

Notes + on + a
Revolution

A Devotional Companion to the Letter of 1 Thessalonians
Hope Lutheran Church + New Life Lutheran Church, Fall 2010

Notes on a Revolution

A Devotional Companion to the Letter of 1 Thessalonians

Hope Lutheran Church + New Life Lutheran Church, Fall 2010

Day 1: <i>The Conspirators</i>	p. 4	Day 29: <i>A Blessing, A Prayer, A Wish</i>	p. 46
Day 2: <i>Together Across the Miles</i>	p. 5	Day 30: <i>More Than A Feeling</i>	p. 48
Day 3: <i>More Than Greeting Card Filler</i>	p. 7	Day 31: <i>Praying for Strength</i>	p. 49
Day 4: <i>Children or Customers?</i>	p. 8	Day 32: <i>Further Up and Further In</i>	p. 50
Day 5: <i>More Than Words</i>	p. 10	Day 33: <i>Recovering Holiness</i>	p. 52
Day 6: <i>The Sincerest Form of...Discipleship?</i>	p. 12	Day 34: <i>Because Bodies Matter</i>	p. 53
Day 7: <i>A Strange Kind of Good</i>	p. 13	Day 35: <i>Where the Buck Stops</i>	p. 55
Day 8: <i>What Can Go Unsaid</i>	p. 15	Day 36: <i>Beyond Bare Minimums</i>	p. 57
Day 9: <i>Leaving the Marketplace Behind</i>	p. 16	Day 37: <i>Turning Down the Volume</i>	p. 59
Day 10: <i>Worth the Wait</i>	p. 17	Day 38: <i>Grief and Hope</i>	p. 61
Day 11: <i>Without Entitlements</i>	p. 19	Day 39: <i>Who's Holding Onto Whom?</i>	p. 62
Day 12: <i>Honest to God</i>	p. 21	Day 40: <i>Not Changing the Subject</i>	p. 64
Day 13: <i>What It Looks Like</i>	p. 22	Day 41: <i>The Triumphal Entry</i>	p. 65
Day 14: <i>The Joy of Giving Yourself Away</i>	p. 24	Day 42: <i>Encouraging Each Other</i>	p. 67
Day 15: <i>More Than A Paycheck</i>	p. 25	Day 43: <i>Ready in the Outfield</i>	p. 68
Day 16: <i>A Life That Is Worthy</i>	p. 27	Day 44: <i>Don't Buy the Hype</i>	p. 70
Day 17: <i>Rain on Good Soil</i>	p. 28	Day 45: <i>Ready To Be Surprised</i>	p. 71
Day 18: <i>Learning How to Suffer Well</i>	p. 29	Day 46: <i>Ready for a New Day</i>	p. 73
Day 19: <i>Going Too Far?</i>	p. 31	Day 47: <i>The Ace Up God's Sleeve</i>	p. 74
Day 20: <i>The Long-Distance Relationship</i>	p. 33	Day 48: <i>Playing the Classics</i>	p. 75
Day 21: <i>Our Best-Laid Plans</i>	p. 34	Day 49: <i>More Than Only Fair</i>	p. 77
Day 22: <i>What Will Last</i>	p. 36	Day 50: <i>Breaking the Cycle</i>	p. 79
Day 23: <i>For Your Sake</i>	p. 38	Day 51: <i>Constant Conversation</i>	p. 80
Day 24: <i>Wagging the Dog</i>	p. 39	Day 52: <i>A Good Fire</i>	p. 81
Day 25: <i>Uncertainty, Love, and Faith</i>	p. 41	Day 53: <i>Wishers and Blessers</i>	p. 83
Day 26: <i>The Gospel in Flesh and Blood</i>	p. 42	Day 54: <i>The Engine of the Revolution</i>	p. 85
Day 27: <i>Throwing Our Lot In</i>	p. 44	Day 55: <i>Love Without Sentimentality</i>	p. 86
Day 28: <i>What To Do With Thanks</i>	p. 45	Day 56: <i>Hemmed In...</i>	p. 88

About These Devotions

Since the fall of 2006, it has been my practice Monday through Friday (with a handful of breaks, admittedly) to write and post daily devotions on the website of Hope Lutheran Church (www.findhopehere.net), as a way of keeping me grounded and connected with the Scriptures and other voices of the faith. At times, those devotions have taken the form of a slow (sometimes plodding) verse-by-verse journey through a single book of Bible. And on those occasions, I have offered bound copies of those devotions to our church families at Hope, Homer City, and New Life, Marion Center, for those who had the interest but missed the devotions when they were posted online. So what follows here is part of that ongoing experiment, this time with my wrestling and seeking through the New Testament book we call 1 Thessalonians. As with previously assembled devotions that we have made available, these are not the last word to be said about this Biblical book. If anything, I hope this is the *beginning* of conversation and prayer as we, the people of God in this time and place, ask anew what God is up to among us and how we can be a part of it. Again, it should be mentioned that these are *devotions* rather than in-depth biblical study. There is much more that could be said about each passage, and surely it would be presumptuous and foolish for me to pretend to have said *everything* that could or should be said about 1 Thessalonians in these pages. Instead, each day's devotions are laid out to allow us to explore a passage briefly, think out what was going on for Paul and for his readers, and what connections these might make in our life. Your own reflections and reactions are most certainly invited as you work through 1 Thessalonians. What is most important, though, is that in reading the biblical text you will be pulled by the Spirit deeper into the good news of God's love in Christ Jesus, and deeper into the living movement called *church* that God is making out of us.

With love for you all, my sisters and brothers at Hope and New Life,

Pastor Steve

About the Book of 1 Thessalonians

Christianity is a revolution: a movement of people living their present lives in light of the promised future reign of Jesus and the restoration of all things. And the Christian community (you, me, and all those saints who have gone before us, too) are all learning from one another how to live as an ongoing witness to that promised future even now. This is what 1 Thessalonians is all about. This short book of the New Testament may be one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest writing in the New Testament. It is a letter from Paul to the congregation he founded in the Greek city of Thessalonica, a congregation with whom he had a strong, loving, deep relationship both when he was with them as their pastor and even after he had gone further on his missionary journey. The honesty and depth of his love for them is evident in the letter, as Paul wears his heart on his sleeve for these sisters and brothers in Christ. But at the same time, Paul is not just writing a love letter to people he misses—he is writing about how they will live *ahead of time*, in confident anticipation of the coming of the risen Jesus and the fulfillment of the Reign of God. This letter, then, is about how wonderfully strange it makes us to be people of faith, hope, and love—love for one another in the community of Jesus, which is grounded in the God we have faith in, because we have a sure hope that our God is coming in the promised reign of Jesus to put all things right and to mend a broken creation. For a world like ours that is not only *used* to its brokenness, but often revels in it, it is a revolutionary act to hold fast to faith in a God who restores, who renews, and who raises the dead!

The Conspirators

Originally written for September 6, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:1

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace.

Everybody in this verse is a *conspirator*, no exceptions. And truth be told, Paul's wish, if he thought much about people reading his words 2,000 years later, would have been that everybody who *read* this verse and the letter that follows would become a *co-conspirator*, too. Their dream was that bold and their vision was that wide.

"All right, all right," I can hear you saying to yourself, "isn't this all a bit melodramatic here? I mean, may be Paul himself had a flair for adventure, what with always being on the run or thrown in prison, and getting himself lowered out of city walls in baskets or shipwrecked. And maybe it was an exciting time to be a Christian back in the first century. But a conspiracy? Really--from the man we name churches and half of the Twin Cities after? And saying that the church today is part of a conspiracy, too? Most people I know think of church as the local community bulletin board and the place where raffles and bake sales are held, not a place of daring adventure, or a revolutionary movement. Can you just cut the drama and let us get back to having a nice plain Bible study, so I can check the 'religious activity' portion of my to-do list and get on with some other errands?"

No, I'm sticking with conspiracy. The church *is* one--or at least, is supposed to be a part of *God's* grand conspiracy, and we are all drawn into the thick of it. It's not a cover-up in the style of a Dan Brown novel, where "the Church" is behind a fiendish plan to hide scandalous things about Jesus. It's quite the opposite--we are part of a movement going back two millennia to *show* and *tell* the world all about Jesus (including some rather scandalous bits, to be truthful) in our words and actions. And the *conspiracy* is about how to do it in ways that will catch the world's attention without playing by the world's rules.

I'm also sticking with conspiracy because of the word itself--as plenty of others have pointed out recently, the *etymology* of this gorgeous word means literally, "breathing together." (Yes, that "spir-" part in the middle of the word is the same as in "respiration" or "inspiration" and even "spirit.") We are people who breathe the same air, we Christians, or more to the point, who breathe the same Spirit, who has been seen to indwell us. All of us, then, who are filled with the Spirit, are a part of what Dallas Willard calls "the divine conspiracy." And it's not a conspiracy of *our* invention--it's not a bunch of Christians getting together saying, "Let's become really powerful in political circles and accomplish *our own* pet agendas." The conspiracy comes from the Spirit himself, who brings to us and breathes into us *God's* agenda, *God's* design, and *God's* vision of a restored creation and of victory over death through Jesus.

All of that brings us full circle--we are all conspirators, we Christians. That's an important part of the Christian message and way of life. We are all players. We are all a part of the movement. Even though this is *Paul's* letter and he's the "big name," he understood his readers to be a part of the same world-changing, life-changing movement. They have each played their own roles, and not everyone would go running all over the world like Paul did, but we are all a part of the movement. We are all conspirators. It's the same in our local congregations. Maybe it feels sometimes like we are tucked back in the safety and obscurity of small towns in an already "Christian" culture, but we really are a part of a conspiracy right where we are. It's not up to pastors or book-writers to carry the movement forward. It's not up to "youth ministry experts" or "praise bands" to draw people in. We are all a part of the movement--we, in western Pennsylvania in the year 2010, our older brothers

and sisters in the faith who lived in 1st century Thessalonica (on modern-day Greece), and Paul, Silas, and Timothy, too. We are all conspirators, breathing the same Spirit.

The real surprise about *our* conspiracy--or really, *God's* conspiracy that we get to be a part of--is that, as the last words of this opening verse say, our movement is about filling creation with grace and peace. We're not about getting our political party elected, our economic philosophy carried out at the Fed or on Wall Street, or putting ourselves in power. We are about infecting (if you can hear that word in a positive sense) a graceless and hostile world with the reconciling grace and peace that come from Jesus. That is the revolution we are caught up in. That is what makes us fellow-breathers, co-conspirators, with the likes of Saint Paul himself.

O God who is the Source of all life, as you did in the beginning, breathe into us, your people, again, and bring us to life. Give to us the life that really is life--the kind of life offered to us in Jesus, and let us breathe together with all your people of all times and places the same Spirit that drives us forward and sends us out to be your agents of grace and channels of peace. We pray it in the name of Jesus, whose motion began and sustains our movement.

Together Across the Miles

Originally written for September 7, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:2

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly....

One of the distinguishing marks of the Christian conspiracy is prayer. Praying makes us look strange to the watching world; it sets us apart from other movements and trends and organizations for two reasons: (1) it admits we don't have the power ourselves, but God does, and (2) it connects us to others as real people, real faces, to be loved, even when we are separated by distance. Think of how revolutionary that is, even among revolutions! Think of how that subverts even the usual tactics and thinking of subversives!

For starters, prayer is an outright admission of our powerlessness. Not in the sense of being bitter and defeated, but in a humble self-awareness that there is much wrong in the world that we cannot fix on our own, as much as we would like to. Prayer is an admission that we do not have all the right answers, and we do not have the muscle to make the world as it ought to be. It is, instead, about coming to the One who does have the wisdom and might to order the universe justly and graciously. It is not only about *admitting* that we do not have all the power, but about *seeking* out the One who is victorious even over death and chaos. As Karl Barth writes, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." But even at that, the *power* of prayer is not in our hands, but in the hands of the God to whom we pray. And so, unlike countless political movements before us and around us, the Christian "revolution" doesn't look to impress the world by flexing our muscles or showing off our numbers or leveraging our influence. (Or at least, if we do fall for using those tactics, it is *in spite of* our unique calling and mission, not *in service of* it). What we Christians do is *to pray*, as a sign to others and a reminder to ourselves that, as Paul says elsewhere, "this extraordinary power does not come from us." So when the Christian community prays, it is neither as a last resort nor empty words, but as the humble seeking of the Power that comes from beyond us to mend what is broken and to rectify what is out of sorts in the world. The world's *other* revolutionaries want to change the world, but they are convinced the power to do it is already in their hands, their cleverness, their economic philosophies or political agendas. Christians, by praying, let themselves be removed of that illusion. By praying, we admit we rely

completely on God's power to heal, to mend, to give life, and to redeem. That is subversive even for revolutionaries!

Then, there is a second way that Christian prayer sets us apart from political movements and revolutions--when we pray for one another, we are connected to other *people*, and not just ideas. The trouble with revolutions and popular movements is that they tend to reduce people to their opinions or beliefs on certain issues. You are not a face--you are either *with* the group, or *against* the group, depending on whether you are willing to toe the party line. You either belong or you do not, based on whether your thinking lines *purely enough* with the set agenda of the party. We've lived through it in our country over the last few polarized years, and it seems it's only getting more severe--whether we called it blue-states-against-red-states, Democrats-against-Republicans, "progressives"-versus-"tea-party-members," or whatever other forms it takes. You are less a person to those movements than you are a set of agreeing or disagreeing opinions--and you really only care about the interests of those who line up *enough* with yours to do much for them. Christians, on the other hand, are taught to see ourselves connected, one to another, across the miles and even across time, as *persons* first. The church is made up of Republicans and Democrats in this country, and there have been Christian socialists, Christian capitalists, and Christians who fit no category. We are taught to see each other--and so to pray for each other--because *Jesus* has claimed the lot of us as his own, and not because they already believe the same things I do about the capital-gains tax. We pray for one another as *people*, asking for God to hold us together across the miles, to comfort those we cannot be with in person, to heal those at whose bedside we cannot be present, to bless those when we cannot lay our own hands on them. We pray, in other words, not merely for the advance of a "cause" or an "idea" or an "agenda," but for beloved sisters and brothers. And again, that is something the world's political revolutions and movements cannot make sense of, because we know it will mean sometimes we pray for those who disagree with us, but whom we cannot help but see as beloved because they are beloved of God.

It makes for a funny revolution, prayer does. But it is the kind of revolution the world needs--not the attempt to replace one human scheme with another, or to swap out one set of corrupt leaders for another, but the mission to be agents of blessing for all the world. Paul's words here teach us to pray--to pray because we cannot save the world with our own willpower and charm, and to pray because we remain connected with brothers and sisters across the miles even when we cannot be with them in the room. Today, let us engage in just such revolutionary activity--let us pray:

O Lord our God, let your kingdom come and let your will be done. Within that gracious reign and within your good will, we pray for your blessing on those from whom we are separated. We name them before you, each on our own, and we see their faces, too, loving them as the sisters and brothers you have given to us. Bless them all, Lord, because they are your beloved, and so that they might be blessings for others this day. We pray it in Jesus' name.

More Than Greeting Card Filler

Originally written for September 8, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:3

[Because this verse picks up mid-sentence, we'll take verse 2 from yesterday as well to get the context:]

*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.***

Be honest--at 90% of the weddings you have attended, someone has read those familiar words from 1 Corinthians 13 about "faith, hope, and love," haven't they? And while we're being honest, let's admit that for a substantial number of those weddings, we just let those words, *faith, hope, and love* go in one ear, and right out the other. Our ears are almost numb to the power of those words, doesn't it seem? Or at least, we can barely hear anything more in them than some nice verbal window dressing to round out a wedding ceremony. By the time you hear, "faith, hope, and love," after all, you're halfway through and can start planning how you'll get to the reception.

Those words almost have the feel now, for so many of us, of the message on the inside of a greeting card--you don't really bother to read the store-bought message very often, do you? Maybe you look for a handwritten note or salutation, but the poems inside greeting cards almost seem like a formality--something that makes for nice verbal window dressing, but not much more. And the trouble, then, is that maybe we come to think that's all Saint Paul had in mind when he wrote those words to the Corinthians, "And now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three..." Maybe, we think, Paul was just trying his hand at writing some fluffy stuff for weddings. If that's all that Paul had in mind, after all, we don't need to pay much attention to those words or what they *mean* for us. If all Paul was doing was writing some 1st-century greeting card filler in his old age, then his words are nice and tame and will leave us as we are.

We do not, however, read the opening verses of 1 Thessalonians at weddings very often, for whatever reason. But here in this verse for today, those same three words appear: "faith... love... and hope..." Okay, a different order than he chose for 1 Corinthians, but there they are, those same three words again, and here it's pretty clear that Paul isn't just writing a greeting card. He is talking about a way of life. He is talking about something with *teeth*. He is talking about, or rather talking *to*, people who have sought to be people of faith, of hope, and of love *for the long haul*. Nobody is sneaking a glance at their wristwatches in between Scripture readings and the soloist singing, "There Is Love," in this sentence--it is about *work* and *labor* and *steadfastness* here. There is nothing sentimental or fluffy in this verse--there is instead, well-deserved thanks for a life-long commitment of brothers and sisters in Christ to live as disciples. To hear these three words, *faith, love, and hope*, spoken here, without the distraction of dresses with puffy sleeves and flower arrangements, we can't just let them in one ear and out the other. In this verse, we hear about faith, love, and hope, not as poetic filler, but as *perspectives*. This is the stuff our revolution is made of. These are what Jesus is using to turn the world upside down.

In all fairness to Paul, he did write *both* passages, and he never intended for his words in 1 Corinthians to be reduced to a bit of flowery prose read before the vows by whoever didn't make the cut of the bridesmaid list. In both 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians, Paul is writing to *whole communities*, groups of disciples who are seeking to live the distinctive and peculiar life of followers of Jesus. We are people who believe certain things about God (that is, we have faith), but who live differently because we believe that we are not the commanders of our own destiny or captains of

our own fate. We are people who love others--strangely enough, even strangers and enemies--even when it is a labor to care for others or put their needs before our own. And we are people who live in light of God's promise to restore all things and to mend what is broken in creation--in other words, we have hope, even when the rest of the world would tell us we can only rely on ourselves. These words are not merely nice ideas or abstract concepts--they are *virtues* and *habits* that we practice as part of our alternative way of living in the world. They are part of how we make the world sit up and turn its head, because the world around us cannot make sense of such deeply-rooted faith, hope, and love.

So maybe today we need the less familiar setting of this lesser-known letter for us to recapture the power of Paul's words when we have let them get stale from casual use. Maybe today we can hear again that our message, the Christian Gospel, is more than greeting card filler--it is a *perspective*, and a *way of life* that will carry us through for the long haul. Today, thinking deeply about what these words really mean for us today, let us be people of working faith, laboring love, and steadfast hope.

Lord Jesus, living Word of God, speak again to us and give us ears to hear what you are saying. Surprise us and catch us off guard, so that even while you keep speaking the same words you have spoken to your people all these years, we will understand with new insight and new passion the life you are calling us into. Make us your people of faith, of love, and of hope, so the world will watch and take notice.

Children or Customers?

Originally written for September 9, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:4

For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you...

I saw a strange product advertised on television some time ago: friends. There was a segment on a morning new show not too long about about an *actual* service where people could pay money to have a strictly platonic social outing with another person on the staff of the company--lunch or a ballgame or playing a sport together. In other words, it was, really and truly, a "Rent-a-Friend" company.

Now, like I say, at first, this news story simply floored me--but the more I think about it, the more this idea strikes me as perfectly natural in the culture where we live. Increasingly, we are taught to see all of our relationships--and ourselves, too, then--in terms of customers or clients paying for services. Companies already make a tidy profit off of introducing people over the internet for online-dating. Professional "life-coaches" make a living offering advice and wisdom to people for money when previous generations would have simply *expected* the wise to share their wisdom with the next generation all through their lives. Maybe the real scandal of knowing that there's a "Rent-a-Friend" agency out there is that it's so blatantly honest about the way things are. We are becoming used to being eternal customers--people whose every relationship is governed by paying our money and then getting our choice, and insisting on the right that we be satisfied with our choice, because we are *customers*, and *the customer is always right*. And that mode of thinking infects more and more of what we do.

Think of how it has affected the way we talk about government. There was once a time when people talked about paying their taxes as part of their obligation to serve the common good. We all agreed that there was a need for good police protection, or schools, or parks, and so there was an understood agreement that every citizen had an *obligation* to support those common good realities,

even if they didn't ever use them. More and more in our day, that thinking is flipped inside-out, and we hear people talking about government as though they are paying customers. "The government should intervene where I want it to," we hear, "--after all, I'm a tax-paying American!" We expect elected officials to find painless (to us) ways to solve our problems--ending the deficit without raising tax revenue somehow, providing services without costing me anything, get me through my hard times without an expectation of sacrifice on my part in some other way. And we have come to this expectation, both sides of the aisle doing it in their own ways, because we have come to see ourselves as *paying customers*, who have every right to get what we want when we want it because we are customers, rather than citizens. We are paying clients, not members of a community.

The other allure of seeing ourselves as customers in *every* aspect of our lives is that it lets us think that everything is a matter of *our* choosing. I should have the right, we assume, to pick and choose everything about my life--who I want as my neighbor, who I have an obligation to interact with or care about, and what "stuff" I spend my money on. I can't be held accountable for how my choices affect somebody else--I have the "right" as a customer to buy cheap running shoes if the store carries them, regardless of what it means for the kid in the sweatshop somewhere who made it but can barely eat on the handful of change he gets for his day's work. If I am the eternal customer, I am always right, and the company has to find a way to please me, but I have no obligation back to anybody else in that transaction, right? We do the same with religion, too--we really do live in the age of the buffet-of-piety. We live in an age where people feel they can pick and choose what parts of a religion are appealing to them--I can do the Sunday morning thing when it suits me, but I can't be told that I am *expected* to participate in the ministry of the church, *because I'm a paying customer!* I expect a congregation to cater to my needs and provide the services I would like, but I can't be expected to be a part of *making* those services happen, because my *money* means I am a paying client, not a member of a community, right? We face the same temptation with preaching--I'll confess that it can be awfully tempting to see the pastor's job in terms of saying something *acceptable* rather than saying what is *called for*. After all, we are all being lured into seeing Sunday morning as one more business transaction, where "customers" in pews pay their dues in exchange for services rendered (a sermon that they can all like and will keep us all entertained for a few minutes), and then we all walk out after an hour with the same satisfaction we have after going to the movies. And if this movie turned out to be a dud, well, then, next time I can take my money elsewhere and pay for services rendered with another provider.

