, but they are equally concerned about their obligation to their Lord...God is no man’s debtor. If you labor for Him, He will multiply your time and bless you to boot! It is really a question of love.

Lastly, Paul refers to their “**steadfastness of hope.**” Our English word “steadfastness” seems soft and passive. Yet, the Greek term behind this translation is tenacious and aggressive. Similarly, the English word “hope” transmits the idea of wishful thinking. We say “I hope it is sunny tomorrow.” Biblical hope, however, is not wishful thinking. No, hope has the idea that we have assurance in the

future because of who God is. Hope helps us claim the promises of God. In other words, the problems we currently face do not daunt us because we see beyond the moment. We possess a holy stick-to-it-iveness that enables us to remain steadfast in the midst of trials and difficulties.

Rev. Krell tells another story to illustrate this point: Our dog, Jerome, lives out the biblical definition of steadfast hope. Jerome has a stuffed cat that he loves to play with. He puts it in his mouth and begs us to come outside and throw it. I always fall for this ploy. Call me sucker. Instead of gleefully dropping the stuffed cat out of his mouth, Jerome refuses to let me get close to him. Instead, he runs away from me!! He has a 75-foot dog lead so he can go quite a ways. If I want to play catch, when he comes close to me I have to step on his dog lead and pull him to me. When I do finally get a hold of Jerome and try to take the stuffed cat out of his mouth, do you think he lets me? Not on your life! When I go after the cat, our basset hound turns into a bulldog. To get the cat from him, I practically have to yank his fangs out of his mouth. What used to annoy me now reminds me of steadfastness of hope. Do you have this type of tenacity? If God calls you to a task, do you refuse to let go? Those who want to advance the cause of Christ in the world cannot give up.

These three characteristics can only be lived out by noting the last phrase of 1:3: “in the Lord Jesus Christ.” When we abide in Christ and live in Him, supernatural living occurs. This is what is really exciting! As a pastor I have to ask the question, “What do I give thanks for?” Am I especially grateful for an increase in our attendance or weekly offering? Would I be really impressed with new programs or a new facility, or am I most thankful for expressions of the faith, hope, and love I see in you? *Encouragement is found in the lives we live.*

The people who heard Paul proclaim the message were changed by the experience. They didn't just hear his words. They saw and felt the power of the Spirit in those words. They saw and felt the power of the Spirit through Paul. And once they became followers, apparently that same power of the Spirit shone through each one of them as well.

The Rev. Dawn Chesser shares an experience about showing our spirit. She writes, When I was younger, I was a cheerleader. One of the phrases we often used, with regard to how we were to conduct ourselves, was that we would “show our spirit,” In this case, the “spirit” we were to show was our passion for our school and our football and basketball teams. We showed our spirit by shouting it loudly, and jumping up and down, and wearing smiles on our faces at all times. We showed our spirit by dressing in red and white, and wearing our uniforms, and never getting discouraged when our football team ended the season 0-9. (Yes, that is actually true.)

An important habit of hospitality for disciples is that we need to show our Spirit as loudly and passionately as possible. This doesn't mean we never have a hard day or admit that we aren't feeling particularly joyful sometimes. It just means that we don't ever give up our hope that joy will return, because the Spirit of Christ is always with us, in us, shining through us and infecting others with the love and grace of the Lord. Methodists early on were known for their “enthusiasm.” I think that Wesleyan enthusiasm, that habit of showing our Spirit through our passion, our hope, our excitement—and wearing that enthusiasm like a holy garment for all to see—is in our DNA. It is who we are, not only as disciples of Jesus Christ, but as United Methodists.

We have all known people in our lives in whom the very Spirit of Christ

was manifest in such a way that we could see it and feel it. People who exhibit this depth of faith are like leaven. They literally spill the Spirit out on to everyone they meet, so that it infects the people around them. They may be sitting in the pew with you right now or they might be part of the great cloud of witnesses that surround and embrace us. Like Paul and the people of the Thessalonian church, they infect us and continue to infect us with the Spirit of the living Christ. We are so grateful for all the saints whose love for Christ has spilled out on us. I can see the faces of my own great cloud of witnesses in my mind and feel their loving spirits strongly, even though some of them are no longer part of this world.

So like Paul, I always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in my prayers, remembering before our God and Father your works of faith and labors of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For I know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that Christ has chosen you, because the 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 person I proved to be among you.

You became imitators of the Lord, for in spite of persecution, you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all the believers in Wyoming, and Nebraska, and Colorado, and Missouri, and Iowa, and all the places where I have seen the face of Christ and felt and known the very Spirit of the living God through all of you. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in these places, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about what kind of welcome I had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, who he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. Amen and amen.