Maybe "Rent-a-Friend" is just being honest where so many other parts of our lives keep it below the surface--we really are being taught to see ourselves as eternal customers, choosing what we want from a marketplace of options, and insistent that we be satisfied at the end of the transaction because we are customers and the customer is always right. Rather than building friendships over a lifetime of shared experiences and running the risk that my friend might ask a difficult favor of me, or need me to listen on a day when his world is falling apart, or that she might let me down sometime, why not pay for a reasonable facsimile? A "rented" friend, after all, can't ask favors--they've already gotten their pay. And a "rented" friend can't let you down, or you'll be entitled to a refund. Why not see *everything* in our lives as business transactions in the checkout line then?

Into the thick of this kind of mentality, the Christian gospel speaks a very different word--indeed it is a subversive message to a world of eternal consumers. The Christian message, Paul says, begins with *God* as chooser, and not with us. We are *beloved by God* who has *chosen us*. It's not the other way around--we are not paying clients whose offerings buy us a certain level of service from God. We are not customers who can pick and choose the god of our liking, or which parts of the faith we will subscribe to (as in, "I like the part about me going to heaven, but I don't really like the sharing my

possessions with the poor or loving my enemies parts; can I buy beliefs *a la carte*?"). We are people who have *been chosen*. And that means we do not get to dictate the terms of our relationship with God, or with the rest of God's people. We are not at the marketplace or strip mall, and we do not get to hold our power over the shopkeepers and service providers telling them "We can always take our business elsewhere." No, we are people who, along with Peter, find ourselves saying, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life?" To be a Christian is to admit we are not mere paying customers--we are part of a community, and we have been chosen by God as children, rather than us as eternal consumers choosing Jesus to be our Savior because he seems like a good deal.

That's what it means to be the church. We are the opposite of the rent-a-friend business--we are the community where *God's* claim brings us in and sticks us next to other people we might never have chosen for ourselves. We are given brothers and sisters and then placed side by side with them, to become friends and beloved fellow servants by our time and sweat and tears together, not because someone has paid money for a computer match-up of similar interests and availability. In a culture convinced that we are can buy anything on our own terms for the right price, it is downright revolutionary to bring a message about a God who *chooses us* and gives us everything as a *free gift*. That's what we are about. How can you bring that upside-down way of life to people around you today, and resist the impulse to make everything and every relationship be up for sale?

O Lord our God, open our eyes to see the ways we have reduced so much of our lives to consumer-spending and customer-mentality. And do not let us settle for it. Let us hear your word to us again that we are chosen by you, before we have done a thing for you, and before we have even chosen you for ourselves. Claim us again as your children, and let us believe it is true.

More Than Words

Originally written for September 10, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:5

(Today's verse picks up again mid-sentence, so you'll get verse 4 again for free, before we move forward into new material in 1 Thess. 1:5.)

*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.***

As a child of the 1980s, I will confess that I can't read these words of Paul's without hearing the old song by Extreme, "More Than Words." The recurring lyrics keep running through my head: "*More than words/ Is all you have to do to make it real/ Then you wouldn't have to say that you love me/ 'cause i'd already know.*" The song itself, of course, is sung as a request, or maybe a challenge, from the singer to his beloved, insisting that she make it clear that her feelings are more than just talk. Now whether he's got ulterior motives in putting that dare to her, or whether he really does wonder if he's being strung along by his girlfriend, are questions for another day (and probably not as part of a devotional conversation on 1 Thessalonians). But the point of the lyrics above is a powerful one in any case--anybody can *talk* a great game, but if all we've got to go on is words, we can easily be let down. Too many times before in life we have gotten our hopes up because of great talk, polished rhetoric, or flowery prose, only to find there was no substance to the speech. Too many times we've been in the

same place as the singer in the song, afraid of letting our hearts be broken by empty promises, whether from romantic interests or political pundits.

Now, the surprising thing to me reading Paul's words today is the direction he takes this idea of needing "more than words." We religious folk tend to automatically assume this train of thought is aimed at other *people*, or even *ourselves*. We know the words of James that faith without works is dead, and we might be suspicious of people who *say* they believe but show no evidence (to us) of a sufficiently changed life to be "really" redeemed. We know the words from John's letters that call us to show love "not in word or speech, but in truth and action," and we know that all too often that can be us, paying only lip service to our calling to love God and neighbor with all we have and all we are. So, yeah, it's true that the Bible does call *us* to a way of life that is "more than words," and to a faith that goes beyond talking the talk.

But that's now how Paul is thinking here. Here, in these opening verses of 1 Thessalonians, Paul isn't trying to poke *our* consciences and make *us* do more to show God that our faith is sincere. He's trying to assure *us* that *God's faithfulness* is sincere, and that the Good News Paul brought was more than just talk. Paul is reminding the Thessalonians that even if the gospel sounds too good to be true, they can know it's the real thing because when Paul came to them to tell them about God's free grace through Christ, it wasn't just a sales-pitch. They had an encounter with the living Holy Spirit, who came among them in "power" and "full conviction." Whether Paul means that they saw miracles or wonders done, or that the Spirit's presence was made clear in some other way, Paul doesn't say--but his readers apparently remembered whatever it was. And Paul is convinced that their experience of the Spirit confirms that the Good News of Jesus is not just an interesting story. The power of the Spirit's presence is their guarantee that Paul was not peddling snake-oil, and his God is not the snake. And then he caps it all off and says if nothing else, the Thessalonians can remember the way Paul *lived* among them and they can see from his own transformed life that this Jesus is the real deal.

In other words, here in this verse, Paul isn't trying to goad *Christians* into putting forth "more than words" to convince *God* that they really love him. He's turned that whole song around and says, "Look here--God has given us *more than words* to assure us that the words he *does* speak to us in the gospel are true!" Paul is putting the "more than words" test to none other than *God*, and saying that God has been found truthful after all. The amazing, even unbelievable, good news that we are beloved through Jesus apart from our earning and without restriction is really the honest-to-God truth, and we can rely on that truth, because God has shown us more than words. In a world where a lot of voices *are* just talk, God has given us the Spirit, who shows up with a power that is always more than we can manufacture for ourselves. And God has given us the lives of saints around us who have been transformed by the free grace of Jesus as yet a further sign to us that the Gospel is more than wishful thinking. God has held himself to the "more-than-words" standards, and if we are honest at all, we can see that God has not been found wanting.

Today, we go out into a world confident that the news we bring is more than a political platform or empty romantic gesture. We go out bringing the news of God's love with the assurance that God actually backs up the promise with the power and presence of the Spirit, who will transform us and leave ripples behind as we go.

Lord God, come among us in power and full conviction again so that we will be assured that your promises are true, and so that we will be transformed in the sight of the watching world, and so be your witnesses of a promise that sounds too good to be true, and yet is indeed the Gospel truth.

The Sincerest Form of...Discipleship?

Originally written for September 13, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:6

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy by the Holy Spirit...

You know what they say: imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. At least our mothers used to say it to keep us from getting too upset at younger siblings when they were going through a copycat phase. And with marginal success, it pacified us as children to think that young Jonny or Mary was imitating you because he or liked you so well and was trying to win your approval.

For the Christian revolution, however, imitation was never about flattering anybody--it was about training spiritual muscles to move in a certain way. It was about learning how to walk the Christian walk--learning how to live the strange new life that Jesus was pioneering, a life of generosity, hospitality, courage, patience, and love.

See, for us Christians, rules have never really done the trick. And truth be told, that's not a Christians-only thing--it's really more of a *human* thing. You can bark all the rules you want at us, but we have a hard time really keeping them. Sometimes, that's because we're little stinkers who look for loopholes or deliberately cross the line. But sometimes it's because we don't really know what a certain commandment or rule really *means*. Take "Love your neighbor," for example. Is that a command to *feel* a certain way toward other people? How big is the radius extending out from me to tell me who *counts* as my neighbor? What kind of actions *count* as "love"--do I actually have to do something *for* my neighbor, or is it enough just to not actively seek to harm my neighbor? And what about when "loving" is not the same as "being nice"--like when love means confronting a neighbor? How do I know what love really means? You can see pretty quickly with even a seemingly simple, no-brainer kind of commandment that it can hard to know what a *rule* really means, or how anybody should actually apply a vague principle like "you should always do the most loving thing." Who gets to say what "the most loving thing" is?

The earliest followers of Jesus knew this all too well, and so we have never relied all that heavily on "rules" for our revolution. We have always learned the particular steps of our walk by walking with others and imitating--copying, to be honest--the kinds of moves and actions we've seen in other faithful saints. The same way you learn to play basketball, not by merely reading the rule book and learning that you're not supposed to run with the ball, for example, but by actually *practicing* the skills of dribbling, shooting, and blocking, Christians learn to become who we are by *practicing* alongside other disciples. We watch how they hold the ball. We learn to put our hands in the positions they use. We train our bodies to move the way theirs do. We imitate them, in other words.

So when we starting asking questions like, "What does it really *mean* to love my neighbor?" we find the answer in the real-life examples of Jesus, of Paul, of Mary of disciples over the ages like Francis of Assisi or Mother Theresa. Even more to the point, we see the answer in the lives of people we actually have *met* and seen with our own eyes, like your father, or my favorite Sunday School teacher, or the people you know whose faith and love are just so compelling that you can't help but keep an eye on them. We imitate those fellow followers, past and present, whose actions have been informed by the disciples who went before them, going back in a chain of imitation all the way back to Jesus and his first band of followers. We learn what it looks like love our neighbor by watching and trying it ourselves--seeing how the saints of 1930s Europe practiced real hospitality by hiding Jewish families from the Gestapo, as well as how the saints of 2010 western Pennsylvania set a table for guests with graciousness and love. We learn what love looks like when we hear the story of Jesus

washing his disciples' feet, and when we see saints around us giving up their time and energy to serve at the food pantry or picking up trash. We know the cold sterility of rules alone cannot make us into the kind of people we are meant to be--but we can have our spiritual muscles trained and toned as we imitate the motions we have seen in faithful disciples before us. That is how our revolution keeps its momentum--we don't handout rule boooks to memorize while you're toweling off at the font after baptism and say, "Go for it. See you in heaven if you can figure these out." We keep learning from each other, letting the actions of faithful saints before us and around us teach our arms and legs and hearts how to move.

Today, think of those faithful followers of Jesus you have known--those whose generosity, or humility, or extravagant love, or deep courage have captivated you--and let them be guides along the way as we get another chance today to live deeper into the Christian revolution.

Lord Jesus, train my arms, my legs, my hands, my feet, and my heart--and use the lives of others around me as guides and mentors, training my whole self in the ways of your movement.

A Strange Kind of Good

Originally written for September 14, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:7

(Our verse for today continues the thought begun in 1:6, so we'll take them together with the new material in **bold**.)

*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy by the Holy Spirit, **so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.***

You can't help being an example to *somebody* in this life... the issue is really *what kind* of example you'll be. People *outside* the Christian community watch us and wonder about what Jesus is all about, and people *inside* the Christian community watch us and see a pattern for being Jesus' followers. The question, I suppose, is really, *What do people think about Jesus when they meet us?* And will the "Jesus" we present to the world through our character line up with the Jesus who really has claimed us?

One of the things we are going to have to wrap our minds around in this Christian revolution of ours is that Christianity is not just about "being good." Or at least, we have to be honest that the direction, "Be good," doesn't tell us much. Jesus, however, shows us what "good" looks like for us--and gives us a different picture of what "the good life" looks like. And let's be honest, it's a peculiar sort of picture. Jesus regularly did things that others around him called *bad* or *scandalous*, and Jesus seems to have thought those were some of the very actions that *made* him "good." His way of table fellowship with "tax collectors and sinners" constantly got him into hot water with the protectors of morality of the day, and yet Jesus wasn't ashamed of sharing a table with the Zacchaeuses and Matthews of the world. In fact, Jesus was convinced that this was the character of the very Kingdom of God. If we are going to be followers of Jesus--and then, consequently, examples of what Jesus is like for others--we are going to have to surrender our *old* picture of what "being good" looks like, and then let Jesus redefine "being good" for us.

See, the thing about Jesus is that he doesn't send followers out and say, "Hey, you all had better be good out there in the world--I don't want my reputation sullied from being associated with you." Jesus instead sends his followers out to teach the world a new picture of what "good" looks like. He doesn't say, "Go into all nations, winning them for our team with your sheer charisma and likability,

and impress them with your universally respectable morals." Instead, he says, "Go into all nations... teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you." Jesus teaches us to risk showing a very strange picture of "good behavior" to the world, whether or not the world is going to embrace it. We are examples and followers of a *particular* Lord--who gives us a *particular* way of life as our own. The rest of the world may think it is a sign of weakness to love your enemies and to forgive those who have wronged you--Jesus says that this is a part of his redefinition of "good." The wisdom of our culture might think it is a foolish and unwise to give away money to strangers in need rather than constantly amassing bigger piles of stuff and bigger barns to store them in, but Jesus says that a life that is not *ruled* by our possessions is "the good life." The world around us, and indeed some other world religions, would teach that the goal of life is to avoid suffering or to deny the meaning or reality of suffering--that the way to experience the good life is to transcend caring about the slings and arrows of this life. Jesus, on the other hand, does not deny the pain of life, and he doesn't teach us to run away from it either, but to suffer alongside those who are suffering, as we also rejoice with those who are rejoicing. All of this makes for a very strange kind of "good" if you ask the watching world.

And *that* is the kind of life we are called to be examples of--realizing that this kind of life will always strike people as an *acquired taste*. Maybe that's just it--the way of Jesus is precisely that, an acquired taste, and we need to be prepared for the possibility that the strange flavor we bring to the world (call it "salt of the earth" flavor, if you like) will not always make us popular. It doesn't mean we stop practicing our strange way of life and our strange kind of good in favor of something that will win more subscribers--but we go in with our eyes wide open, knowing that our calling is simply to be witnesses, examples, to our strange kind of Lord, and leave it up to God how that witness will draw people. That's what Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, too--he's not complimenting them for being good religious salesmen and women in their region, hooking people on their new religion with smooth talk and affability. He is saying that they were faithful *examples* of what Jesus is like. That's the most we can hope for in our callings, too--that at the last, Jesus will say of us, "Well done, you good and faithful servant," rather than, "Great--you met your quota!" All we can do is be echoes, examples, models, of the strange kind of good Jesus has taught us. That's what makes the church a movement and a revolution, not an end-of-the-year sales event at the car dealership. Today, let us be faithful to the peculiar way of Jesus, letting it get us into trouble where it must, sending us into the lives of those who are hurting today if that is where it takes us, and risking that we will not be the most popular people around as we follow Jesus. Let us be faithful, and that will be enough.

Lord Jesus, with thanks for those faithful saints you have put in our lives to teach us your way of life, we offer ourselves today to be witnesses and examples for others--not just of some generic, vague sense of morality, but of your peculiar but compelling way of life, the life that really is life.

What Can Go Unsaid

Originally written for September 15, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:8

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.

When you are occupied talking about something that really matters, it's funny how you don't worry much about getting credit for yourself. When you have a message to bring to somebody else that is urgent and compelling, isn't it interesting that you don't really have the need to toot your own horn at the same time?

You step past the double doors from the maternity ward and immediately pull out your cell phone to pass along the message, "The baby is healthy and mom's doing well--it's a girl!" But you don't particularly care about being praised for being the one to make the phone call to let the extended family and friends know. Really good news has a way of trumping our petty concerns and needy egos. "She said *yes!*" carries so much force by itself that the messenger doesn't care about patting himself on the back for passing along the message. "The surgery was a success--he's in recovery right now!" has the same compelling power--nobody follows that sentence up with, "and didn't I do I nice job of telling you?" Genuine good news has a way of clearing its own way and letting lesser concerns stay in their rightful place.

And here's a sign for us that the news of God's love in Jesus is genuinely good news, too--from the beginning, it's had the same effect of stilling our need to get credit for ourselves. That's what Paul is talking about here: the Christians in Thessaolnica have been so occupied with passing along the story of Jesus that they don't care about being patted on the back for what a good job they're doing. They have found the Good News so compelling that they don't worry about getting more press themselves or getting gold stars on their permanent records. The privilege of getting to be the ones who bring this news to others is a joyful enough thing that they do not need to go scrambling for credit. "The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you," Paul says, and its been so obvious and apparent that "we have no need to speak about it." Paul knows that these brothers and sisters in faith of his aren't interested in him buttering them up with compliments or praises. They are just doing what they cannot help doing, because the news about Jesus is so powerfully beautiful that we can't help sharing it--if indeed its power and beauty have sunk in for us.

I have to tell you--that's the kind of person I want to be. These early Christians were so captivated by the word of grace that they didn't need their egos stroked with praise for sharing the news with others. They were so taken with the message of the Love that will not let us go that they didn't care about further recognition. *Those* are the kind of people you would want to be around, aren't they? Those are the kind of people you would choose to be your friends. Those are the kind of people who make you want to be just as free and joyful as they are--just by being around them. And it is such a difference from the alternative we often run into--people who are so insecure or ungrounded that they feel the need to inform you about all the good things they are doing and all the smart things that they know. We have all surely at some point been in that place--so self-conscious and needy that we fish for compliments and tease out praise from others. And chances are, too, that when we look back in honesty at those times, we wish we could have handled things differently. We want to be freed of that ego-driven baggage. We want to be so passionately caught up by something, or Someone, that it will no longer matter to us whether we get sufficient praise or credit for what we do. We want to know--not just for a moment, but for our whole way of life--the joyful privilege of getting to be the ones who run out the doors and shout, "The baby is healthy!"

And that, according to the New Testament, is exactly what each of us has been given. We are each offered the calling of bringing the news of Jesus to the people around us. We will do it in words and we will do it in actions, too, but as we find ourselves in those ongoing moments of representing grace to others, we will also find our need to get credit evaporates. We will find the news of God's love so compelling, we don't worry about what prizes or accolades we will get for it. We will find so joy in the compelling message of Jesus that we can't help but pass it along. That's a possibility for you and for me for what this very day can hold for us.

Lord Jesus, let us be so captivated by your Good News that we lose ourselves and leave our petty wants behind, and let us sense the deep privilege of sharing that News with others.

Leaving the Marketplace Behind

Originally written for September 16, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:9

For the people of those regions [Macedonai and Achaia] report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God..

There's a conversation in the movie *When Harry Met Sally...* (a movie I find has several surprisingly rich theological insights to it, whether Rob Reiner intended it or not) where a pair of secondary characters, Jess and Marie, have gotten married and are reflecting how tough it is to be in the dating scene. They have just heard about the romantic misadventures of the main characters, Harry and Sally, and it brings back memories to both of them of how stressful and empty it was when they had to go on dates and put on a good face and "sell" themselves to potential romantic interests like they were vendors in a marketplace. And Marie looks at Jess and says to him, "Tell me I'll never have to be out there again." And Jess, knowingly looks back at her and says, earnestly and lovingly, "*You'll never have to be out there again.*"

This is what coming to faith in the God of Jesus was like for the Thessalonian Christians. It was the end of putting themselves "out there" in the religious marketplace and trying out different gods and different religions. It was the end of sampling from a spiritual buffet and finding that nothing really cured their hunger or satisfied them. And it was the end of trying to make *themselves* acceptable to a host of "new" gods, instead to discover that they were beloved by a God they had never heard of before meeting Paul, a God whose love was willing to go to a cross for them.

First-century Thessalonica really was something of a marketplace of religions and gods--it was right in the heart of ancient Greece, and was full of temples to the various gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon. And of course, the Romans essentially took those gods and goddesses over with new names, giving yet more options for worship (if you didn't care for Zeus, you could worship the same basic concept of a god by another name by worshipping Jupiter!). And beyond that, Thessalonica was a heavy traffic area and crossroads for other cultures as well, so you might easily have a smattering of Mithras followers, Zoroastrians, emperor-worshippers, and people still hanging on to the old Egyptian or Babylonian deities, too. And the empire managed all these competing religions by saying, "Take your pick, as long as you're not too serious about it, and as long as we all know that your ultimately allegiance is to the Empire." The empire's way of keeping the peace within this marketplace of religions was to keep people forever browsing, but never buying--always exposed to the "next new thing." It was a life of endless religious "dating"--of trying out novel religions and moving from one god or goddess to the next, always trying to find out what the perks were of this or that temple, and always trying to make yourself acceptable to whatever that god's tastes were thought to be. And like dating or shopping (which can be sadly similar activities, truth

be told), this kind of religious lifestyle might have been exciting or different at first, but got pretty old pretty quickly. At some point, you can imagine these people wishing for someone to say to them, "You'll never have to be *out there* again."

And that's precisely the way Paul has already talked about coming to faith in Christ. Remember back in 1:4, that Paul insisted it was *God* who had chosen *them* and claimed these Thessalonian Christians as his own through Jesus. And God claimed them apart from their own self-selling or batting eyelashes--God loved them just as they were through what God had done in Jesus. And now, Paul says, that the news has spread all throughout the region, how this Christian community had said "No more!" to the religious meat-market and realized that they were claimed by the living God, the God who in fact raised the dead. Or to think of it in slightly different terms, these Christians found themselves looking to Jesus and saying, "Tell us we'll never have to be *out there* again." And Jesus lovingly and knowingly said back, "You will *never* have to be out there again." We have been claimed permanently by a God who stakes his reputation on promise-keeping, a God whose signature trait is faithfulness. We get to walk away from dating deities and instead find that we have been drawn into a permanent love with the real and true living God. We get to leave the religious marketplace behind, because we have discovered that what all those other competing vendors were selling at a price can really only come as a free gift from the real Source.

In our day, however, the additional challenge is realizing that most of the idols around us are a lot more subtle and subdued than the obvious golden calves and marble statues of the ancient world. It may be easier for us to say "No more!" to lifeless statues of Zeus or Athena than it was for people of the first century. But we face the harder challenge of naming our favorite brands, our personal technology and cell phones, our calendars, and our bank accounts as potential idols, all still competing for our allegiance and our business. Today, then, the challenge is for us to be as honest with ourselves as possible and see what we have been selling ourselves to, and where we have been trying to find something to satisfy our hunger from the marketplace of "stuff" out there. And once we have seen that truth and realize how sad and empty all of those lesser things left us, and how miserable the religious dating scene really is, we can recognize that Jesus has been saying to us all along, "You don't ever have to be *out there* again." Praise and thanks to the living God for that.

O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, be so real for us today that we will not fall for the sales pitches of the lesser gods around us, and let us dwell securely in your promise that we are at home once and for all in you.

Worth the Wait

Originally written for September 17, 2010--1 Thessalonians 1:10

[For our last devotion of the week, we will take the last piece of the verse from yesterday to get into the flow:]

*...you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, **and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.***

Now just hold your horses for a second--I thought this series and this letter were all about a "revolution"! I thought you said that First Thessalonians was all about the thriving and vibrant movement of early Christianity and how it sparked a revolution that turned the Empire upside down! But today's verse seems so *sedentary*, so slow, so un-revolutionary. How can waiting be an act

of revolution? How can waiting be a protest against the way things are? How can waiting turn the world upside down? Was all this Christianity-as-a-revolution just a gimmick, just a bit of packaging?

No, no, no. All fair questions, but I'm still convinced that there is something revolutionary about this verse and what it is calling us to. It just requires us to zoom out for a moment to see it. Paul is talking with these Christians who have come to faith in Jesus after saying *no* to the many gods and idols and other "options" in the religious marketplace around them--and Thessalonica was full of them. They have turned away from those empty idols (and the worship of the emperor and the empire, too, which were "out there" as religious choices), but Paul says that they still have to *wait* for the final revealing of the new God--Jesus--to whom they have turned. That *is* a bold thing, because we humans seem wired to want instant gratification. If we are going to go to the trouble of choosing something, we tend to want it *now*. But to be willing to turn to the God of Jesus Christ amid all the other religious "choices" out there, and on top of that to be willing to wait for the promises of Jesus to come true--that's a slap in the face against all the other gods in the marketplaces who are making quick-fix promise of their own.

Think about it--the gods of the Greeks and the Romans were all more or less the same, all various brands but all offering the same basic religious product: you come and worship this god or that god, and you bring your sacrifices, and that god would look out for you in some way (at least this was the sales pitch--we Christians would say it was all a big scheme since those gods were not real). In other words, the Greek and Roman gods were all part of the same instant-gratification system--you make your offering, and you could expect some "service" from the god or gods of your devotion for your trouble. They would increase your crops or prosper your business or guard your family, all for the price of your devotion. And you could *see* the spectacle of *those* gods, too, as an added "perk"--the statues and the temples and the drama of their priests and attendants.

Jesus, on the other hand, was a Lord (and is still such a Lord) who insisted on patience. There is no instant gratification with Jesus--there never was. Jesus is not one more religious service-provider in a marketplace of other divine vendors, offering you whatever you want for simply the price of your devotion. Jesus couldn't be bought off by sacrifices, and he couldn't be manipulated to grant wishes like a genie. And there was almost no spectacle when those early Christians met for worship--no statues, no golden calves, no priests in fancy vestments, and no animals killed in dramatic ritual fashion. If you were going to trust Jesus, it was going to require some patience and trust that the promised future Jesus was bringing would be worth the wait. If you were going to trust Jesus back in the ancient world--and still today--it requires us to believe that the universe is a different place already because Jesus is risen from the dead, even when it looks to the rest of the watching world like we're waiting around for nothing to happen. These early Christians, then, were revolutionary and subversive, even, in two respects: *first*, they rejected outright the offers made by the other gods and goddesses (and emperors) in the religious marketplace; *but* then second, their faith in Jesus was a rejection of the whole instant-gratification system that all of those other gods represented. The early Christians didn't just call into question whether people should offer their sacrifices to Zeus or Mithras or Apollo or Caesar, as though these gods were merely competing brands of soft drinks like Coke or Pepsi or Sierra Mist. The early Christians undermined the whole idea that your worship of a god was primarily a way of *getting* stuff for yourself--they ridiculed the whole idea of treating your god like a cosmic vending machine.

That may be more revolutionary than we had bargained for. We live in a world that is very much like the religious marketplace of the Roman Empire. And we are probably even more enamoured with the idea of an instant gratification faith. On the small scale, we watch our children blow their savings on cheap plastic toys or carbonated drinks filled with high fructose corn syrup. But that may

only be because they see us "grown-ups" buying houses we can't afford with credit we don't have, and using our plastic credit cards to buy things now and think about paying for them later. We get tired--or even sadder, we get *bored*--with wars, and become numb to the sacrifices being made and the lives that are destroyed by human violence. And at night, we turn on our televisions and demand instant entertainment--and in fact, we have a hundred or two other channels at our disposal to provide that instant entertainment if the show I am watching right now is not delivering exactly what I want at this very moment. Let's be honest honest here--we are trapped in a system bent on instant gratification, too. The issue for us is whether we are really willing to question that system itself with a faith that *waits*. Are we willing to stand up in the face of instant gratification gods and say, "We trust that the new creation Jesus is preparing really will be revealed, and we would rather wait for *it* than distract and numb ourselves with the other choices in the marketplace. We would rather wait for a good meal than rush through the drive-thru or microwave Ramen noodles."? Are we indeed willing to question the whole vending-machine-religion system we live in? That would be a bold stance for us to take, if we would dare to do it. Are we willing today to say that we are convinced Jesus really is worth the wait?

Lord Jesus, even as we pray for you to come, soon and very soon, we pray for the patience to take your timing and not to settle for a lesser god who will pretend to be our genie. Let us hold out for nothing but you.

Without Entitlements

Originally written for September 20, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:1-2

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but through we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.

Contrary to popular Christian opinion, the followers of Jesus never got free passes. Being truthful about that fact may clear one of the bigger hurdles that gets the church tangled up and tripping over its own feet these days. We never got free passes, and we are not promised entitlements, either.

In our place and time, it is pretty common to expect the culture around us to make a special place for Christians because we are, or have been, the majority of the population in this country. We find religious people getting upset when non-Christians refer to events in December as "Holiday" events rather than "Christmas" events, even if they don't share our belief in *Christ* (and even when the events in question have nothing to do with Jesus--after all, what about an appliance sale really has to do with the birth of our Lord?). We find people getting really mad if someone can't put cross-shaped monuments or displays of the Jewish/Christian Ten Commandments on public grounds (and yet no one seems to think it could compromise the meaning of the cross or the commandments to have them associated with power-wielding governments). People who remember an earlier generation when blue laws kept most stores and activities closed on Sundays now get upset when the rest of the world does not automatically make its schedule around the Christian holy day. In other words, we tend to have a belief that it should be *easy* for us to be Christians in our culture, and that everybody else around us, while free to have whatever faith they want, should be flexible around *our* wants and calendars. We expect free passes and entitlements, in other words.

Historically, though, that's just now how Christianity was birthed. Here in these opening verses of Chapter 2, Paul makes that clear. It appears that Paul is referring to the events we know about from Acts 16-17, where he and Silas were stripped and beaten by a mob for freeing a slave-girl who had a spirit that told fortunes (*effectively depriving her "owners" of their income and making them mad over it*). And when the authorities sent the angry mob away, their next step was to throw Paul and Silas in prison (*yes, this is the set-up for the story of Paul and Silas singing in prison before the earthquake and the encounter with the Philippian jailer*). And then the next thing you know, Paul and Silas head over to Thessalonica, and there's an angry mob waiting for them there, too. Nevertheless, in every town, and even when they've been horribly mistreated, Paul doesn't give up peaking the good news of Jesus wherever he goes. Paul did not expect a free pass. Paul did not assume he was entitled to a friendly hearing. He knew that he was in store for a lifetime of opposition and that his voice would always be one from the margins. But he was convinced that the news he was bringing was just so inherently good, so compelling and beautiful and true, that it was worth telling, whether or not the crowds and the authorities made it easy for him or not.

If Christianity is not merely a hobby--something that can easily fit into the pockets of free time in our already booked calendars--then it is worth living out this faith of ours whether or not the culture around us makes it easy for us or not. And at least as Paul's story makes it clear, we Christians have not traditionally been given free passes by the world around us, because the world around us knew that we Christians were *dangerous* to the order of things "as they are." If we really are part of a revolution, a movement, and not a pleasant pastime, then we should not expect to get special treatment. If anything, we should be prepared for the world to make it *harder* for us bring the news of Jesus. After all, following Jesus will lead us to seriously question our economics, our politics, our personal comfort and its cost to others, and how much of ourselves we give up to technology. Paul and Silas were beaten and stripped *at the decree of the authorities* because their actions to liberate the slave-girl cost her owners a *profit*. And the world around us, enamoured as it is with profits, is always going to have trouble with Christians who question whether our piles of money are worth our devotion. The world around us is always going to be upset when we go around announcing that the emperor is wearing no clothes. That's how it has always been for us.

I had a professor in seminary who once asked in a sermon, "Can Christianity survive in times of persecution? Certainly--we have plenty of evidence from 2,000 years of history that the church even thrives at the times and places where it is pressed the hardest. But can Christianity survive in times of comfort? That is much more in doubt." If we spend our time and energy fussing that the world has not given us free passes or preferred status in the public square, and spouting angry words that we have not been given special entitlements for being Christian, then we are wasting time and energy that could be spent simply bringing the good news to people around us and letting the grace of Jesus speak for itself. And in fact, we would be spending our energy and time serving *ourselves* by trying to make it more comfortable to be Christians, rather than serving *Jesus* and *others* bringing the Good News to people even when there is no special place made for us at the table.

So how will we spend our energy today--complaining that we Christians are not given specially enough treatment, or simply putting the love of Jesus out there for people, whether or not we get a pat on the back from the world for doing it? Are we willing to share the Good News only if we get a free pass to do it, or have we found the Gospel so compelling by itself that we cannot help but live it and speak it, regardless of what the rest of the world does about it? That kind of witness is going to turn some heads....

Lord Jesus, give us the courage and love to keep sharing your Good News rather than looking for easy outs or the path of least resistance. And give us the wisdom and passion to see where you are leading us today.

Honest to God

Originally written for September 21, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:3-4

For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.

The old line goes, "It's easier for your memory just to always tell the truth--that way, you never have to remember which lie you told to which person." It's the non-rhyming version of "What a tangled web we weave/ When first we practice to deceive." Either way, pretty smart insight. In fact, I'd say you could take it even a step or two farther--it's not just *easier* on your memory to be straightforward and honest with everyone, it makes you a much *freer* person. When I put up a mask or a smokescreen to cover up my *real* intentions, or what I *really* think, I've always got to spend a fair amount of time...and energy...and attention...on keeping people distracted and away from the real me. Like a professional magician, I've always got to keep the world looking the other way, worrying about whether anybody caught the sleight of hand to cover up my real motives with something else. Like the Wizard of Oz, I always run the risk that some clever little dog will discover the truth behind the smoke and mirrors, while I try frantically to save the illusion, pleading, "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!" See that's the trouble with putting on an artificial face to the world--it just about takes all your energy to keep pulling the levers and turning the wheels behind the curtain to keep the act up, and at some point, you just can't keep it going anymore.

We all know it. We've all been there at one time or another--the Wizard behind the curtain, putting on a face we think will be more acceptable, or will help us accomplish what we want better than our own real selves. You keep your mouth shut and smile along when your boss talks politics, letting him believe you are both in the same party, when you really are at opposite ends of the aisle. You play good cop with a potential customer, to get him to lower his defenses so you can reel him in and make the sale. You play up your devotion to the Steelers with the friends who follow football, and you act casually indifferent with the ones who couldn't care less about sports. It all sounds pretty pathetically adolescent, but it can become a way of life, can't it? We humans keep coming back to the old pattern of inventing artificial selves to present to the world--it's just how you get ahead in business, or win friends, or keep up with appearances, isn't it?

But like I say, despite the fact that the world around us often tells us we need masks like that to make it in this life, there is a freer way to be human. It is the honest-to-God invitation for us to be honest-to-God. After all, as the saying goes, if you never lie to anybody, you never have to worry about remembering which lie you said when to whom! If we get into the habit of being just straightforward, earnest people who don't have cards or tricks up our sleeve and aren't trying to peddle snake-oil, we just don't have to spend all that energy keeping people distracted from our real selves or motives. And we can look other people in the eye, and ourselves in the mirror, to boot.

This is part of the freedom Paul invites us into as part of the Christian revolution. "Tired of putting up a smokescreen?" Paul asks. "Well, you are free to stop at any time." It really is just that plain and simple and honest. We don't have to be schemers--not at work, not with our peers or friends, not with potential romantic interests, and definitely not with the Gospel. See, when you share the Good News of Jesus with other people just because you love them and the news is so compellingly good, you don't have to *hide* anything about what you're doing. You don't have to walk into the room with mixed motives, *saying* that you want to share your faith because you care about the other person, but *really* doing it because you're looking to rack up "stars in your crown" or some other divine reward. After all, people can tell when you are only interested in *getting* something from them.

I suspect this is part of why Paul was as successful as he was as a missionary and carrier of the "movement." He didn't have to keep people from seeing his secret motives--because he didn't have any. He just loved people, and he knew what it was like to be loved by the living Jesus, and he couldn't help but want to share that love with everybody. There was no catch. There was no hitch. There was no fine print or ulterior motive. And so Paul didn't have to waste time or energy trying to keep people from finding out "the truth" about him. The truth was, Paul was just absolutely captivated by Jesus, and he couldn't help telling people about this Jesus. And I've got to tell you--that's the kind of person I want to be. I want to be free the way Paul was free. I want to be the kind of person who doesn't have to spent energy pulling the levers and turning the wheels to keep the Wizard illusion alive. Paul would tell me, and all of us, that the way to become free like that is simply to drop the act, and to let ourselves be so filled with Jesus' love for you and me that we simply don't care anymore who knows it--or maybe, in fact, we just decide we want *everyone* to know it. That kind of life is possible--it's free for the taking, actually. But it comes at a price--the cost is to let the dog pull back the heavy weight of the Wizard's curtain and to let go of the logic of our culture that says you have to tell people what they want to hear in order to get what you want. And instead, we are given a life where we just love people--and love them enough to be honest to God with them about the radically freeing news of Jesus.

Lord, take a good close look at us on the inside, and show us what you find. Where we still have divided loves and compromised loyalty to you, give us simple faith. Where we have treated others as means to an end, give us the courage to let that thinking go. And instead give us an honest, earnest, contagious faith.

What It Looks Like

Originally written for September 22, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:5-7a

As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

As I read these verses, I find myself asking, *How is this not bragging, Paul?* And even more to the point, I have been asking myself, *How is this not bragging about being humble?* That would be both pathetic *and* ironic! In all seriousness, though, I have been wondering what we are supposed to make of Paul's words here. He seems to think it's really important to remind his readers that he never manipulated them or took advantage of his position with them to fill his wallet or stroke his ego. And then he goes even further--he drops the not-so-subtle hint that although he *could* have insisted on some support from the Thessalonians while he was there, or *could* have thrown his weight around and demanded respect for his authority and position as an apostle commissioned by the risen Christ, he never actually did any of those things to them.

Now, I have to admit to you that Paul's move here makes me rather uncomfortable. It's reassuring to know that Paul never tried to take advantage of his authority or misuse his position to milk these new Christians. In my mind, that should be *obvious*. Of course we would expect Christian leaders to be models of honesty and integrity! Of course we do not want our leaders to be motivated by greed or emotional insecurity! And while we're at it, Paul, if you've been trying to teach us to be *humble* people, why are you going out of your way to call attention to how *humble* and *unpretentious* you are being? Doesn't that send mixed signals if you're trying to be an *example* for others, Paul? Maybe a little?

But there, precisely, is the rub: Paul is trying to be an *example* for Christians who are still relatively new to the faith (after all, at this point, the Christian faith was itself relatively new!). Paul is trying to teach them a whole new way of life, which means unlearning old practices and being trained in new ones. That takes the real-life example of someone else *doing* what we are trying to *learn* how to do ourselves. And how else can that happen without someone *modeling* the new way of life and then, in teachable moments, helping the learners to see, "Yes, *this* is what it looks like to be a servant leader..."? This is the bind we are in as a movement of people who are learning to *live* whole new lives--we need the examples of others to teach us and train our spiritual muscles to move like them, and yet we know we need to resist the temptation to slide from being an example to bragging about ourselves. In Paul's mind, he is not bragging to the Thessalonians about what a good pastor he has always been for them--he is trying to help them to see what servant-leadership looks like beyond just the word on the page.

If Paul just writes to these young Christians, "You all should be humble. Also, don't take advantage of each other," that's really easy for us all to agree to, but still to have no *real* idea what that means or looks like. We can all nod our heads and say, "Oh, yes, we all want to be good, humble servants of one another," and then still not make the connection to our actual choices and words and actions. We need someone like Paul to say, "By the way, being humble is not merely about blushing when you get a compliment and saying, *Amm, shucks...* when someone expresses their appreciation to you." We need someone like Paul say, "Servant leadership means that sometimes, even when you have the authority to *make* someone do something, you hold back and try to get people to choose to do things freely rather than out of guilt or fear or manipulation." We need the lives of fellow followers who can show us that the way of Jesus means that we *don't* always insist on getting our "rights" or what is "due" for ourselves, so that we can instead be free to give away what we could have claimed for ourselves. Without those real, lived examples, our way of life will dissolve in a lot of really good *talk* that doesn't translate into actions that will make people sit up and take notice about this strange community of Jesus.

So after a little more thought about it, I really am thankful for Paul's willingness to take on the awkward task of modeling servant-leadership for us. He likely knew that he ran the risk of being accused of bragging about himself or fishing for compliments, but he knew that words like "humble" or "self-giving" or "without pretext" would be emptied of their power without being practiced in real, tangible actions and lives. And so, Paul, like so many other saints who have walked alongside of us and gone before us, knew that love meant the risk of looking ugly for the sake of the beloved--and yet he showed love for his sisters and brothers in Christ anyway, taking that risk. That, I tell you, is compelling, and makes me want to be more of a part of that kind of community.

O God who is both great and good, we ask you to keep putting examples in our lives, in places we might expect and from quarters that will surprise us, who will keep putting the love of Jesus into real, lived actions beyond lip service. Teach us to love as you continue to raise up servants who model your love for us.

The Joy of Giving Yourself Away

Originally written for September 23, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:7b-8

But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

That about says it all. That's why we Christians are compelled to follow after the Lord we serve, and to build our lives around Jesus: because Jesus makes *this* kind of genuine community possible. This is what makes it worth it for us to live through petty squabbles, personality conflicts, the tedium of committee meetings, volunteer labor, and all of the rest of the baggage that may come with being "the church" in our time and place: there are those moments, sometimes right in the midst of the squabbles or committee meetings or other frustrations, when we find we are genuinely captivated by love for the other sisters and brothers in Christ around us. And in those moments, it becomes clear that we, with all of our rough edges and limited patience, could not manufacture such a community on our own. The only possible explanation for such genuine love as we hear in Paul's words here is the real presence of the living God, bringing former strangers together and binding them in love.

I love the way Paul puts it--it makes it so clear that the Gospel Good News is not just talk. He has become determined, not just to bring a verbal message to this congregation whom he loves, but that message itself compels him to pour out the heart of who he is for these people. The English phrase, "not only the Gospel of God, but also our own selves," is pretty close to the force of what Paul says, but the actual word Paul uses here for "self," is the same word that often gets translated "soul." Think about that and let it sink in: Paul says that the love of God has *so* endeared these brothers and sisters in Christ to him and to his co-writers Silas and Timothy, that they are giving their very *souls* away to this congregation, the very core of their being and lives. That's powerful stuff.

There's an old saying that the world is by and large immune to Christianity because it has been inoculated with a weak form of it, the same way a vaccine filled with a weakened form of a virus will keep the real thing from overcoming you. Maybe the friends, neighbors, and acquaintances around us who seem apathetic about the church are where they are exactly because all they have ever seen in the church is a settling for fake niceness, rather than a love that is willing to give itself away for others. People cannot imagine that church really means all that much, because they have seen so many of us Christians barely tolerate the other people in the pews around us or keep one another at arms' length. Well, I wouldn't want to be a part of that kind of congregation, either, frankly. And if I were a part of that kind of congregation, I wouldn't have much reason to invite anybody else to be a part of that kind of "community," if it could truly be *called* a community at all in the first place. But to read these words of Paul's and to see that such a beautiful, compelling, honest love was built between Paul and this congregation in such a short span of time as they had together, my goodness, I cannot help but want to be a part of *that* kind of life, and that kind of love. And Paul would have us believe that this is precisely the kind of genuine beloved community that is available to *all* of us in Christ. It was surely not because Paul was such an agreeable fellow all the time--there's plenty of evidence that his personality was a hard pill to swallow for the congregations he served. The kind of love that makes you want to give yourself away and pour yourself out, that is possible in the real world with our real personalities that really do create friction on their own only because the vibrant love of the living God is gathering the people together in the first place.

Amazingly, the kind of affection and love Paul is witnessing to here is still held out to us--we have the opportunity to practice living in that kind of community as we rejoice with each other in our joys and weep with each other in our sorrows. It happens when we show up to listen and to pray with

one another, when we bring each other meals and carry each other's burdens, and when we forgive one another and dare to risk asking for forgiveness. It happens as we are given those blessed moments of clarity, sometimes right in the midst of the otherwise tedious work of organized religion, to see the faces of the fellow disciples around us and to recognize how God has blessed our lives through those faces, hands, and hearts, along with whatever other baggage we bear from each other. And as we become even dimly aware of how God blesses us with the gift of such a community of love around us, disguised to the world as just a group of people who meet in the same building on Sunday mornings, our hearts overflow and we cannot help but pour them out back to these saints who make the love of God tangible for us and real.

Thornton Wilder says that "we can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures." That is something very much like what Pastor Paul is experiencing as he pens these words to the Thessalonians. He is conscious--blessedly aware with open eyes--of how the love of God has bound him together with this congregation of brothers and sisters in faith who have wept and rejoiced with him. And the more this love fills his awareness, the more he is truly alive--and at the very same time, the more cannot help but want to give himself back to these faces of divine love. *That* is what our revolution is about. *That* is why we gather on Sundays and throughout the week as church family. *That* is "the life that really is life." And it is yours today.

Good God, words fail when we consider the holy and extravagant privilege it is to be surrounded by your people and the ways they become living human channels of your love for us. Thank you, thank you, thank you, Lord, for the glimpses you give us now of such beloved community, and for the chance to belong among the saints you have placed among us. Your name be praised for those sisters and brothers who have blessed us beyond our telling.

More Than A Paycheck

Originally written for September 24, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:9-10

You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers.

Think of the people you regularly interact with every day or every week, the people who are a part of your usual routines day by day at work, at the post office, or at the grocery store. Who among those people leave a positive impression with you?

I am willing to bet that the people who come to mind, the people who stand out most for you within your usual comings and goings, generally have something in common. I would bet that most of these people seem like they genuinely care about what they do, and the people with whom they relate. The people who stick in our memories--at least in positive ways--are the ones who do what they do for more than a paycheck. They are the people who do not just phone it in in life, because they are passionate about what fills their lives. And you get the impression when you meet these people--whether they are ringing up your box of cereal and your vegetables for the week, or working alongside you from 8 to 5, or changing the oil in your car--that they are not merely there to make money. They may not love their jobs all of the time, but you get the sense that they are willing to do their work, and to do it well, as a way of loving other people. These are the people who are dedicated to getting things accomplished rather than just counting the minutes and hours until they can go home for the day. These are the people who do not constantly seem distracted by a million

other, lesser things, but can be fully present for you face to face when you speak with them. These are the people who can put their cell phones or email or running to-do-lists aside (something I will openly confess I have a hard time with) and actually give your their attention. You know, when you are around such people, that they are not just getting through a day for a paycheck. Their passion for what they do, their conviction that it matters, and their love for the people who cross their path make a tangible difference.

Paul offers to us the possibility that we can all be such people here. And I have to say, I *want* to be that kind of person. There are plenty of days when I know I fall short of that goal, and let another day go by where I am distracted or allow myself to drown in technology rather than being present in the moment where I need to be. But the kind of life Paul holds out as an example is compelling to me. You get the sense that Paul wasn't just working for a paycheck, either.

That's his point here, isn't it? While he was living and working with the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul wasn't there just to make a living. As he will say in other places, he had the *right* to ask for support so that he could do what he was doing, but he never would. Paul never passed the hat around to take up a collection for himself--if the hat was passed, it was to give to someone else. But Paul wasn't preaching for a paycheck, and he didn't just show up to earn a living. In fact, Paul was willing to work a second job so that he could do the preaching and teaching and witnessing that he considered to be his primary work. In other words, Paul wasn't *playing church*, and he wasn't just *biding his time* until the whistle blew and he could punch his time-card. Paul did what he did because he knew it mattered, and because he loved the people God was putting in his path.

Now as we've said before in these devotions, this would all sound pathetically self-congratulatory if Paul were just mentioning this history to fish for compliments from the Thessalonians. But his point all along has been to offer up an example of how to live *differently* for people who are just learning what it looks like to be Christians. Maybe that's all of us, really, since we are all disciples along the way trying to figure out what it means for us to follow Jesus. Paul isn't trying to get his readers to praise him, so much as he is saying to us, "You don't have to phone it in, either!" We don't have to be the kind of people who are so narrowly focused on ourselves that we only show up at our day-jobs for our own benefit. We don't have to be the kind of people who are so fragmented by our personal devices that we cannot sustain a meaningful conversation for more than five minutes. We don't have to be the kind of people who give the impression that it's all about a paycheck at the end of the day--because for us, it won't be. That's not just the kind of person I want to run into at the grocery store or at the bank. That's the kind of person I want to *be*. And that, Paul says, is the kind of genuine life we are called to as followers of Jesus. It's ours already.

Lord Jesus, let me be present in what I do today, and give me the vision to see this day as more than a daily wage or to-do list.

A Life That Is Worthy

Originally written for September 27, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:11-12

"As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pelading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory."

When you are invited to a wedding and you can see from the invitation that it will be a formal, elegant affair, you don't show up in flip-flops and your "I'm With Stupid" t-shirt. If you care much at all about the bride or the groom, you put on a suit or a dress and you make yourself look *presentable*, as my mother would say. And you dress that way, even if you would much prefer to be casual, as a way of honoring the couple. It may take some time to adjust to the tight knot of the necktie, or to the constant need to check your stockings for snags, but because you care about the couple, you decide that they are worth your being a little uncomfortable for their sake. The beauty and significance of the moment are *worthy* of it.

Yes, it's true--there are some weddings where the couple specifically does ask for guests to come in blue jeans and cowboy hats, or some other dress theme. But in those situations, a denim outfit and a Stetson hat "work" the same way as a tuxedo with tails or a three-piece suit do in other weddings--you wear what is asked of you, simply because the hosts who have invited you have asked you to do it. They are worthy of it. And the moment is worthy of it, too. The fact that they have honored you already by included you in their celebration calls forth from you the response of honoring them by dressing for the occasion. In fact, dressing up in your suit and tie is a way of letting the moment really be about the couple and their vows--if, in false humility, you show up in the flip-flops and ragged cut-offs, you have instantly made yourself the focus of attention and robbed the moment of its rightful meaning and beauty. (And yes, the flip-side is true, too: if you are the lone hold-out in a three-piece suit at the denim-and-boots western wedding, you have again turned the focus *away* from the couple's celebration and *onto* yourself.)

So we appear to have resolved this bit of fashion etiquette--when you are privileged with an invitation to some significant moment or event, you dress appropriately. You wear what the moment and the occasion calls for, as a way of honoring the ones who invited you. Whew--we can call off Emily Post.

But what if the *event* we are invited to is not a wedding and reception, but nothing less than *the Kingdom of God*? And what if we are not talking about a single afternoon or evening or your time, but an entire *lifetime*? Then we're not talking about a change of clothes, but a *way of life*. What kind of way of life "fits" the moment--or the lifetime--if we are talking about being invited into God's presence, and even God's "family"? Well, this is exactly the kind of question Paul has in mind when he tells his readers to lead lives *worthy* of God. He is writing to people who have *already* been included in the Kingdom of God and are already *accepted* through Jesus. They've gotten their invitations to the party in the mail already--so the question is *not* about whether they are going to be deemed good enough to "get in." The issue is whether they (and we) will insist on wearing our "I'm With Stupid" t-shirts. It's not about putting on a false self like a rented tuxedo to try and *impress* God. We're *already* on the guest list, and God has honored us by including us. It's about whether we will be dressed for the moment appropriately. If you tend to think our God is a suit-and-tie sort of deity, then picture yourself showing up for daily life with your spirit in formalware. If you think ours just may be a denim and boots kind of God, or barefoot-on-the-beach kind of God, imagine your soul dressed that way as you navigate through each day. It's not that we have to wear *expensive* clothes to the wedding, so much as we are called to dress for the occasion--and that has everything to do with the character of the One who is throwing the party.

The whole Christian life, then, is about dressing ourselves appropriately for the "occasion of living in the Kingdom of God right now. When we think about the way we will act and treat others today, it's not that we ever think we are "better" than anybody else. We are simply called to dress in a way that fits the character of the God who has included us. The same way you wear the Hawaiian shirt and shorts, even if that's not your personal taste, when you are asked to for a beach-front wedding because that just fits the character of of the bride and groom who invited you, we are called to live lives that "fit" with the character of God, even when that is a challenge for us or strains against our inclinations. But take note: we never do it *in order* to get into God's good grace. We are called to live lives "worthy of God" because we are already on the guest list, and we have already been deemed acceptable. How else can we honor the God who has included us in the party?

Lord God, let us be prepared, appropriate, worthy, for the life you have called us into today, however that may stretch us.

Rain on Good Soil

Originally written for September 28, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:13

"We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers."

"The thirstiest ground can't take the rain," the singer Jon Foreman says in a song called "Erosion." He's right. You've surely seen pictures at least of the parched and cracked earth in the driest deserts, where a sudden rain can become a dangerous flood because the earth itself can't soak in the water. The soil becomes so parched and cracked that it can no longer absorb the rain, but can only channel it into a deluge. And precisely because the soil can't take in any water--can't *receive* the water as it falls from the sky--the rain cannot nurture any plant life there. The rain cannot do its life-giving work because the soil can't take in the rain in the first place.

By contrast, this is part of what makes good soil *good*--it's got the right mix of organic and inorganic particles, of loam and clay and sand and compost--that it can take in and hold the right amounts of water and other nutrients so that plants can thrive. Good soil can "accept" the rain as it is intended to, and for the very same reasons, the rain can do its "work" within the soil to nurture seedlings and water tree roots.

Did you see that Paul makes the same connectio here in 1 Thess. 2:13? When God's Word is spoken among us it *does* something to us and in us as it soaks in and seeps into us. We cannot "accept" God's Word for what it is and not have it be *at work in us*. Like rain water soaking into the good earth, the Word of God sustains and grows and refreshes. It creates the possibility for seedlings to sprout. That means the Word will not stay inert or fixed or under my control--even when God's Word soaks *into* me, it is still at work *on* me. That means when we hear the news of Jesus, it is not like learning facts for history class or a science exam, facts which we can memorize and categorize and contain without them *changing* us. You can commit to memory the rhyme, "*In Fourteen Hundred Ninety-Two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue,*" or "*A pint's a pound the world around,*" and yet keep those facts from *doing* anything to you or *changing* you. But not when God speaks to us. If we are really hearing it and not just letting it roll over us like a flood of noise, the Word is going to soak into us--to permeate deep within us--and will go to work. "*For as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall be my word that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it*

shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it," God says in Isaiah 55:10-11. Well, that's what Paul is saying here, too: to receive God's Word for what it is also means that we let that Word do its work in us. Otherwise, we are parched desert wasteland that can only repel and channel life-giving water away, not take it in to let something sprout.

So the question for us then, today, is how we will let God's Word interact with us. Will we let the rain in and soak into us, knowing that taking the Good News seriously may challenge or stretch us where we thought we were already completely settled? Or will we come to the Bible, and to the living, spoken, *preached* Word as well, closed up like the crackled desert floor, already so certain we know what it will say that we cannot let it in again to shake us up? Is our soil so hardened and dry that it can't let the rain in? Or will we risk whatever ways the living Word of God could surprise us today? Keep your eyes to the skies today--looks like it might rain....

Lord, let our hearts be good soil today, letting your Word soak in and do its work within us.

Learning How To Suffer Well

Originally written for September 29, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:14

"For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews..."

Life--let's just be honest about this--is going to involve some pain. Some of it will be easily curable: the twisted ankle in your youth, the hasty cut on your thumb from slicing apples, the mild slight of someone's off-hand comment that you forget without much offense. Some of it will be tragically futile: the wasted advances and heartaches of an unrequited love, the sadness of watching cancer do its awful work on a loved one, the bitter energy spent nursing a grudge.

But some of the suffering of this life has the possibility of being transformed into something *beautiful*, something we call sacrifice, when it is offered up knowingly and willingly in love. The labor pains that bring a new child into the world. The loving bedside vigil when someone is hospitalized and needs the presence of family or friends to keep them going. The vacations put off or creature comforts that were delayed so that the kids could have nice things and new shoes for school. The way a friend will give up their day, or their lunch hour, or even a few minutes, to listen when you need to process through something difficult. These are all sufferings in their own way, and they all involve a certain amount of chosen *loss*, of sacrifice, that makes the pain different--perhaps even holy--in comparison to the cuts and scrapes we heal from, and the other pains that seem thrust upon us but have no redeeming possibilities in them. We know there are opportunities in this life (strange as it sounds to call them *opportunities*) where we can suffer *well*, and transform otherwise meaningless pain into something beautifully redemptive--so that in our sharing of someone else's pain, their hurt is lessened and their burden is eased, or so that some blessing can come out of the pain. The challenge for us is to learn *how* to suffer well like that, and how to recognize those opportunities when we stumble our way into them.

Well, part of how Christians answer the question, "How do we learn to suffer well?" is to say we learn by copying each other--by following the lived examples of those saints alongside us who teach by their own willingness to lay down their lives for others how to bend meaningless pain into something redemptive, healing, and even creative. I am reminded of that passage in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, where the Atticus' young son Jem has been made to spend time with crochety,

old Mrs. Dubose. His father has insisted that he read to the bedfast, dying woman--ostensibly as a punishment for having trampled her flowers one day. But when Mrs. Dubose dies, Atticus has a talk with his son about what all of this has meant. He says Mrs. Dubose was refusing to take the pain-killing morphine that would have spared her some physical pain because she wanted to die "beholden to nothing and nobody." Atticus says that he wanted Jem to *"see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all ninety-eight pounds of her. According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew."* We learn how to suffer well--to turn mere meaningless pain into chosen sacrifice--by seeing the examples of those who suffer well alongside of us.

This was the experience of the early church, too. The Christians in Thessalonica learned to suffer by seeing the lived experience of their brothers and sisters in Judea--the Jerusalem church that found itself met with hostility by the religious authorities around them. And rather than running away or avoiding the pain by giving up their faith, or retaliating in angry violence against the authorities, those Christians transformed the pain of persecution into the strangely beautiful suffering, by continuing to witness, to love, and to endure as a living example of Jesus' own self-giving love. The Thessalonian Christians heard about that, and they were shaped by it. So when the local Roman authorities or the angry mob showed up for them in Thessalonica, they had learned how to suffer well already--having seen it fleshed out on the canvas of actual lives of brothers and sisters in Christ. Like Jem learns from being in the presence of Mrs. Dubose, and by having his father explain the meaning of her actions, we disciples always learn by seeing the lived out faith of others, and by helping each other to see the significance of our actions. We hold up the actions of others like diamonds sparkling in the sunlight to let the facets of their choices scatter light around the room--we teach each other by seeing how disciples among us have learned to transform pain into something redemptive and compelling. "Do you remember the way that Kathy sat with you in the hospital waiting room when your husband was going through surgery?" "Do you remember how Walter always gave up his Thursday afternoons to work in the food bank?" "Do you know what Suzanne went through taking in her grandkids while her children were out of the country?" We tell the stories of how others have taken the pain of life and let it be used for something blessed, and so we, too, learn how to suffer well. That is part of our witness to the world--that in Christ pain and destruction do not get the last say, but can be transformed through the same power that raises the dead. That's why we keep gathering together as a family of faith--to learn from each other's lives how, among other things, to suffer well.

Lord Jesus, transform the pains that will come our way this day into something blessed. Teach us how to suffer well, as strange as that prayer may seem, by the compelling witness of those around us whose lives will teach us.

Going Too Far?

Originally written for September 30, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:15-16

(Note: Today's verses come halfway through a train of thought that began in yesterday's verse, so we will pick up with a part of 1 Thess. 2:14 to get into the passage for the day.)

*"...for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, **who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.**"*

Remember, remember, remember: the man writing these verses, Paul, is Jewish. So as strong as these words are, they were not fired from the outside by an angry xenophobe looking for a scapegoat. They were spoken from the inside of the Jewish community by someone who was heartbroken that his own people had opposed him with violence and rejected his message. It might seem like there was no love lost between Paul and "the Jews" he is criticizing here, but to be truthfully, Paul writes as a heartbroken man who is deeply saddened that so many of his own people have not embraced the message of Jesus. So even though *our* ears may find these verses troubling because we have seen what horrible atrocities have been committed when *outsiders* started blaming "the Jews" for things, we need to remember Paul and his context. Of course, we must be vigilant in our day not to let the heat of angry words lead to the smoke of ovens. And *absolutely* we Christians need to own responsibility and seek forgiveness for the ways we have let our words be twisted into violence in the past, whether against the Jewish people, other groups, or even within our own house (*Lutherans, for example, were responsible for killing a lot of Anabaptists in the 16th century, all done in the name of the faith of Jesus*).

If we are going to hear these verses for today rightly, then, there are two further notes of context we need to keep in mind: (1) Paul *never* calls for violence against anybody, whether his opponents from Jerusalem and Judea here or anywhere else, and when he talks about God's wrath, he never envisions Christians being the agents of that wrath. If God is going to judge someone, Paul is going to leave that to God, but Christians are *not* ever to use to violence to advance our faith. That is unquestionably clear throughout Paul's writings, and is the only *possible* posture for a faith that follows after a man who went to a cross forgiving his executioners. And then (2) Paul says in other writings of his that he would rather that he himself be sent to hell than see his own people cut off from God's love in Christ Jesus. So as mad as he is in this passage (*and remember that by this point, he's been beaten, imprisoned, and run out of town multiple times by these religious authorities*), Paul's over-all posture toward his own native people in Judaism is one of fierce love that cannot help but be fiercely heartbroken when he has met with rejection in the past.

All right, all of that said, what does *any* of this have to do with us today? And given that we cannot avoid living in a post-Holocaust world, is there now so much baggage we have to unpack in these verses that we had better skip past them now? Is there anything these verses offer for us, 21st-century members of the Jesus revolution? Well, I would call our attention to one thing from today's passage: the thing that seems to have upset so many of Paul's opponents was that his message of God's grace always seemed to go *too far*. The Good News of God's salvation was all well and good as long as it was limited to in-group members--that is, to folks who were already in the covenant people. But Paul kept insisting that God was sending him out with the gift of salvation to everybody else--to the riff-raff--that is, to the Gentiles (*anybody who wasn't ethnically Jewish*). And that's

where the religious authorities drew the line. Judaism in the first-century had room for believing that the Messiah could come at any time, and there were plenty of movements around the time of Paul when good, faithful Jews claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah. That wasn't the breaking point. The problem was the news that the Messiah had been a crucified, homeless rabbi who, after being raised from the dead, was welcoming undeserving *outsiders* into God's people without consulting the *rest* of God's people for their approval first. The problem was not God's "grace" per se, but that according to Paul, God's grace was going outside the bounds of their control--outside beyond the realms of the socially acceptable, outside beyond the lines of their religious understanding, outside what the rules said about who could belong in the covenant people of God. And to be honest, Paul wasn't doing anything different from what Jesus himself had done--Jesus regularly got himself into hot water with the religious authorities because of his insistence that God's salvation was available to tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, and those who had "fallen away" to the fringes. As William Willimon (*following New Testament scholar N.T. Wright*) says in his book, *Who Will Be Saved?*, "Jesus was crucified because of the company he kept at the table, because he practiced wide-open messianic hospitality. Messiah was supposed to come and gather faithful Israel; Jesus came to save *the lost* of Israel." Paul only follows that same trajectory and brings the news of Jesus and his invitation to belonging to the lost of the whole world, which is all of us. That always will seem like it's going too far. But that is exactly the nature of the beast when you are dealing with grace--by definition, grace is always going to seem like it is going too far, past the bounds of what is earned or deserved or worthy, because that is exactly what grace means. It is always going to seem like Jesus--and those of his followers who *get* what he is about--is going too far, because the Christian message is about a God who eats at table with the riff-raff, and a "love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be." But it is not given only to those who are *already* lovely--that's none of us. Grace requires going out to the unacceptable, but that will always seem like it is going *too far* for those who are already "in" the club, to the elder brothers of the prodigal, and to those who are worried about inflation in the divine economy. "If God welcomes in *those people*, well, then my belonging isn't nearly as a exclusive and prestigious." Yep, that's exactly the point. God has never been a fan of puffing us up with prestige and status for belonging in his people--all of us have gotten in by grace, so we had better be prepared for God to keep going and letting other people in by grace, too. What flusters Paul so much in these verses is that this is *always* how God has operated throughout the Bible--from the days of scraggly old pagan Abram or shrewd-dealing prostitute Rahab--but his own people in the first century couldn't imagine God doing it again and welcoming in the Gentiles.

Today, let us be honest--our God always pushes further than we would like, and grace always risks looking like it is going too far. But rather than shrink away and find a less offensive message, let us, with Paul, announce boldly to the world that God is on a mission to rescue the whole lot of us, riff-raff included, because that is the kind of God we have.... thanks be to God.

Good Lord, don't put the brakes on now. Even when we are squeamish about it, keep pulling us out and keep drawing people in, even if it pushes us beyond our comfort zones, and even if we fear that your grace is going too far.

The Long Distance Relationship

Originally written for October 1, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:17

"As for us, brothers and sisters, when for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you--in person, not in heart--we long with greater eagerness to see you face to face."

There is just something good about being together in the Christian community. I know people have been burned by churches before, and I know I am a biased witness who can't help but be a cheerleader for being together in congregations. But like they say, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're *not* out to get you--and just because I as a pastor of two Christian congregations am predisposed to see good in the gathered community doesn't mean I'm making it up out of whole cloth. There is something undisputably beautiful and blessed about belonging in a family of faith who faces joys and sorrows together as support, as encouragement, as challenge for one another, and as the face of Jesus for one another. There can be a lot of *junk* (this is the technical term for it) that gets in the way or clouds the beauty of the thing, but *being together* as disciples on the same journey is a good thing when you get glimpses of it. The rain and the clouds that made my drive home so dark last night on the back roads may have been awfully gloomy, but it didn't mean it wasn't truly beautiful in the moments when the clouds parted and I could see the stars again. Same with us--all the silliness and pettiness and territorial nonsense that comes with herding a bunch of people together still cannot completely cover up the beauty when saints are in the same room together.

Well, this is what Paul is all about here. He loved those saints in Thessalonica. He really did. And he rather wears his heart on his sleeve here, letting these dear brothers and sisters in faith know how much it hurt him to be away from them for so long. This is sort of the "meanwhile" to what Paul was mentioning just a few verses before about how the Thessalonians had been through rough times and persecution. While they were suffering for their faith by enduring hostility from the authorities and the crowds, Paul was suffering, too, in his own way, with part of his heart left back in Thessalonica (perhaps that doesn't make for as catchy a song title as the original, but you get the picture). And now as Paul thinks about it and writes, it becomes clear just how much these people meant to him.

Think about that for a moment--it is always a two-way street between each of us in the community of Christ. It's not just that the children need to come to church so they can learn to be good--the teachers need the living, thriving energy of young faith to renew them. The pastors and teachers and council presidents and committee chairs need the whole congregation of people to help sharpen *their* faith, to strengthen *their* spirits, and to build up *their* character. It's not just a handful of religious experts who give something (hopefully) to the majority who sit in pews. The church is not a service-provider for customers who pay their money and get a product. We all belong to one another, and we all feed one another, so that when someone like a Saint Paul is removed physically from the Thessalonian church, *he* is missing something, too, as much as *they* are missing something from him.

It's not enough for us just to know in our heads that there are other Christians around--we need to see their faces, touch their hands sharing the peace, hear their voices, and know their presence to know that we are not alone. It's not enough for us to read our Bibles in isolation at home and say to the rest, "I'll see you in heaven,"--we need the blessing of each other to give us glimpses of the Kingdom now to keep us going, or else it will all seem too good to be true. It's not enough for us to bear the weight of each day's hurts or pains by ourselves, and we can't contain our joys within ourselves for very long, either. We need one another, and the fact that God has given us one another is a sign of the utter goodness of God.

If someone asks me why they should bother going to church, especially if I believe that it won't get them into heaven, that's all I can tell them: that the people who have lived this way of life the most deeply over the last 2,000 years have found they can't do it alone. The followers of Jesus who have let their faith soak down into their core, they just can't keep themselves away--or else they feel like orphans. We need each other--and by the grace of God, we have each other.

Lord God, we give you thanks for the life we get to live in community with each other. Purify out from within each of us the things that make our life together bitter--root out our envy and pride, our indifference and apathy, and open our hearts anew to find their place in the body of Christ.

Our Best-Laid Plans

Originally written for October 4, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:18

"For we wanted to come to you--certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again--but Satan blocked our way.

All right, so Paul, the apostle of God, had made plans to go see his friends in Thessalonica on multiple occasions, and repeatedly, his plans were thwarted. So Paul draws the conclusion that he was being blocked by Satan--by the accusing, demonic voice of evil in the universe. If you were an apostle of Jesus Christ, convinced down to your core that you were on a mission for the Kingdom of God, you might well draw the same conclusion. After all, the logic is pretty simple: **(Step 1)** I am a servant of God, doing work God has called me to do. **(Step 2)** I want to go to such-and-such a place, but circumstances are preventing me. **(Step 3--The Logical Pay-Out)** Therefore, what is really preventing me must be from Satan, because Satan is the root source of all that is opposed to the will of God.

Like I say, that seems pretty straightforward, and we could all probably see how Paul draws his conclusion. The hitch is this: there are other times in the Bible when Paul (yes, the very same guy) has his plans thwarted, and the biblical narrator (Luke, writing in the book we call Acts) says it is not *Satan*, but none other than *The Holy Spirit* who is putting up roadblocks to Paul's itinerary. In fact, in a curious turn of events in Acts 16:6-10, Paul had planned to go through a part of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) but is re-routed through Phrygia and Galatia because, as Luke writes, he had "been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). Paul then wants to go to Bithynia, but again Luke chimes in with, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." And because his travel plans are thwarted twice, Paul ends up on the coast at a place called Troas, where he has a dream of someone in Macedonia (modern-day Greece, home of, you guessed it, *Thessalonica*) calling him to come and help them in Macedonia.

In other words, if the Spirit had never interfered in Paul's best-laid plans, he never would have gone to Thessalonica in the first place and never would have met these new Christians whom he has come to love so dearly and whom he intends to visit as he is writing the letter we are reading. So Paul (or at least his biographer, Luke) was able to see the Spirit's fingerprints on that change of plans, but now Paul is convinced that his new delay of plans is the work of Satan. Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice says...

All of this has me wondering today about the changes that come to our own best-laid plans. How do we know which changes in plans are the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit, and how do we know which are the nefarious plottings of the devil? When are we right to suspect that evil forces are behind the roadblocks in our lives, and when should we take them as divine nudgings? We are

pretty good at recognizing *that* there are impasses in our lives, or signs rerouting our life plans, but we have a much harder task in deciphering *what* those signs mean, and *who* put them there, don't we? We could err by assuming that everything that happens in our lives was the perfect will of God, down to your spilling coffee on your shirt or cutting yourself shaving, and start assuming that God is out to get us. Or on the other hand, we could just as easily fall into the ditch on the other side of the road by becoming the boy who cried "Devil" and see diabolical intentions behind every bad thing that happens to us. But again, you've got to ask, "Am I really important enough to the devil that he's trying to get me to cut myself shaving, or that he is sending paper cuts my way to frustrate or discourage me?" And is it possible that as we live *through* events we just won't be able to tell what's going on, but that in *hindsight* we can recognize how God brought us through or even used detours for divine purposes?

So what are we to do on *this* day, today, the only day we are guaranteed to get? How do we make any sense of the changes in plan that will necessarily be a part of our day? Where do we point the finger and say, "Get behind me, Satan!" at the obstacles in our path, and when do we take the cue that this could be the direction of God? Perhaps not very comfortingly, Paul doesn't give us much of an answer here. And neither did Luke when he wrote about the Holy Spirit "preventing" and "forbidding" things in Acts. It's the same man's life, but two different episodes are read in two very different ways. So what do we do when we find ourselves in Paul's situation--with plans changed and us left wondering who's behind it? What if we start the same way we can always start when we are faced with problems beyond our unraveling: what if we began with prayer? That lets us be honest with God, laying out *why* we think that Plan A was what we were "called" to do, and then laying it on God either to help us to *do* Plan A, still, even despite obstacles, or to show us a new Plan B and to see divine direction in the detour. And in the mean time, we can only do what we are convinced by our prayerful and honest discernment is what we are called to do, and to trust that God is able to get our attention (and smack us upside the head to do it, if necessary) if there needs to be a new direction. Paul wasn't being *sinful* back in Acts 16 by wanting to go to Asia Minor--he was convinced that God was leading him there. It just turned out that God had other plans and sent him sailing off in the opposition direction. But Paul wasn't *wrong* to make his plans to go to Asia Minor at first--he was working as well as he could with the intellect and insight he had, until new information and divine nudgings came. And conversely, here in 1 Thessalonians, Paul doesn't jump to conclusions and assume that since he has been prevented from going to see his friends in Thessalonica, that it must be a sin even to want to go. There is a prayerful cautiousness in Paul in that regard, and we would do well to let it become our own. We can make the best plans we are able to make day by day and month by month, knowing that they will be subject to change from forces that are in line with God as well as forces opposed to God. But as we continue to pray in all things, we will always be in constant touch with the One who is able to work with detours and in fact bring good through all situations. There is our calling for the day--take your plans, make your plans, fine. But let us be prayerful in our planning and humble enough to lay them at God's feet and say, "Your will be done!" in the same breath.

Lord God, give us discernment. Help us to know where to see your hand, where to keep striving in the face of evil threats, and where simply to rest humble patience while you re-route us. We pray it in the name of Jesus.

What Will Last

Originally written for October 5, 2010--1 Thessalonians 2:19-20

"For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!"

At some point, you've got to be honest about what will last, and what is therefore worth putting your life and energy into. That is probably a pretty widely acceptable bit of advice. You don't have to be Christian, or even practice any religious faith, to think it's wise to spend your life doing something meaningful and to leave a lasting legacy. In one way or another, that's largely what culture is--various people's attempts to do something worthwhile with their lives to leave behind an enduring mark on the world. The sculptures, statues, and temples of ancient Greece. The pyramids of Egypt. The world's canon of great literature. The innovations and great theorems of science, or the best of philosophy and political science. They are all the results of people doing their best to contribute something to history and, in one way or another, leave an imprint on the world that will last. Everybody wants to be remembered.

So for us Christians today, we should perhaps begin with a little honesty ourselves and admit that we are not the only ones saying in the public square, "Leave a legacy for those who come after you." We are not the only ones teaching our children at home as they grow up, "Do something that will last." The Pharaohs left a legacy, too--although they are crumbling in the desert wind in Egypt now. Alexander and Augustus (and a long line of empire-building would-be world-unifiers after them) left an impression on the course of world events--although neither could create an empire or an order that would last *forever* as they had hoped. What really *does* make the Christian perspective stand out among human attempts to be remembered is that we have never been convinced that it had to do with monuments, buildings, endowments, or achievements. As Paul shows us here in 1 Thessalonians, for us Christians, what will last is loving other human beings.

When Paul gets nostalgic and starts wondering what his own legacy will be, he skips over his dramatic daring deeds, and he makes no mention of his own writings. He never asked for a stone to be chiseled with his name on it, and he never had a portrait commissioned so that we could remember his likeness. When Paul thinks about what he will have that he can hold up before Jesus at the Lord's return, he thinks immediately of the people he has loved with the gracious, self-giving love of Christ, and he is satisfied. He has pinned his hopes of glory and joy on *love*, and on loving actual human beings, other real selves with real faces, and Paul is convinced that the love that has held them together in this life, even across miles, will last when he stands on the brink of eternity. What we do out of love for others--or, perhaps it is better to say, what Love himself leads us to do for others--will last. Love, even if given in gestures that are forgotten in an instant or invisible after a moment, will endure. To hear Jesus tell it, the things that get brought up on the last day will not be the number of monuments left with your name on them or the number of dollars you left behind in a bank account, or even for the the Alexanders and Augustuses among us, how many years your empire lasted. By Jesus' reckoning, it is the food given to the hungry, the visits to the lonely and imprisoned, the welcome given to the outsider, and the clothes shared with the poor--in other words, momentary actions of love--that will be the subject of discussion on the day when everything else is stripped away. Love will last, and love can never be in the abstract; it always involves concrete words, actions, and presence for real persons. But the actions, words, and presence through which we offer love might occupy only fleeting moments of time, or seem like they hardly mattered.

This is part of the peculiar way we who worship the God of Israel and Jesus, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, see things. Whatever our activities, if they are offered in love to the God who has loved us first, or if they are offered in love of neighbor, stranger, and enemy (because God has taught us to bend our love outward to them as well), they will last, even if they seem completely forgettable to us. C.S. Lewis writes, "All our merely natural activities will be accepted, if they are offered to God, even the humblest, and all of them, even the noblest, will be sinful if they are not." In other words, the cup of cold water offered in Jesus' name--or the dishes washed, or trash picked up by the side of the road, done out of love--will last in the end. But even our proudest accomplishments, tallest towers, and best works won't even come to mind if they are not offered up in love of God or neighbor.

And now comes the really beautiful, but also really strange, wrinkle in all of this: because it is *love* that matters, and because Jesus shows us love as a self-forgetting act of putting the other first, we won't be *looking* to leave a legacy when we are loving others. We will just be loving others, and discover on that great future day that it is love that has mattered all along. Paul doesn't think to himself, "How can I be remembered? I know--I'll make a lot of friends in Thessalonica who can vouch for me in heaven!" He has *already* established those relationships. He has *already* loved these people before he even considers that they are his "legacy." Loving them was not merely a means to an end--we don't love people *in order* to get a crown one day in heaven. To hear Paul tell it, the people we have loved with Jesus' kind of love *are* our crown. We don't love others as a back-door way of loving ourselves or getting our names remembered. When I love I am able to forget myself, but the God who has fashioned the universe and who *is* Love still remembers. But if I am using love as a tool, as a way of getting something for myself or some lasting legacy, then it is a pretty sure sign I don't really have love in in the first place, but a cheap knock-off that will turn my finger green. The ones at the judgment seat in the parable who have fed the hungry and visited the sick and loved "the least of these" say they didn't even realize they were doing it for Jesus--they have been blessedly clueless all the while! That's the beautiful, peculiar paradox of Christian love--we know it is the only thing that will really last, and yet we are not looking to make *ourselves* last when we offer love to someone else. You are looking out for the well-being of the *other* while you are doing it, only to find in the end that the *other* will be your joy and your crown. Today, let us do something that *matters*, something that will *last*. Today, let us love.

O Eternal God, give us the vision and wisdom to see moments, even brief instants, when we can love the people whom you have placed in our lives. We pray it in the name of has shown us what love is, Jesus.

For Your Sake

Originally written for October 6, 2010--1 Thessalonians 3:1-2

"Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith..."

Love will make you do some strange things. Or perhaps it's better to say that love will make you do things that appear strange to an outside observer, but which make perfect sense to you and have their own kind of logic to them. There is, after all, a certain amount of pain that we choose to endure for the sake of those we love, and for people do not share that love, it will seem odd that we are willing to do the extra work, or sit at the bedside keeping vigil, or clean up someone else's mess, or take the hit for someone else. But for you, when you do these things for someone that you love, it makes perfect sense.

Well, we are about to enter one of those kinds of situations with Paul and the Thessalonians. At first read, Paul's report here sounds nonsensical: he missed his friends in Thessalonica *so* much that when he could not bear the separation any longer, he sent Timothy to them, which meant that now Paul was more alone than ever. Wait...*what?* Paul was missing his friends, so he sends away the one other sure companion he had to go to be with the people he was already missing? Why would he do something like that? What would possess a man like Paul to be willing to be even *lonelier* than he was before? Doesn't that seem like it actually makes the original problem *worse*? The answer, of course--the only answer that can make any sense of this--is *love*. Paul loves these fellow disciples, and even if he cannot be there in person with them, he knows it will benefit them to send Timothy to them, even if it means a certain additional heartache for Paul. And to know that he is making their lives better, and their faith stronger, that is going to be enough for Paul.

This is what our revolution is about. This is the kind of life that is made possible for the followers of Jesus. We are invited into the kind of life where we are given such joy to bless the lives of others that we are willing to endure a certain amount of other pain for their sake. And we are at the same time invited into the kind of life where *others* have sacrificed for us and for our sake, knowing that they have done it joyfully and willingly. There will be times when we are *Paul*, risking the pain of separation so that others can be blessed--when we send our children out into the world to fulfill their callings, when we bid Godspeed to a member of our church family who goes into ministry somewhere else in the wide world, even when we give time to be involved in congregational ministry that means we have to spend some time away from family, too. There are also times when we are the *Thessalonians*, and we receive the blessing that someone else has sent us--and that, if we are truthful about it, have really come from God who is operating through human channels. But if you think about it, every mentor in the faith, every decent pastor or counselor who touched your life in the name of Christ, every friend through whom God's Word came to you again or who listened to you when you were aching to be heard, all of them were *sent* to you by someone, and they could have been elsewhere. We have been unchangeably blessed because people we never met were willing to send their loved ones into our lives. That is a humbling thing to realize, to be sure. And it cannot help but make us grateful--both to those anonymous givers who sacrificed, like Paul, so that we might be blessed, even if they never so much as get to see the looks on our faces when we realized what we had been given.

And then, there is a third category of times in our lives. Sometimes, we are neither Paul, nor the Thessalonians, but Timothy himself--and we are the blessings sent into the lives of others. That is not a grounds for boastfulness or pride, since it is never *our* bright idea to go and be a blessing--it is

the genius of someone else who sees our God-given gifts matching up with a need somewhere else. When we take our kids to sing at nursing homes, the kids are undoubtedly blessings for the lives of the residents there, but none of the kids gets it into their heads that they should get some credit for what they are doing. They are simply blessings who have been sent into the lives of these strangers, and they are fully occupied with being blessings--singing their songs in Jesus' name, handing out their handmade cards, giving hugs, and being the vibrant bundles of life that children are, which remind the rest of the world of the goodness of God. Well, that, too, is a sheer privilege for us--knowing that we get to be such blessings, and that others, who are wiser than we may have had a hand in placing us in opportunities to be blessings. Or at the very least, there is one Other--the very Spirit of God--who has had a hand in sending us and placing us as Timothys sent to bless the lives of others in Jesus' name, and we find that we are blessed, too, as we go. This is the life that is ours in Christ--this is the life we step into right now.

Lord Jesus, use us, and grant us a glimpse today of how you might be doing it. Help us to see the gifts you have placed in our lives that have come from others. Help us to see opportunities when we might send blessings to others whom we love, even if we will not see the fruits of our giving ourselves. And help us to see when we ourselves might be the blessings you are sending. In grateful humility, we pray that you would put us to good use.

Wagging the Dog

Originally written for October 7, 2010--1 Thessalonians 3:3-4

[Paul writes that he has sent Timothy to his readers to encourage them] "...so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know."

Truth-in-advertising: while being followers of Jesus may not *guarantee* that we will get into trouble for our faith, it surely is a possibility we need to be ready for. Jesus himself got into trouble regularly, and he told his first followers that the same was in store for them if they were going to keep walking in his way of life and telling the news of his resurrection. That kind of news is always going to rock the boat with those who have a vested interest in the current order of things, because the current order of things banks on *death* as a necessity. (*Truthfully, think about it--nearly every advertiser appeals to us in some variation on the theme of "You only go round once in life, so grab all you can while you are alive." And every business or manufacturer counts on people and things wearing out--so that we will need to purchase new things to replace broken things or to make life more manageable for people who are wearing out. And without a doubt, the whole logic of war is that we can get our way if we kill enough of our enemy, or make them fear our ability to kill them enough to give in. At the very least we can say that our present system of economics and politics is driven by death.*) That's just how it is—in a culture of death, the news of resurrection is bound to stir people up.

So, knowing that going in, Paul's question was how to keep a congregation of young-in-their-faith believers from being *shaken* while they were busy stirring things up with the news of Jesus. How could he keep them from buckling when the world started pushing back against the news of life beyond the power of death? How could he keep them from falling silent out of fear the crowd would not want to hear that the Emperor was wearing no clothes? And maybe most of all, how could he keep these green Christians from falling for the tempting voices that would surely arise and

say that the Christian life would be easy and agreeable all the time? If they fell for that line, how would they respond when tough times *did* come?

This is actually more to the point, because the word Paul uses for "shaken," here (*when he says he sent Timothy "so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions"*) is the verb that ancient Greek used for a dog wagging its tail. And most of the time it carried a sense of flattery or buttering somebody up. The picture is of somebody telling you what you want to hear rather than telling you the truth, the way a dog will happily wag his tail at you if he thinks it will get your attention and make you give him a treat. Well, like they say about our canine companions, you know something is wrong if the tail starts wagging the dog, and you know that something is not the way it is supposed to be if we let ourselves be wagged ourselves and fooled into believing a pleasant lie rather than the uncomfortable truth. And surely in those early years of Christianity, it would have been awfully pleasant to think that the Good News of Jesus would never upset anybody and that Christians should never have to suffer for their faith. It's awfully tempting to think that *now*, even with 2,000 years of evidence to the contrary! We still face the temptation of thinking that the world *owes* us Christians a soft berth. And we definitely still face the temptation of thinking that God will give us Christians an easy, comfortable life with the car we want and a bigger house than our neighbors--there are plenty of religious hucksters still selling that gospel-as-get-rich-quick-scheme business out there, to be sure.

So Paul reminds the Thessalonians, and us as well, that we have always known, even back to the first followers of Jesus, that the Good News was bound to get us into trouble. "Don't let anybody wag the dog with you," Paul is really saying. Don't let anybody pull one over on you and make you forget we have been preparing for this all along--at some point, the world is going to hear what we have to say, and they won't like it. No emperor, and no political party, is going to like hearing that they are not the be-all and end-all of power. No advertiser is going to want to hear that there is treasure being *given away* which they cannot sell us. No manufacturer wants the word to get out that there are things worth having that do not wear out, which are "stored up for us in heaven." And none of them wants the secret to get out that there is a Power who raises the dead, which means that we cannot simply make our enemies disappear by killing them or surrender by making them fear us. But we have known all this from the beginning. We bring a message that at one and the same time embraces and disarms people, and there is a part of each of us that doesn't like the disarming part. We need to be honest about that, so that we don't find ourselves "wagged" or "shaken" or "fooled" when somebody comes along and says differently.

Here's a good rule of thumb, then, for how Paul would keep us from being "shaken" or "deceived" (or, if you like my translation, "having the world *wag the dog* on us"): if your picture of the Christian life is completely compatible with the worldview we are being sold on television, something is rotten in Denmark. If we see no trouble with asserting our right by asserting our might and insisting that our comfort can come at the expense of other people's lives, we are once again building our empires on death. If we see no trouble with keeping ourselves comfortable while treating the lives of others--far or near, rich or poor, Christian or not, from the womb to old age--as expendable, then we have confused the God who raises the dead with an idol. If we decide that what would really give us "the good life" is more *stuff* that is designed to wear out in a few years so that we have to buy another, we have been had. But if we refuse to be satisfied with death as a way of life, and if we refuse to fall for "grabbing as much as we can because we only go around once," we have not been wagged yet. Where are we on that count today? Where have we already been duped, and found ourselves in need of rescue? Where have the Timothys arrived in time to keep us strong and unshaken? How will we keep from being shaken today, so that we can keep stirring things up by the world-changing news of a risen Jesus?

Good Lord, keep us grounded in your Good News, and keep us braced for when the world around us cannot stand to bear the news of resurrection. Help us always be ready to respond with love, the same love shown to us in Jesus, your crucified and risen Son.

Uncertainty, Love, and Faith

Originally written for October 14, 2010--1 Thesalonians 3:5

"For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain."

I have a working theory about worry, and it goes like this: worry is the form that love takes when we don't know what to do next. In most cases, that means the reasons for our worry are not bad in and of themselves--they may be quite noble, in fact. You care about the people who are back roads during the thunderstorm during deer season, so you worry until they've made it home. You are concerned about family members working or traveling in other countries, because they are not there in the room with you for you to guarantee their safety. You don't want to see your friends approaching retirement lose their nest-egg, so you worry when the Dow Jones has a string of bad days. It is all very well-intentioned, and kind of sweet, I suppose. But let's be honest, too, this kind of worry is just a bit *futile*. Worry is perhaps the spiritual and mental equivalent of nervous pacing--you wish you could do *something* rather than *nothing* to help a situation, but either you are physically unable to do it or can't think of what to do. That's just the nature of the beast here.

If I seem to be a little soft here on worry and worriers, I will own the fact that I am wired to be a worrier myself. Perhaps I'm just trying to rationalize the irrational, but I really do think that worry can be a sign that you are alive--indeed, that you are aware of the troubles in the world and concerned about how they will affect the people care about. And with that confession out there, I have to tell you that it is of some comfort to me to know that Paul found himself worrying sometimes. And at least here in 1 Thessalonians 3:5, the worry seems to fit my working theory--Paul loved his old congregation, and cared about how they were doing, but realized that there was nothing he could do on his own to keep them from every danger. But at some point, he stopped stewing and sent his co-worker in the gospel, Timothy, to check in with good old First Church of Thessalonica. And Paul shares with us that he really was stewing over this. His theology told him that he could trust a good and strong Savior to preserve these Christians in the faith despite the insidious temptations of the devil. But we humans are more than strictly brains, and Paul's emotions and affections started whispering these doubts to him. And so concern became anxiety, and anxiety became worry, and before very long, Paul was pacing the floors wondering about his friends far away. The really bright insight that Paul offers us here is that at some point, he realized that just *stewing* about the worry wasn't doing anybody any good. And so, even if it turned out (as it did in the end) that he was all worked up and worried about nothing, Paul needed to send Timothy so that Paul could unclench his nervous spirit and get back to his own work. That's really the double-edged sword when we let worry get out of control--not only are you spending a lot of energy getting worked up about something that isn't helping the ones you're worrying *about*, you're also keeping *yourself* from using any of that energy for something productive. Up to the moment that Paul decided to send Timothy to reconnect with their friends in Thessalonica, he was earning ten out of ten for loving concern, but he was failing in terms of *efficiency*--his loving concern was just spinning its wheels and grinding its gears.

We Christians are going to have to learn to live with a certain amount of worry, and a certain amount of *inefficiency* in this life. We cannot help but care about others--our friends, our families, our fellow congregation members, and the needs of our community, country, and world. We are made for connection and love just being human, and on top of that, then as followers of Jesus we are called into a life of love of neighbor that means we will care about the needs of those around us. But at the same time, we are *not* given unlimited power or knowledge. So there will be times when we are concerned about people we cannot see, or times when we do not know what to do to help them. We are going to have to get used to a certain amount of worry in this life. And yet we are not called to wallow in it, or to celebrate worry for its own sake. Worry is a side effect, or a byproduct, that is going to be produced occasionally when people love but do not have the power to know or fix all things. But it is largely a *waste* of a byproduct. Like the sludgy mess that comes out of a mine, it's not good for much of anything of its own, except to tell you that the mine is operating. The coal is what will burn--the sludge is something that can't be avoided if you're going to mine the coal that you're after--it is a sign that our process is rather inefficient, but is at least doing *something*. (*We can have the discussion about the value and perils of coal mining on another day--right now, the metaphor about worry will suffice, I hope.*)

So at some point, we have to decide how much of our energy we want to pour into creating more worry, and at what point we want to redirect our energy into something more useful and valuable. If we take Paul seriously and learn from his experience, we can come to that point sooner rather than later. We can decide that anxious pacing in an empty room doesn't do much good for anybody, and we can figure out how best to *channel* the love we already have into efforts that will either help those we worry about or allow us to let go of the worry enough to get back to whatever it is we really *are* called to be about. In our day, we are blessed with much quicker ways of releasing that worry than Paul had at his disposal. While Paul was easily looking at weeks between sending Timothy and hearing back from him, we can make a phone or send an email and have near instant response that lets us either *be* a help or *let go* of our worry. The question, then, today, is whether we will follow Paul's example and allow our worry to be rechanneled so that love can *do* something good in the day we have been given.

O Lord God, you must laugh and hurt for us at the same time, knowing how much of ourselves we waste letting well-intentioned love be clenched up in worry. Give us relief, Lord, and use the love you have placed in us in constructive ways.

The Gospel in Flesh and Blood

Originally written for October 18, 2010--1 Thesalonians 3:6-7

"But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us--just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith."

When the early Christians wanted a word to describe the message of how Jesus redeemed the world through his death and resurrection, they pretty quickly settled on the word, "*euangelion*," which literally means "good news." But then here's a curious thing: when they wanted a word to describe any kind of positive message--including greetings from faraway friends, a report that things were going well for people you cared about, or a news of a safe arrival, for example--they reached for the same word, "*euangelion*." In other words, the same word did double duty for the huge, world-

changing, cosmic, divine message of salvation through Jesus' cross and empty tomb, and for the day to day good news you might receive from friends far and near. It was all counted as "good news."

We are at risk, we modern English speakers, of losing that connection between the day-to-day good news that comes from real flesh-and-blood people with whom we speak and work, on the one hand, and the Spirit-inspired Good News of Jesus on the other hand, news which, to be truthful, has to do with a human being named Jesus whom we never knew as he walked and talked in Palestine. We can truly *know* Jesus, to be sure, but we know him differently than those who walked and talked with the itinerant rabbi himself. (Fair enough?) But for us there's a division even in our *language* itself, because we have dedicated the word "gospel" for the "spiritual" kind of good news, and we have left the phrase "good news" to be the workhorse for all the day-to-day announcements that lift our spirits. For us, when we hear "gospel," we automatically think religion, and for many people, we tend to think mostly of the distant past (Bible times thousands of years ago when Jesus actually did and said the things recored in the books we call *Gospels*) or of the distant future (as in, when we get to glory after we die). In any case, for a lot of folks, the word "gospel" is not a present tense kind of word--it's either for the Great Beyond of heaven or the Great Back-Then of history.

Paul did not have that kind of split in his mind, nor in his vocabulary. God bless him, Paul used the same word, from the same root "*euangelion*," for the unchanging, eternal Gospel of Jesus Christ, and for the day-to-day good announcements from friends far and near. When Paul was preaching to the folks in Thessalonica about how God had reclaimed them through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it was "good news," and when Timothy came back to Paul and reported that the congregation was holding strong in faith and love, it was the same word for "good news." There was no division between "spiritual" things and "daily-life" things--it was all described in the language of "good news."

I think that's an important reminder for us today, as we head into another work-week, when it is tempting to think that we have left the sphere of "religion" behind with the end of Sunday, and that we will now have to pick up our "secular" vocabularies, jobs, and patterns of life for another five or six days. That's just not the way the writers of the Bible saw life."The gospel" was not separate from the flesh and blood lives of real people; in fact, it had only ever come--and still only ever comes--through the words and lives of real flesh-and-blood people.

Today, let us be "good news" people--people who recognize that the message about Jesus is not just about the past or the future, but meets us today in the present as well. We will not accept the split between our religious selves on Sundays and our secular selves for the rest of the week, because the Gospel Good News of Jesus comes dressed in the same ordinary words we use on Monday through Saturday. Jesus comes today dressed in the vernacular, speaking our language, and dressed for the day's work.

Lord Jesus, all creation is yours and all genuinely good news is your gift, too. Let us see our lives as whole, as all of one piece, where the day to day blessings are connected with the eternal blessings you have spoken to us, all in the same language of our daily lives.

Throwing Our Lot In

Originally written for October 19, 2010--1 Thessalonians 3:8

"For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord."

All of our lives are bound up together in the body of Christ. There's no getting around it--my life and yours are caught up together because we both belong to Jesus, along with many, many others in this world. It's funny, almost, how quickly Christians use that language of "body of Christ" without thinking what those words mean and imply. We are used to the metaphor, and maybe we have overused it, so that maybe we forget the *punch* of the imagery. To say that we are a body is to say that each individual is a part of something like an ongoing three-legged race, except that we are tied to *all* the followers of Jesus in all times and places. You can't go anywhere without your body. And the only occasions when *parts* of your body go somewhere on their own without the whole coming along, too, are not happy occasions for the separated parts! The body can survive without an arm or a leg or a kidney, perhaps, but the limb or the organ cannot. You might survive an amputation--but it's not good news for the hand or foot, after all. But after two thousand years of repeating the phrase "the body of Christ" any time we are looking for a synonym for "the church," the words get worn down, and the teeth on that blade don't seem very sharp anymore. We may forget how radical a claim Paul was making with that image, and what a radical thing it is to say that our lives are all bound up together by our common faith in Jesus.

So every so often, it is worthwhile to strip away the poetry, the metaphors, and the figurative language, and just say directly what the metaphors have been pointing to in the first place. This is today's verse--it's got the *punch* of the idea underneath "the body of Christ," without the visual imagery. And the punch is precisely this: our continuing life of faith is dependent on the ongoing faith of others, who keep holding us up. To be a Christian is to have thrown your lot in with every other follower of Jesus, and to realize that you cannot live this life on your own. *We now live*, Paul says, *provided that you all [his readers] keep on keeping on in the faith*.

That strikes our American ears as a strange, or even subversive, thing to say, doesn't it? We are much more comfortable to picturing our lives and relationships with God as one-on-one, independent things. I have *my* relationship with God, and it is unaffected by whether *you* have a relationship with God or not, right? I have *my* faith, and it stands or falls on its own strength, right? God evaluates me, judges me, and deals with me, based *solely* on what **I** bring to the table, not what anybody else brings the table! Nobody else can make a claim on me or say that I have some responsibility for their faith, and I shouldn't be able to stand on somebody else's shoulders when it comes to me and God... right? That's a much more traditionally *American* way of thinking about faith--we all get an equal *opportunity* in life to believe in God, but if I blow that opportunity, it's all on me. And if I "succeed" and believe rightly, I get all the credit, rewards, and accolades for it.

But note, this is exactly *not* what Paul is saying. Paul--yes, the apostle and singular figure of the New Testament--says that his life and hope is directly connected with the continuing steadfastness of his brothers and sisters in Christ down the road in Thessalonica. You would think that if *anybody* could have said, "I've got enough faith to stand on my own, thank you very much," it would be Paul, Mr. Justified-Through-Faith himself. But no, Paul says that his ongoing life of faith is bound up with the ongoing life of faith in his fellow believers. He can't live apart from them (at least not spiritually separated from them), and presumably, their faith cannot thrive apart from him for very long. None of us can live--really live, at least--without the rest of the body. This is what Paul's later metaphor about "the body of Christ" is all about. The trouble is that we forget that is a *metaphor*, not just a poetic piece of filler. If we really are a body, then my "fate" is locked up with yours, my future

bound up with yours, and my faith connected to yours as well. And if that's true, then when we gather in worship around the Word and the Font and the Table, we are not just a collection of isolated individuals bundled into one room. We are *one thing*, one community, one reality, that happens to scatter into pieces for much of the week, but is always gathered back together into our truest shape when we are together.

This is going to be hard for us to accept, I suspect, because it will mean being humble enough to recognize that we are, each of us, standing on each other's shoulders (if you can picture that somehow). We are, each of us, bound up with the rest--our faith strengthening the faith of another, and your and my faith being strengthened by the continuing faith of someone else. It will also mean that we cannot just cut people out without harming ourselves--if you start amputating limbs, after all, pretty soon you won't have a leg to stand on. Today, then, the Scriptures are calling us to be honest about our dependency on the faith of others and our responsibility to be a source of strength for someone else, too.

Lord Jesus Christ, we come to you as pieces of your body, but honest that we are only dimly aware of what it really means to say that. Help us to see our connections with everyone else who belongs to you, and to whom, therefore, we belong as well.

What To Do With Thanks

Originally written for October 20, 2010--1 Thessalonians 3:9-10

"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith."

How can anyone "thank God enough"? Bottom line--you can't. None of us can ever thank God *enough* to pay God back or to be *even* with God. The quicker we admit that and get over it, the quicker we can get to thanking God as fully as we are *able*, knowing that it will never be for as much as God is *worth*.

Truthfully, the only things we can do when we are grateful to God for something we have receive from God are (1) to say so as well as we can, (2) to take care of the gift God has given us as well as we can, and (3) to use the gift in the way it was intended as well as we can. And this, it turns out, is just what Paul does. He is filled with joy because God has put the Thessalonians in his life and he has seen their faith blossom and flourish, and he knows that expressing his joy and thanks back to God is not about *evening* things out with God or paying God *back*, but just bursts out of him. It is that Thornton Wilder line that keeps coming back to me: "We can only be said to be truly alive when our hearts are conscious of their treasures." That's a good piece of what thanks really is--an awareness of the good, blessed things and people in our lives, and saying back to God, "I realize the value of this thing placed in my lap, and I realize it was given to me." Thanks takes the pieces of our lives and realizes that they are gifts, which means that there is a Giver. Here is Paul, truly alive and joyful because he is aware of what a gift he has in the friendships and strengthened faith through this congregation. If we take seriously what Paul said yesterday in 1 Thess. 3:8, he knows, too, that his living faith is bound up with *their* living faith, and they have helped to shape him and make him the person he is. All of that is what Paul is holding back up to God in thanks--he knows that God is the Giver.

But second, then, notice that Paul also wants to *take care* of that gift--the gift of this group of people put in his life as sisters and brothers in Christ. To recognize that something is a *gift* means that we are called to be good *stewards* of that gift, after all. If you find a book or a pair of gloves laying on the sidewalk, or sitting in a hallway in some public place, you might (if you have the predisposition) just take them and claim them as your own, but I have a feeling that you will not have a very strong attachment to them, and will not have a very big incentive to take care of them. But if these things are placed in your hands as a gift, by someone who made you the gloves and design them just for your fingers, or by someone who knew what kinds of books you like and thought this one would be a good read for you--well, you tend to take special care of those gifts. This is what Paul does, too--except he knows we are not talking about gloves and books, but about *lives*. And so Paul realizes that there are two things he can do, really, to be a good steward of these fellow Christians: for one, he can pray for them--which is exactly what he does. And for another thing, he can go to be with them, so that he can continue to teach and live alongside them--which is exactly what he prays *for*. And he prays for them--and asks to be brought back to them in person--so that they can be the best possible followers of Jesus they can be. He prays for them so that they can *do* most fully what God has called them to *do*--so that these friends can go out and be witnesses and servants in Jesus' name, too. We never just pray to God for each other so that we can pat each other on the back in a never-ending circle of ego-stroking--we give thanks to God for each other and pray God's blessing on each other so that we can be sent out and be the kind of people God has called us to be--witnesses to Jesus, models of servant-love, and faithful followers.

This is a model for us, too--and this is why it is so valuable for us to practice praying for one another. In praying for each other, consciously, deliberately, and gratefully, we come to recognize the gifts God has given us in other people, and we ask God's blessing on those gift-people so that they can be the blessings God intends them to be, too. That's where we can start today: in prayer of thanks and of stewardship for the lives God has graced us with.

Lord God, make us truly alive by making us truly grateful for the people with whom you have blessed us. Strengthen those people in our lives whom you have sent to walk with us, and provide for their needs. And give us the open eyes to see how best to be a blessing for others, too, so that we may together be witnesses for your Blessed Son, Jesus.

A Blessing, A Prayer, A Wish

Originally written for October 21, 2010--1 Thessalonians 3:11

"Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you."

I started this devotional series through 1 Thessalonians convinced that it depicted Christianity as a *revolutionary* thing, as a *movement* with urgency and passion and vision to be a part of God's new creation in Jesus. But the deeper we have delved into this letter together, the more I am convinced that if Christianity *is* a subversive, revolutionary movement, it is a strange kind of revolution--one that subverts even the usual way revolutions are carried out. It is a movement hemmed in *prayer*, which is to say that it is begun and ended handing over control and direction to God rather than grasping at power to assert its own way.

Other revolutionaries throughout history have been convinced that *they* had the answers for our problems, the right designs for making a better world, and the best possible solutions to the plight of the human condition. And as well-intentioned as they may have been, they have all let us down.

Not a one has ever gotten it right to fix the world's brokenness, and yet they have all gone down the same path, clamoring to get more power, more prominence, more resources so that they can enact their proposed solutions to make the world a better place. And when things didn't look like they were going right, the bulk of history's revolutionaries were just convinced that they needed *more* power, *more* influence, or *more* money to get their agendas accomplished--and *then* we'd all see that they were right. It has made for a particularly bloody time in the last hundred years or so.

Christians, however--or at least the first generation of those Christian revolutionaries--were different, in that they were not convinced that they had the plans to make the world right. They were convinced that the world was broken, yes, and they were convinced that it needed to be and *would* be mended. But they were convinced that they were not the ones to mend it, so much as they were the ones who would *point* to the One who had begun to restore a broken world. The Christians were revolutionaries--I am still convinced that they were--but a strange kind who did not see *themselves* as the ones to usher in the "right" plan to remake the world. They were servants and witnesses and tag-alongs to the One who would, in fact, set things right. That made the Christian movement a *humble* one in its origins--something we have struggled with ever since.

Take Paul here in this verse. From one angle, Paul is your cookie-cutter revolutionary: an itinerant, fiery speaker, moving from place to place and stirring people up with a message of a new order. He sets up communities who will spread the message and attract more followers, and then he goes onto a new place, "turning the world upside down" town by town, and regularly getting in trouble with the authorities for doing so. And as he strategizes his next move in the revolution, Paul decides that he should go back to Thessalonica--to a home-base of sorts where he has support already, but where he may need to fire up the troops again before launching out on another covert mission in a new place.

Now, at this point, any other revolutionary would say, "I know the right way forward, and I know the steps necessary to get us there. We must execute *my* plan to accomplish *my* designs. So, for the sake of the cause, we must do as I say." Revolutionaries have a way of letting noble causes go to their heads. And when that happens, a well-intentioned leader can become convinced that he has not only seen the promised land, but also that he knows the only possible route to get there, and that *this* route must be followed at any cost, and the goal reached *by any means necessary*. So it is that many movements with dreams of improving human life or lifting people out of poverty or oppression end up spinning out of control in violence or disaster, because a charismatic leader got it in his head that he was calling all the shots.

But not Paul. Paul looks the part of a revolutionary in some ways, but he is humble enough to know that *he* is not leading the charge, and that *he* does not have all the answers. He has plans, he has wishes, and he has what he *thinks* is a good strategy--but he holds all of those up to God in prayer, so that the most he can say about his travel plans is a wish and a prayer: "*May our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus Christ direct our way to you.*" It is not an empty, Jiminy-Cricket-style wish-upon-a-star sort of hope, but neither is it an unchangeable Five Year Plan etched in stone. Paul is convinced that the next logical step in his ministry is to be reunited with his friends in the faith back in Thessalonica, but he knows better than to claim this is the *only* way things can be. So he *prays*. His prayer takes the form of a hopeful benediction, "May God do such and such..." which is an admission that he does not have all the answers himself, but will rely on God's direction, wisdom, and will to move forward.

This is what makes the Christian revolution so radical. Unlike the failed movements that litter history because they just replaced one arrogant human vision with another, at our most faithful,

Christians do not seek to impose *our* vision of the world onto the world, but rather we make our best, most thoughtful and faithful plans, and even then we hold them up to God and say, "This is your baby." We will not fall for the temptation of "*by any means necessary*" kind of thinking, and we will not insist that even if we can see the Promised Land of the New Creation, that we will always (or even often!) know the only way to get there. Instead of demanding that we must accomplish God's good goals by *our* best laid plans, we will offer those plans to God and set out from there.

I may have referenced it before, but there is a haunting song lyric by Ben Gibbard, from a song called "What Sarah Said..." which goes, "And it came to me then that every plan is a tiny prayer to Father Time." Christians, at least ones with the humility of Paul, can understand the wisdom of that line--we would simply say that our plans are offered, not to an abstract imaginary figure of fate called "Father Time," but to a good and gracious God. That is the kind of strange, but wonderful, revolution we are a part of--a revolution hemmed in prayer.

Lord God, we open this day with our best-laid plans and our calendars full of what we expect to happen today. Allow us to offer up our plans to you, and to be your servants today. Direct us today, O Lord, and give us the grace to go where you set out a path.

More Than A Feeling

Originally written for October 22, 2010--1 Thessalonians 3:12

"And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you."

No, despite the title for today's devotion, this is not going to be a Bible study based on the observations of the old hair band Boston, or any other power-ballads. "More than a feeling" may have been the recurring refrain from those tired (and now aging) rockers, but beyond that, the idea is key to understanding what Paul is praying for and the kind of blessing Paul is invoking here. Love, despite what so many *other* power-ballads and hair-bands would have us believe, is always *more than a feeling*. At least, any kind of love that has staying power has to be more than just a feeling--and for that matter, the only kind of love that is worth *praying for* has to be more than a feeling. Boston was at least right in that regard....

That's really what's poking at me this morning--what do we think Paul is *asking for* when he prays that the Lord would increase the love of the Thessalonians Christians for each other and for the wider world? Well, surely it's not about romance--that's obvious. Paul doesn't have much use for all the pretending and preening and posturing that goes along with romance. And of course, he's talking to a whole congregation, and not to just a doe-eyed couple. But Paul is also not going to settle with mushy sentimentalism with the whole group, either. He's not praying that they would all simply *feel* all warm and fuzzy toward each other. Paul doesn't seem particularly interested in having the Thessalonians get butterflies in their stomachs whenever one of their fellow church members walks into the room, and he's not praying that they start pining for him while he is away. It's about more than *emotion*--it's about *showing up* for each other. It's about something with staying power.

Praying for someone else to have a more intense *feelings*, more passionate *emotions*, and then calling that love is a little like looking at your parched field and praying for a single severe thunderstorm to come and water your failing crops. What you *really* need is a long, steady rainy season, even if any single shower is never that intense. That's more like what Paul is praying for. He's praying for rain,

enough rain to keep God's plantings green and thriving, rather than a single deluge that might overwhelm the roots and wash away the good soil.

For Christians to keep praying like Paul does--that God would keep us increasing and abounding in love--is to keep looking out at the field and praying for rain. We are not so much interested in a single burst of intense emotion in church, or even that people walk away from our Sunday services having had a warm feeling. We are looking to the heavens for the kind of sustained rainy season that will keep us growing, even if the growth is slow and almost imperceptible to the observing eye.

When we ask what we Christians have to offer the world, the answer always has to be more than a feeling. What we hold out to the world--and what we have first received from God, truth be told--is a long, steady, increasingly growing love that shows itself in our willingness to give ourselves away and to show up for others. We have lost something if all we have to say is "Come to my church--it will make you feel good." We have so much more to offer, because we continue to be watered by the sustained showers of a God whose love does not blow through town and then dissipate like a sudden storm.

Today, let us keep praying for rain... and let us be examples for each other of the love that acts for and stands with others for the long haul.

Dear Lord, let us never settle for love as a mere feeling--let us be caught up in your sustained, and sustaining presence, so that our love will grow and overflow, even day by day, even little by little.

Praying for Strength

Originally written for October 25, 2010--1 Thessalonians 3:13

"And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

What you pray for says a lot about how you see the world, how you see yourself, and how you see God. Today's verse says a great deal, then, based on what Paul prays for.

The way our culture likes to see things, your inner strength and moral character are *yours*. You may inherit the family fortune. You might have been born in a neighborhood with good schools and plentiful opportunities. Or you might start a business and make your fortune on your own after having pulled yourself up by your bootstraps through awful schools and miserable jobs along the way. But at the very least, our culture says, your *strength* and your *morals* are your own. They are what you bring to the table, and they are something you can be proud of, if you have them. *They can take everything else away from you*, we like to think, *but in the end, nobody can ever take away your strength or moral fiber, because they are the only things that are truly yours*. Sound about right?

Except... that's not the way Paul sees things. If you push Paul on this question, *even* your inner strength and personal holiness have to be *given* to you. They are gifts, and they are things you can *pray* for. In other words, the **one** thing our culture likes to think of as an I-did-it-all-myself kind of accomplishment, Paul says is a gift from a gracious God.

Now, at first this might leave you feeling rather deflated: now I've got *nothing* I can hold up to God as my achievement, as some reason that God should pick me for the team. Even our do-it-yourself American culture can admit that there are a lot of handouts and gifts in other aspects of our lives--that the circumstances into which we are born are handed to us without our achieving them, and that it is quite possible to get a lucky break in this life beyond what your efforts and striving deserve.

But our culture likes to think that at least your inner moral fiber and grit are our own achievements, so that at least we can be graded on *that* count. At least, the people who are strong in character and pure in heart can brag about making themselves into good human beings. And now Paul yanks that rug out from under us by praying that God would give strength and holiness to his friends in Thessalonica. Paul is praying for their *character*, as though even my innermost, intimate, deepest self comes to me as a gift from God. And if that's true, I don't even get to brag to God about being a "good person" (if I think I am one). If even whatever inner strength or holiness I have comes from God, then *all* of who I am has come to me from without as a gift, and I don't have a thing to impress God with.

But this sword cuts both ways, and the second cut is a healing one, believe it or not. While it is definitely humbling to hear that even our inner strength, even our personal holiness, really has to be *given* to us, that also means we are not on our own or left to our own devices to *make* ourselves strong and holy. It means that if we find ourselves lacking in strength, or fearful that we will lose our blessed strangeness (which is what holiness really means) and just blend in with the crowd, there is hope for us. We do not just come to God and say, "This is as strong as I can get--I hope I make the cut." We pray that God will find ways to "strengthen our hearts in holiness" and that as we pray, God will take us up on our invitation, roll up his sleeves, and go to work in our lives. Part of how Paul envisioned that God would answer his prayer, for example, was his belief that God would send him to his friends in Thessalonica where he could once again encourage and strengthen them in person. God may send other people into our lives, the voices of wisdom, or opportunities and experiences to galvanize us. But note, we are not stuck with whatever strength we *already* have, and just the hope that it will be enough to get us through because it's the one thing we think we have to supply ourselves. Even our strength, even our holiness, is something to be prayed for and supplied by a good God.

Today, we can let go of the old need to try and impress God with what we've got, and instead come to God honestly with what we need, knowing that even the deepest parts of ourselves are really gifts of a gracious Giver.

Lord God, give us more fully the strength and holiness that are at the heart of who we want to be. Give us the hope of knowing that you are working even in our deepest selves to transform and nurture us as your beloved people, and that we no longer have to worry about presenting ourselves as finished products to you today. Let us, instead, offer ourselves to you as we are, ready for you to reclaim and renew us.

Further Up and Further In

Originally written for October 26, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:1

"Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more."

C.S. Lewis describes his vision of God's new creation in his *Chronicles of Narnia* by saying that the new heavens and new earth God will make are "more real" than the world that we know. At the end of the final book, *The Last Battle*, Lewis says of the new creation, "the new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more." And then he has his characters explore this new-but-familiar new creation with the invitation that they go "further up and further in." They are not leaving something behind so much as they are traveling deeper into a

country they somehow have always known and have always been waiting for. Lewis has a Unicorn say it this way in a beautiful speech in that same chapter: *"I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this."*

Another wise voice in the faith, Martin Luther, talks about the Christian life as a journey further along a road we are already on. He says it this way: *"This life, therefore, is not godliness, but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal, but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed."*

Notice how both of them resonate with the way Paul talks here in the beginning of the fourth chapter here. He is writing to people who are still growing in their faith, still learning, and still developing in their character--but they are on the right road. They are already in the process of becoming more and more like Christ--the way a painting of a portrait or a landscape starts out as only a mix of blurred patches of color and broad shapes, but slowly comes to look more and more like the real thing the artist is trying to recreate on canvase. They are being made--molded, even--to look in their characters more and more like Jesus, the same way a sculptor might first shape a clay figure in rough outlines and then hone and fuss over tiny details as time goes by. They are, in other words, on the way to their divinely-directed destination, and the way to get there is to keep on going *further up and further in*, along the path they are already on.

This is precisely what Paul says, too: "We urge you... that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and please God (as in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more." They are already on the right path--they are now to go *deeper* in that same direction. (Contemporary writer Eugene Peterson has rescued a phrase from Nietzsche that makes the point well--he says we are called to "a long obedience in the same direction.")

Deeper is maybe not a way we are used to thinking of the Christian life. So often, it is put in such simple and stark terms of, "Turn from this *to* that," or "Don't do *x*, but instead do *y*." Or even just "Believe these facts about God, or go to some minimum number of church services, or have a certain amount of water poured over you, and then you'll go to heaven." We ask about *minimums* a lot. We ask how much we have to do in order to still be in the club. And we Protestants especially can get all hung up insisting that we don't have to go any further than that, lest we end up tangled up in trying to earn our salvation (like the old joke about the Lutheran on his deathbed who is relieved to hear someone say he has never done a single good, worthy deed in his life, because he doesn't want to die and go to hell for works' righteousness).

But deeper is exactly the way the New Testament writers talk about the Christian life--we have already been started on a journey and pointed in the right direction. But each day, we are called to step into that life more deeply. "But I already am a pretty loving person," you might say in response. "Good for you," Paul would say back, "but God won't be done with you until there's not a shred of hatred or apathy or indifference left in you." "I am already generally truthful, and I have turned away from my old pride and arrogance," you might say, to which our Paul will respond, "And that's great, but you are still being led on a journey until all the old insecurities and empty spaces are filled in by the humble assurance of being loved by God as you are." *Keep going*, Paul says. You are on the right path and headed in the right direction. Keep going, and keep moving further up and further in. That is the life we are called to--not the stagnant settling for "getting by" or "the bare minimum," but a life of fullness and depth, a life *like* our lives now, but somehow more real, where everything looks like it means more, as Lewis might say.

Whether you have been a follower of Jesus all your life or are brand new to the faith, we are all being led *further up and further in* today. None of us have arrived, and yet we have a real foretaste of the homecoming feast when we get there. We have a fuzzy picture of what we are becoming, so the only sensible thing we can do right now is, as Paul says, to keep at what we are doing already--living our lives in faith and following after the way of Jesus. "Keep doing that more and more," Paul says. Or as a kindred spirit of his from nineteen centuries later put it, "Keep moving further up and further in."

Lord Jesus, let us hold firm to the life you have already begun in us, and keep at it, never settling for shallowness, but always walking further and deeper into the path you have laid out in front of us.

Recovering Holiness

Originally written for October 27, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:2-3a

"For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification...."

Lord, have mercy. More churchy jargon: *sanctification*. It is hard to get excited or passionate about words that end with "-ication," isn't it? They tend to sound either like bureaucratic quagmires or medical procedures, rather than something you would choose to sign up for (phrases like "application for identification" or "double indemnification" come to mind, along with "innoculation," "vaccination," "interveinous medication," and a host of others). Whatever "sanctification" *really* is, it *sounds* sterile and rather passive--like it is something done *to* you, something you *undergo*, perhaps something that someone else has to wear latex gloves for or which will require you to sit on that exam room seat covered with white butcher paper from a roll. And let's be honest, that is not a very pleasant place to spend much time, nor to picture as an analogy of us and God, the Great Physician.

But maybe we need to rescue the word "sanctification" and see why Paul thinks it is not only our homework at the present, but also God's mission to accomplish in us at the same time. First of all, *sanctification* is an attempt to say in a single word, "when God makes you holy." Well, most of those words are more familiar to us, and at least have fewer syllables, and perhaps also less sterility to them. But there's still that alien word *holy* there that we don't quite know what to do with. What does it mean to be "made holy," and is it something worth being passionate about, something to want and to long for and to work toward, or just something God requires to stand the sight of us, like heaven is a hoity-toity restaurant that insists on sports jackets for the men?

If you've spent any time studying the Biblical idea of "holiness," you probably already know it usually carries a sense of being "set apart" and "special." Now, even that can sound stuffy or starchy. After all, your grandmother probably had a set of "good dishes" that were *set apart* for special occasions, but which spent most of the year gathering dust in the hutch, and which probably seemed so fragile and delicate that you were afraid to eat a good meal on them for fear you might ruin the floral pattern or break a dish. If *that's* our picture of "being holy," like we are all God's special-occasion-china, kept from danger at the cost of missing the day-in, day-out moments of earthy, ordinary joy, well, then I can completely understand why we might not be very eager for God to make us holy *in that sense*. And the other common way we talk about being "holy" or "set apart" is in the negative "holier-than-thou" sense where people put themselves above others, and we are

pretty sure that's not what we're after, either. Jesus, after all, was known as "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24), and yet he got quite a reputation for hanging out with the riff-raff and inviting himself over to dinner with unsavory sinners and sell-outs. Neither the fragile-as-good-china sense nor the aloof-arrogance picture of holiness will do for us. And frankly, neither of those seems much worth God's investment of time and energy to bring about in us. If that's what it means to be made *holy*, it seems hard to imagine that being God's will for us--at least the God we know in Jesus, at any rate.

But maybe, as is so often the case, *Jesus is the key*. Jesus, after all, really was and is (and will be) *holy*. So whatever it means to be *holy*, Jesus can still be it, even while he is eating with Zacchaeus, Levi, and the rest of the tax collectors in town, or while he is washing grimy, dirty feet, or while he is raising a glass of wine to toast a wedding in Cana, or while his clothes smelled like seaweed and fish after a day with Peter and Andrew. Apparently, being holy does not mean being taken *out* of the beautiful ordinariness of life, nor does it mean we are sterilized and set on the shelf while the messy tangle of the world is left to its own devices. Jesus never was. In fact, maybe we could try substituting "being like Jesus" for the more daunting and impersonal "sanctification," and see if it helps us make sense of this verse better.

"For this is the will of God... that you be made to be like Jesus..." Yeah, that does have a certain ring to it. That makes sense--and that is a mission you could see God getting invested in, couldn't you? That seems like something God would care about and would will for us, so that we might have the same beautiful, compelling, blessed strangeness that made Jesus stand out from a crowd precisely by the way he could be with people *in* the crowd. *That* is what God is after among us--to transform us to be people who live as truthfully, faithfully, graciously, generously, and courageously as Jesus. That is the kind of life I want to lead--the good news from Paul today is that God has the same goal in mind for me, too.

Good Lord, do your work on us and in us, so that we may be transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

Because Bodies Matter

Originally written for October 28, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:3-6

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you."

There are ditches on both sides of the road when it comes to the Bible's teachings on how we use and treat our bodies. And more specifically within that category, there are two ditches when we come to the Bible's directions on sexual ethics. One ditch, one error, is this: to assume that the **central** message of Christianity has to do with rules for what we are or are not allowed to do with our bodies. Thus we have had all sorts of arguments and splits within the church over questions like, "Are Christians allowed to consume alcohol?" "Are Christians allowed to smoke?" "Are Christians supposed to think of sexuality only in terms of procreation?" not to mention a whole host of even more awkward questions about how we use our bodies and what things are permitted and what are ruled out for us. And at different points in Christian history, people have sometimes come to the conclusion that our message is essentially this--that the Good News we have to bring is,

"Hurray! There is finally a definitive set of *rules* to keep for what we are and are not allowed to do as physical beings."

The trouble with that view is that it just doesn't fit with the way Paul, or the rest of the New Testament, for that matter, talks. If Paul were convinced that the *most important* Christian teaching had to do with rules for the body and sexual ethics, let's be frank--he would have opened with that. Paul is quite capable of cutting to the chase and letting you know what's really on his mind (see the opening to Galatians, for example), and he is perfectly comfortable with chastising his readers without pulling any punches (see much of 1 Corinthians, too). And yet here in 1 Thessalonians, it has taken him to the fourth chapter to get around to talking about boundaries for bodies. If Paul wanted to make sure that these Christians were being good rule-followers first and foremost, he would have started with this passage and held off his rather personal greetings for later. But Paul does not--because Paul believes that the absolute center of our faith is not what *we* do, but what *God* has done. Paul believes that the Good News of Jesus is *not* that, at long last, we finally have a list of rules detailing what we are not allowed to do with our bodies, but that God has redeemed our lives by inhabiting a body in the person of Jesus--his life, death, and resurrection. How we behave isn't the Good News, but rather God's determination not to give up on us despite our bad behavior--that's more on target.

But like I say, there is a ditch on the other side of the road, too--the error that says that if our behavior is not the *center* of the Christian message, it is not important at all. This has been a perennial problem for Christians, too, who think they are drawing solid logical conclusions when they say, "God loves me even when I misuse my body; therefore, it doesn't matter what I do with it." Or a variation on the theme, "God is interested in spiritual things, therefore, keeping track of physical things is a waste of time." Or, projected onto the screen of the whole world, we might say, "God is just going to take us to heaven one day, so it doesn't matter in the end how we take care of our selves, our neighbors, or our world--it's all going in the cosmic trash heap eventually anyway, and our souls will be safely tucked away on the clouds then."

But once again, there's trouble with that view--this, also, does not fit with the way Paul talks. While it's true that here in 1 Thessalonians, Paul doesn't get around to talking about sexual ethics until the fourth chapter, he *does after all get around to it*. We cannot just dismiss this book as a bunch of inspirational pick-me-ups or spiritual talk that makes no claim on our day to day actions. Paul thinks it matters what we do with our bodies--not because it is the criterion by which we can be saved or not--but because our whole *selves* matter to God. God did not make a mistake by creating us as physical-and-spiritual beings--as creatures who can both taste a peach and give praise to the Creator who invented them. There's no way around it--God thinks the physical world was a good idea, and therefore that physicality is to be guarded and treated as precious and good and fraught with beauty. And because of that, it is worth caring for our physical selves--both ours, and the people around us--knowing how fragile beautiful things tend to be in this life.

So here is what it boils down to--Paul here directs his readers to treat their physical selves neither casually or callously, but with care and a sense of the preciousness of the selves we walk around in. Note that what seems to really provoke God on this subject is when we use our bodies in ways that exploit or hurt others around us. God is "an avenger," Paul says, when it comes to "wronging" and "exploiting" each other. God does not just bark out arbitrary rules for the sake of being difficult, or to balance equations in some invisible, inscrutable moral calculus. God knows that because our physical selves cannot be separated from our spirits and our minds and our hearts, to treat *one* part cheaply is to harm the *whole* person. And God, quite simply, doesn't want us to go around breaking each other's hearts or ruining each other's lives. The reason the early church was so hot about being

faithful in their marriages and guarded in their physicality was that they knew God was just as hot about people being treated as disposable objects and the careless way we trample on each other's hearts by using our bodies like *things* rather than as part of a *person*.

So even though the Christian Good News is first and foremost about what God *has done*, we are not an "anything goes" religion, and we miss the point if we say, "Our actions don't matter in the least, because we can chalk anything we did up to Jesus, and he'll pay our tab." It is *precisely* because God thinks our lives (our whole selves--body, mind, and spirit) matter enough to die for that we have been taught to treat those same lives as precious and fraught with beauty. And so, both for the sake of *my own* heart and for the sake of *my neighbor's* heart, we are all called to a profound respect for the way we care for each other's bodies. Because all of us matter, and as whole people at that, to God, Christians are called to live within boundaries of faithfulness when it comes to sex, as well as boundaries of love when it comes to anything else I do that affects my neighbor--from secondhand smoke to endangering others' lives if I drive a car while intoxicated to the kind of world I leave behind for the next generation. All of those things matter to Christians, not as ways of *getting* God to like us, but because we have learned from the God who *loves* us that our whole selves, bodies included, matter.

O God our Creator, help us to love what you love, to care for what you think is precious, and to use the bodies you have given us in ways that honor your Image that resides within us. We pray it in the name of the One who is your Good News, Jesus our Lord.

Where The Buck Stops

Originally written for October 29, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:7-8

"For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you."

Boy, it really seems like Paul has gotten out the big guns here, hasn't he? He is not afraid to name God as the authority behind his words here, and he will not shy away from insisting that it is no less than *God* who has called the followers of Jesus to be holy. This might make some of us uncomfortable, not because we are opposed to holiness, but because we have seen what happens when people start claiming they have God's authority behind their words. We probably trust Paul--after all, he is an apostle, and if we really do believe that the Scriptures are inspired by God, it means we believe that God's authority *did* in fact stand behind the words of Paul's letters that became a part of the New Testament. (*Now, a stickier wicket is what we are going to do with the fact that other letters of Paul's have been lost or are unknown, since Paul mentions other letters in his writings that we do not seem to have any longer.*)

But even if we do not have trouble with what Paul says here, or even with the idea that *Paul* claims God's authority underneath his words here, we can get a little squirmy about the idea of anybody else taking that claim and running with it. We have seen, all too often, what happens when a TV preacher claims to have God's special authority behind some new teaching or action--we become at best a laughingstock when their claims do not come true, and at worst, it becomes a stumbling block or a hurdle for others who are on the edge of faith. We have seen and heard people make outlandish predictions about when the world will end--quite confident that they have been given this secret knowledge from God directly--and then, of course, to date they have all been wrong. More

tragically, we have seen what happens when people are led to violence because they are convinced they have God's authority to kill others. So, let's be honest this morning here and put our cards on the table: while we're OK with Paul asserting divine authority for his words here, we might be more than a little concerned about what will keep anybody else from saying whatever they want and insisting they've heard it directly from God. So is there something in this passage today that will help put a *check* on that kind of abuse? Is there some way we can be able to sift out claims that really have God's authority behind them and the ones that we should be skeptical about?

Here are some places to start: first, this whole issue is why there is the commandment against using God's name in vain. It's not so much about saying "bad words" or avoiding vulgar vocabulary (the Bible itself can be pretty raw, to be truthful, if read in its original languages), but about invoking *God's* name and *God's* authority without warrant. The commandment is about casually throwing around God's name to bolster the force of our words, and thereby making claims that God never intended to make. So we would avoid this problem if we could actually manage to keep this commandment. Second, it's worth remembering that Paul himself knows that not every word that comes out of his mouth has the guarantee of Jesus behind it--he sometimes will qualify his own writings with, "now this is me, not the Lord, offering this wisdom," (see 1 Cor. 7:12, compared with 1 Cor. 7:10), by which he seems to mean that on some questions we have the clear teaching of Jesus, and on some questions we do not have a recorded saying of Jesus to settle a question. Third, you'll notice that Paul doesn't just appeal to "what the Bible says," to settle the question, because of course, there was no solid, fixed Bible yet. What we call the Old Testament was written, of course, and held to be authoritative, but most of the New Testament had not yet been put down on paper. So even though Paul could have tried to back up his claims with a stack of verses from the Old Testament, he doesn't do that here for some reason--so he is convinced that he's got God's authority here even without giving us footnotes of Bible verses. Neither does he just say, "I'm writing something that will one day be in the Bible, and you should all take the Bible as the authority. Therefore whatever I say has God's authority, QED." Interesting...

So, what then? Well, on this particular verse from 1 Thessalonians, it's worth looking at *what* Paul is claiming God's authority *for*. He's claiming he has divine authority to tell his readers that "God did not call us to impurity but in holiness,"--in other words, *live a holy life rather than a sordid one, because that was the intent God has had for you all along*. And as we saw yesterday, that kind of holiness especially had to do with careful, loving use of our bodies rather than exploiting, degrading, or objectifying others by casual coupling, as though there really could be such a thing as *sex without strings*. Paul's point today is to say, "Hey, don't take my word on all of that--this comes with God's authority on it." And as we said yesterday, too, Paul says that God's deep concern about that kind of 'holiness' is that we not hurt each other by treating our bodies, or others' bodies, as objects there simply for *our* use. It is because God does not want anyone's heart broken, and because God values each of us so highly, that God insists so strongly on this point. *Holiness*, in other words, is understood as a part of *love* for those around us, since love will mean respecting the preciousness of each person and refusing to degrade them by objectifying their bodies.

All right, so that helps explain what this holiness business is all about, but notice a second connection--Paul says both that we were *called* in holiness, and that the God who stands behind Paul's words is the same God who gives us the *Holy* Spirit. We can't miss the connection--God calls us to a particular way of life, but simultaneously provides the *means* for us to live in that way of life. We are called to be holy, but that is made possible because God has given us the Spirit who is holy and who makes us holy. In other words, God never calls us to something without making that something possible along the way. The command of God fits with the gifts of God and the

character of God. This helps us a great deal in making sense of how Paul uses God's authority, because the things he is claiming to have God's "backing" on are things that *fit* with the character of who God is. He does not go around willy-nilly saying he has God's authority Paul's own personal preferences, but only on the kind of things that fit with God's character. So, for example, we never hear Paul say, "I have God's authority on this--God wants you to be wealthy at the expense of your hungry neighbor, so go ahead and hoard all you want." And we never hear him say, "I command you in the name of God, don't you dare forgive someone who has sinned against you, or else they'll never learn their lesson!" No, and we would know not to take those kinds of claims seriously, because they do not fit with the character we have come to know in Jesus Christ and in the Scriptures. On the other hand, when Paul says, "Because God loves and values human beings, don't you go around cheapening human life by treating yourself or anybody else like your body doesn't matter," well, we can take that with the authority Paul is claiming, in part because it fits with the kinds of things God has been saying to us all along.

Hopefully, this helps us too, to know how we can speak about God, and even speak with authority ourselves. We are not given a blank check of permission to say whatever we like and assume we must be speaking under divine inspiration because we are church-goers. But we can speak confidently when the things we say about God are grounded in the *character* of God. That goes beyond having a single Bible verse to justify whatever we like, and instead calls us to actually get to know our God before we presume to speak in his name. But as we get to know our God, through the life of Jesus, through the Word and the Story of this God and his people, and through the community where the Holy Spirit dwells, we can speak with confidence when our words are grounded in and backed by the character of God. That way, the buck never stops with us and our *guesses* about God's will, but the buck always stops with the God who has revealed himself in the strong, suffering long of Jesus.

Let us speak with such humility and confidence about the goodness of the living God today!

Good Lord, help us to know you so that we may speak truthfully about you, and also with humility.

Beyond Bare Minimums

Originally written for November 1, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:9-10

"Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more..."

One of the things that comes with wisdom is the ability to ask the right questions. And sadly, all too often, we make a mess of the Good News of the Scriptures because we come to the Word asking the wrong questions--or at least questions that make assumptions the Scriptures do not share. I don't know about you, but I am finding the more and more I read the Scriptures together with other disciples, the more I find them teaching me what kinds of questions are the ones they intend to answer. In other words, the Scriptures not only offer answers to some of our questions (but *only* some, to be truthful--God doesn't tell us everything we might want to know), but they also teach us how to ask the right kinds of questions, and so to become wise.

This passage is a good illustration. Quite often, Christians (and maybe especially Protestant Christians like Lutherans and others) have come to the Bible asking questions about *bare minimums*.

"What is the bare minimum required for a person to be saved?" "What is the least often we can celebrate Holy Communion and still be in good standing?" "What are the essential, non-negotiable requirements for a baptism to be valid?" We often ask things in terms of *least*s, in terms of *requirements*, and in terms of *what does the most stripped down, basic version look like?* And I think it's because we misunderstand what it means to be people who are saved by grace. Follow me for a moment: we Christians, and especially Lutherans among them, will live and die on the hill of "justification by grace through faith apart from works of the law." We insist that we cannot be right with God by our achievements or by earning or by rule-keeping--instead, we are saved by grace through faith, we say. But that leads us to ask strange follow-up questions, like: "What counts as faith?" or "How much do I have to believe, and how *hard* must I believe it, in order for my faith to be *saving* faith?" Or then we ask things like, "Since I do not get into God's good graces by works of love toward others, is there any kind of bare minimum requirement of love to *stay* in the club, or what?" There was a time when Lutherans celebrated Holy Communion very infrequently because they had gotten some number in their heads about what the *bare minimum* should have been, and they took it to be *the* single right answer for sharing the Meal. We tried to strip down as much as we could from our worship life that we thought smacked of religious ritual and--dared we say it, Catholicism--because we didn't want people thinking that you *had* to do those things to be right with God. We got into a whole line of thinking that saw *everything* in terms of lowest-common-denominators and bare-minimums, and we thought it all flowed out of being saved by grace through faith. And to be truthful, the answers that Lutherans came up with--having infrequent Communion, paring down song and celebration and such out of worship, and insisting that we didn't *have* to do good works--all made sense because the questions we were asking were always put in terms of "What is the bare minimum I have to do for God to love me?" Because if you ask the question that way, you had better come up with an answer something like: *you don't have to do anything to get God to love you!*

But maybe that way of phrasing the question is wrongheaded. Maybe we are distorting the truth to begin with by asking loaded, or convoluted questions that make assumptions just in the way they are phrased. Maybe, in fact, we should get outside the "bare minimum" question and start asking questions about *fullness*. Instead of saying, "How often do I have to have Communion to still be in right standing with God?" maybe the question really is, "If I am a beloved part of the Body of Christ, why would I miss any opportunity to share the Meal Jesus gave us?" Instead of saying, "We don't have to have these extra elements to our worship, because they are not *required* for salvation," it may be worth asking, "What would make our exposure to the Word and to the Sacraments as *full* as possible?" Instead of saying, "You can't tell me I have to do good works toward my neighbor because I'm justified by faith apart from works," it might be worth asking, "What happens to a person when the love of God grabs a hold of them--and how does that love find fullest expression." See how the question we ask makes a big difference in the kind of answers we get?

So why the extended sidebar here into church denominations and worship practices? Because the questions of *bare-minimums* versus the questions of *fullness* make a big difference in how we make sense of today's verses. If we come to the text today asking only questions of "How much am I required to do in order to get in (or stay in) God's good graces?" then Paul's words will make no sense. Paul is telling his Christian friends that they already know to love one another--and yet he teaches them to love *more and more* all the time. If we are thinking only in terms of bare-minimums that get us "saved," we will have painted ourselves into a corner, and we will have to say things like, "You can't *make* me show love to anybody, because I'm saved by grace and I can be as big a stinker and a jerk as I like--I have God's love, darn it!" You are forced to say odd things like "Love people or not, it doesn't matter--all that God cares about is that you believe the right things about God."

Well, there you've just turned faith into your accomplishment (believing the right things about God) and you've clearly missed the point if Jesus himself thinks that loving others is non-negotiable. So how can Paul tell these Christians in good standing that they are supposed to love more and more? Haven't they already met the bare minimum? Aren't they already "in" by faith in Christ? Doesn't being saved by grace mean that you don't have to worry about *doing* anything any longer?

See how we've gotten ourselves painted into that corner? But what happens if we ask a different set of questions? What happens if, rather than asking, "How much love do you have to show to others around you to meet the requirement Paul is setting out?" we asked instead, "If you knew you were already beloved of God as a free gift, how would you let it overflow from you?" Now it's no longer a question of what the bare-minimum is that is allowable to "get in," it is instead a question of how to live as fully as possible *within* God's love, knowing we are there already? See, the moment you set the bar with *some* kind of requirement, however low the bar is, there is still something that *you* have to do to earn your place. But the moment you turn the question around and ask about fullness, then grace can really be grace. We can say, "You are already accepted, justified, and saved as a gift of God--that's a done deal, not up for debate or discussion. So what will you do to live in that gift as fully as possible now?" That makes Paul's question understandable. This is not the spokesperson for being saved-by-grace now changing his story and demanding that the Thessalonians love each other *more and more* in a never-ending quest to win God's favor. It is the champion of grace saying that grace is never the *ending*--it is also always the *beginning* of something. It is, in other words, the beginning of a growing love that radiates out to friend, neighbor, stranger, and enemy. That is what the *fullness* question is all about.

Asking the right question makes a big difference with the Scriptures. Thank God for the Spirit of wisdom who enables us even to *hear* and *read* and *ask* rightly.

Lord God, give us your Spirit and give us wisdom to engage your Word faithfully. And lead us to be done with bare minimums, so that we can strive for the fullness you offer.

Turning Down the Volume

Originally written for November 2, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:10b-12

"But we urge you, beloved... to [love] more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your own hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one."

Early on in the revolution, the leaders of our movement (called the Church) had to decide how much they were going to stir the pot and deliberately go *looking* for trouble, versus *letting* the scandalous message of Jesus do its own work and let the resulting trouble come to *them*. They decided, as Paul's words here show us, on the latter.

Now, just to be clear, the early Christians were not *cowards*. They didn't shy away from being put on trial, mocked, or imprisoned for their faith, and they weren't afraid to look like fools or lay down their lives in love and in service of the Good News of God's recklessly wide grace. And in fact, they knew from the beginning that sharing the news of Jesus--and the power of his life beyond the grip of death, and thus beyond the power of the worst the empire could do to you--would *get them into* trouble. The first followers of Jesus knew the stakes and were not turned off by them. *But* they also knew to save their energy for the scandals and troubles that *really* mattered, and that it wasn't worth

going out and *picking* fights with their neighbors about other, lesser things, just because the Gospel itself might land them in hot water.

In other words, the early church knew it would get itself into *trouble*--it just wanted to make sure the trouble it got into was the *right kind* of trouble, or trouble for the right reasons. It was worth becoming a laughingstock with the neighbors if it meant that someone else heard the news of Jesus that sounds like foolishness. It was not worth making your neighbors mad at you over something trivial and piddling, like fighting over property, or insisting on special treatment in the public square, or squabbling over rituals and rules. As a smart theologian named Gerhard Ebeling put it, we know that the Christian message will be received as a scandal, we just want to make sure we are bringing people "the true scandal." We know that people may be offended by grace--we just want to make sure we are not "causing offense in the wrong way."

We will only get so much of the world's attention--we had better not waste it crying wolf over stupid issues when we could be using our opportunities to announce the news of God's love in Christ... and then let the chips fall where they may. We don't need to shy away from controversy--it's just that we had better know what controversies are worth getting entangled in, and which are just plain silly.

This is the direction Paul is giving here: the early Christians were called to "live quietly" and "mind your own affairs," while not becoming a financial burden or drain on others, so that they did not cause *the wrong* scandal. If Christians became known for stirring up trouble over every little thing, no one would bother listening when it came to the genuinely worthwhile news of Jesus' death, resurrection, and reign. If Christians were always making a stink when they felt like *their* rights were being impinged upon, frankly, no one would bother listening to them when it came to sharing the message of God's free gift of grace. And if Christians were constantly known as a drain on society, they would hardly be a witness of God's abundant provision, and no one would want to be a part of their new way of life.

In our day, the issues may change, but the wisdom isn't. The news of Jesus brings a scandal all its own, and if gets people riled up for the wrong reasons if we Christians are known in the community for being nasty neighbors, or wet blankets, or petty and litigious in our disagreements, or constantly expecting special treatment, well, then, no one is going to be willing to listen to us when we want to tell them the really world-changing news about what God has done in Jesus. If we shout so loud at each other, or at the world, when we are upset, no one will be able to hear us when we speak in a softer, but more genuine, voice of love. And in a matter of weeks, when it will be really tempting for Christians to make a big fuss over which stores wish people a "Merry Christmas" versus which say "Happy Holidays," for example, we will be faced with the same challenge: can we not waste our energy on the *little* fights that really only serve ourselves, and instead use our moment to speak to offer the news of Jesus? If we get all hung up on "Happy Holidays," or bicker with each other over trivial things, or refuse to share our abundance when so many go hungry, the watching world will dismiss us with a shrug and say, "Don't you have something more important to say at all?" If we do--if we are convinced that the story of Jesus and the community of his followers really is *worthy* sharing--perhaps we will do well to turn down the volume in other parts of our lives and not go looking for trouble over lesser things, but rather just let the news of Jesus be enough trouble for the day.

Lord Jesus, we know that as long as your are alive and loose in creation, you will always be stirring things up and surprising a tired and curmudgeonly world. Let us be a part of your scandalously good news, but let us not distract from that news by wasting the chances we have with the world's attention by fighting over nonsense.

Grief and Hope

Originally written for November 3-4, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:13

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

The last phrase in that sentence makes a world of difference, and we need to spend some time with it. We Christians do not grieve *as others do*, Paul says. But that does not mean we do not grieve--it is simply that we grieve *differently*. We do not grieve as though we "have no hope," Paul says. But we do grieve. We do feel loss. We just cling to the conviction that even that loss does not get the last word with us.

You really need both halves of that to get a complete picture of how we Easter people think about death--it can't be just one piece or the other, or else you'll lose something important. On the one hand, we don't believe that death gets the final say over us. We all constantly lean on the promise that God does not let go of us even through death--as Robert Farrar Capon says, in death, all we lose is *our* ability to hold onto our *own* lives, but Jesus emphatically does *not* lose his ability to hold onto them. We are convinced--at least on the days our faith has not taken a beating--that we will be reunited with those saints who have gone before us. And we are further convinced that those "saints" are simply all those who have been loved into faith in Jesus, not a special elite class or a select few. So, not because God *owes* it to us to reunite us with those we love, or because the human spirit is somehow just unthwartable and keeps coming back, buoyant as ever, but rather because God is just determined not to let us go, we believe that death is not the end of us. And that means death is not the end of our relationships with others. We await both the resurrection of our *friends*, and the resurrection of our *friendships*, which is to say that we believe that even when death separates us, we will one day be able to relate to and love those we have lost. Once again, we will be reunited and rejoined to those we love, and so our memories of them do not have to have the despairingly heavy weight of finality. We are never at the end--at least, so we have come to believe, because we believe in the God of Lazarus, the God who raises the dead. And so, just as Paul says, we don't grieve the way the world grieves--we do not grieve as people who have no hope. We *do* have hope. It is real, and we bank on it.

But that said, we do *grieve* when death separates us from those whom we have loved. That's important to hear--it's not that Christians *don't* grieve, but that we grieve *differently*. That keeps us honest, because it *does* hurt when we are separated from those we love. It *does* hurt--it rips us open--to lose a loved one to death. We may eventually land and settle in a place of peace about the God who promises to raise the dead and to roll away the stone, but the way to that place of peace is through honesty about our loss. There's just no way around it. So it's a distortion of our faith if we tell those who grieve, "Don't feel sad. They're in heaven now." We have that confident hope, yes, that our loved ones, those "brothers and sisters" in the faith whose lives God has not let go of, are indeed in the presence of God. But we still feel sad. We feel sorrow. We feel helpless. We feel hurt--and to be honest, it is precisely *because* "they are in heaven now" and we are in our lives as usual. It is the separation, our being pulled away from them, that makes us sorrowful, even if not the thought that their lives are lost. Easter people still weep for those they love and have lost--there were tears, after all, on that Easter morning on the way to the tomb, and there were still sorrows even on Easter evening as those two walked the Emmaus Road.

In fact, it is because people *matter*, and matter so deeply, that we grieve when we are parted in death. It is because we believe a human life is so precious and valuable that we hurt so much when their lives are separated from ours. Even when we know full well by faith, even when we have rock solid

confidence, that we will be reunited at the last with those whom we have loved in Christ, we hurt to be pulled away from them, exactly because they matter so much to us and we have loved them. You could say it this way, I suppose: it is because people matter *to us* that we grieve, and it is because we are convinced that people matter *to God* that we have hope.

That surely gives a different spin to our way of talking about death and separation as Christians. If all we had to offer the world was a forced, candy-coated, smile and the insistence that we are happy all the time even when we lose people we love, the world would see right through it and know it was a lie. And for that matter, the watching world would ask whether we really cared about those for whom we grieve, even with our hope of seeing them again, if we never let our guard down or never admitted that it hurt.

But that cannot be the last word for us, either--Christianity is not just a program for learning how to be sad honestly. There is hope--the hope that as much as *we* have loved those we have lost, the living God loves, and continues to love, them even more deeply, and has an even tighter grip on them. That is how we talk about our hope and our grief together--with the honest confession of our wounds, and with the truthful hope, not just that there is one who will tend to our wounds, but who will never let go of those who have been pulled from us, and who indeed, will mend us all back together, on that day when "God will be all in all," as Paul says elsewhere, at the last. Whatever of each of those two, grief and hope, you bring with you today on your way, in any case, what we are invited to *do* with both of them is to bring them to God. We hold them in our hands, and we say, "You take these, and you make something out of them." And we trust... with tears of one kind or another (grief and hope sometimes each take that form, as you know) that will be enough.

O Lord, for whatever losses we have known, we offer to you both our sorrow at the pain of separation, and our hope that your grip will not let go of us. Mend all things, as you have promised, Lord--both the rips between us and the tears within us.

Who's Holding On To Whom?

Originally written for November 9, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:14-15

"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died."

What happens if I run out of steam? Will Jesus still own me then? Will he still claim me as one of his own? What happens if I work and run and strive and grow in faith all my life... and in the end, I just don't have the energy anymore, and I give out? Will Jesus be ashamed of me--or worse, disown me all together?

These are the kind of questions that the first generation of Christians in Thessalonica were starting to ask themselves, because some were beginning to die and Jesus hadn't come back yet. So their initial, anxious reaction was, "What about Aunt Rosie? Will Jesus reject her, will she miss out on God's glory, because she died before Jesus' coming?" Of course, you have to remember that this kind of fear is a little bit harder for us to understand, since we have been waiting for Jesus' coming for 2,000 years now--and there are now far more Christians who have died than in that first generation congregation in Thessalonica. I wouldn't dare to guess at what the proportions are by now, but if you're thinking of all the Christians who have ever lived, there's a pretty sizeable number

who are not walking around and living right now. It seems harder for us to imagine now that *all* those deceased Christians would be disowned for not having perseverance enough to keep breathing until Jesus came. But back in the first century, this was the concern--is it a sign of my flakiness, my failure of endurance, my weakness of character, if I can't keep living all the way until Jesus comes? Am I letting him down if I can't hold on that long? And if I die before his return, is it a sign that I was never really good enough to belong to him in the first place?

Maybe we are no longer afraid that those who have died will miss out on something when Jesus *does* come again, but I'll bet the underlying fear is a real one still. We still want explanations for why some good, faithful servants of God die so young. We still fear that we might let Jesus down if we buckle under the weight of all that we carry. We still have this nagging fear that, in the end, being saved is a matter of *me* holding on to God more than of *God* holding on to me. And in that case, we can *completely* understand why the Thessalonians were so concerned about their friends and loved ones who had died, and about their own lives as the years went by.

So even if our specific concerns are slightly different, the fear still needs to be dealt with, and so does our indignation that it seems like good people die too young while the universe seems to be coldly indifferent about it all. And really, to hear Paul tell it, God's answer to both concerns is the same: in the end, even if it *looks* like those have died in the faith are cut off, God never lets go of them. From our side of things it looks cruel that good and faithful servants die before whatever time seems "fair" to us, and we wonder if God is just going to let that injustice stand. From our side of things, we are afraid that our salvation, our acceptance by God, hinges on how tightly *we* can hold onto God--and that if we would let go too early, we could lose heaven.

And to all of those fears and concerns, Paul offers a loud, "NO!" No, he says, don't worry about those who have died. They are not lost, and they will not lose out. They will not miss out on the celebration at Jesus' coming, and they are not second-class Christians because they didn't "make it" alive to see Jesus' coming. (Paul didn't know it, of course, but he ended up being one of those who died before Jesus came again, even though here he seems to think that he'll still be alive and breathing when it happens!) God will vindicate those who have died, and in fact, God has not let go of them.

All of this comes back to that point we touched on the other day--in the end, our salvation has *everything* to do with Jesus' ability to hold on to our lives. And while we lose our *own* ability to do that when we die, Jesus has not lost that ability at all--he keeps a firm grip on our lives even when we cannot hold our own any longer. As Paul says, because Jesus has come *through* death, now *through* Jesus, we will be brought along with Jesus wherever he goes, whether we are alive or have died when he comes. We are tethered to Jesus--wherever he goes, we go. We can count on that, Paul says, because in the end, this is all a matter of God's grip on us rather than our grip on God. The early Christians in Thessalonica didn't have worry, then, that their deceased loved ones like Aunt Rosie were somehow being demoted or rejected because they couldn't hold out until Jesus came. And they didn't have to be upset that Aunt Rosie was being forgotten by God, either, if it seemed like she died before her time. God never let go of her, and in fact, Paul says, those who have died first will get the best seats in the house when Jesus comes, all as part of God's clever plan to show us and to show the world that this whole thing called salvation was always about God's grip on *us*.

So what happens if, in the end, I breathe my last before Jesus comes? We Christians are taught to believe that nothing has really changed--since Jesus was holding onto my life before, he is now, and he will keep holding onto my life even when I lose my own grip on it. Who's holding onto whom?

For all our fears and anxieties over how well we grasp the things of God, in the end, salvation has everything to do with God's refusal not to let go of *us*. Thanks be to God.

Lord Jesus, hold on to me tightly today, and never let me go. And let me trust that it is true...

Not Changing the Subject

Originally written for November 10, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:16

"For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first."

Here's a good rule of thumb to help us all in our Bible-reading: unless the author gives you a reason to think otherwise, you should presume that a given passage will not jump wildly around from one topic to another without warning. Pretty much, the writers of the Scriptures try to follow a train of thought. So for us *reading* what they have to say, we will probably miss something or get ourselves mixed up and in a heap of trouble if we start reading like each verse could be on a completely different subject from the last one.

So I'll take my own advice here and follow my own rule of thumb today. We should probably remind ourselves what Paul was talking about in the previous verses before just cherry-picking this one out of the clear blue sky and deciding what we think the verse "must" be talking about that way. You wouldn't take a sentence out at random from a conversation with a friend and assume it was talking about something completely unrelated to the rest of the things she said. You wouldn't take a page out of a novel you're reading and start assuming that the author had abruptly inserted a science-fiction adventure mid-chapter in the middle of a Victorian period piece romance. So if we are willing to extend that courtesy to friends and novelists, we should at least be willing to do the same for the Word of God.

Yesterday we saw that Paul was responding to the question of what happens to those who have died before Jesus' return. Would they miss out on the triumphant celebration? Would they lose honor because they didn't hold on until Jesus' came? Has God forgotten or abandoned Aunt Rosie, who died and didn't get to see the glory of Jesus coming to reign? Or to put two modern variations into the list, what about our friends and loved ones who seem to have been taken 'before their time'--will there be vindication for them? And what if I get so weary in my life that, even while still believing in Jesus, I just give up on life rather than fighting and striving and always running at full steam? Have I let Jesus down if I die before he comes?

Yesterday, Paul's response was a loud no--no, those who have died are not going to miss out on the party or the celebration. And no, you are not out of Jesus' grip even when you no longer have a hold on your own life. This is where Paul picks up again today: how will those who have died be included in the celebration? And Paul's answer, rather fitting for a God who exults the lowly and puts the last first, is that those we *think* are forgotten in fact are the *first* to be raised to the new resurrection life. Don't worry, Paul is saying, if anything, those who have died in the faith before Jesus' coming are given the places of special *honor!* Aunt Rosie will not be forgotten--Jesus never let go of her, and he will prove it at his coming. In fact, Jesus will show to the world then that his rising from the dead was never just about himself *alone*, but about the promise to raise *all* who are joined to him, throughout time and space and history.

All of this is still part of Paul's answer to the "What about Aunt Rosie?" question, which means that this is *not* Paul jumping off onto a new topic, as sometimes folks want to do with this verse. As we'll see again tomorrow, this whole passage is about resurrection and Jesus' final glorious coming, and you have to do some wedging and forcing and inventing to try and make this passage about a secret "rapture" of Christians when Jesus comes. Even though this passage is often used as a go-to passage to justify the belief that when Jesus comes, he will evacuate living Christians and beam them *out* of the world while it goes through its worst period of disaster and calamity ever. But to make this verse say that, you have to do some cutting and pasting and forcing things together like a frustrated old couple jamming two pieces of jigsaw puzzle that are not meant to go together.

Instead, these words are meant to be a voice of assurance and vindication that even when it looks like our loved ones are forgotten or have been left behind to the power of death, Jesus has never let go of them and has not left them behind at all. We belong, even now, to a community--a communion, as we say--that holds together because Jesus has got a hold of all of us. And even if the world forgets the lives of the many sisters and brothers we have loved and who have loved us along the way, the promise we hear today is that God has not forgotten them, but in fact will privilege them with resurrection ahead of us!

O God of resurrection and life, let us trust today that you have knit us together with all your people, so that we can know we remain connected with them, regardless of what else comes our way today.

The Triumphal Entry

Originally written for November 11, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:17

"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever."

On some days during the week, if I get home first before my wife, when I hear her car pulling into the driveway, I will come outside to the back door, meet her at her car to see if she's got anything to bring in--groceries or shopping bags or school work or the like--and will walk with her back *into* our house together. Even though it might *look* at first like I am walking *out* of the house to leave, the whole ritual is really about welcoming *her* back *in*. When she pulls into the driveway, I don't walk out the back door to get in the car with her and then leave our house behind, usually, but rather I go out to meet her to walk alongside her as she comes home for the day. She may not have been at the house for the whole day, but of course, it was her house already--she has just been at work. When she comes home and I meet her in the driveway, it is to come back--with a certain sense of victory at having made it through another day--to the place that we share together.

You'll have your own particulars, of course, but I'm betting that kind of scene is pretty familiar to you. Whether you are more frequently on the welcoming side or the being-welcomed side, I'm willing to be that at least the *meaning* of that moment makes sense to you, and that it is clear when I walk out the back door, it is not for my wife to whisk me off to some *other* location (unless we are, say, going out to eat straight from work), but for her to come *home* to the place that was already hers. Well, keep that picture in mind to consider one other scene before we jump into the verse for today. In the ancient world, especially in the practice of the Roman empire, when the emperor was coming to visit a Roman city or colony, a very similar ceremony of welcome unfolded. Citizens from the city--who understood the emperor to be *their* ruler--would go out through the city gates

and walls and stand waiting to greet the emperor, who would then be escorted with this entourage back *into* the city. The city was understood to already belong to the emperor, and he was the rightful ruler. He was simply being welcomed back into what was his own, perhaps as he returned from some far off military campaign, or as he toured his territory. But what *always* happened was that the loyal citizens of that city would gather *outside* the city so that they could *meet* the emperor and *accompany* him back *into* the city--the city, mind you, from which they had just left, in order *immediately* to come back in as part of a triumphal procession. There was *never* a scene where the emperor would come near to one of his own cities, and then have the citizens standing outside like they were waiting for a bus to be picked up and taken somewhere else. The emperor didn't take his own citizens out of their various cities (which were *all* under Roman rule) to bring them all to Rome. No, the scene was always the other way around--the emperor is met by loyal crowds who welcome him into their city, which they all agree is under his authority already. So this scene, which was played out again and again across the empire, was both a moment of celebration, but it was also a statement of *allegiance*. Those who welcomed the emperor into their city were, in effect, saying that he was the rightful ruler of their city and that he was coming back to a place that was his own already.

Well, both of these scenes help make sense of what's going on in this passage from 1 Thessalonians (as well as some of what is going on in the triumphal entry in all four Gospels when Jesus comes into Jerusalem riding on a donkey on the day we call Palm Sunday--a day when the people of the city "took branches of palm trees and *went out to meet him*" (John 12:13) before escorting him back *into* Jerusalem. On both Palm Sunday and here in 1 Thessalonians, the idea is that Jesus is being escorted *into* a place, and that people have come to welcome him--and by doing that, they are pledging their allegiance to *his* authority and lordship. It turned out to be rather fickle allegiance on Palm Sunday, but the idea is the same. Just as the emperor or other imperial dignitaries would have triumphal entries to Jerusalem as shows of their power, Jesus has a parallel entry, and it was a statement of a *different* reign than Caesar's.

This is the way Paul talks about what will happen at Jesus' return. The whole scene here is of a triumphal entry, or a homecoming celebration--not a rescue mission to retrieve people and whisk them away somewhere else. The same word Paul uses for "meeting" Jesus in the air is the same technical word used in Greek for that political procession of welcome when the emperor came to a Roman city. The idea is that Jesus, when he comes, will be met by his people, who will then accompany him back *into* the world that is rightfully his--the place that he shares with us, and where we will dwell together. This idea of meeting Jesus in the air is all about a triumphal *return to* the world, not a secret rescue or *rapture out of* the world.

That's because ultimately, God is not going to give up on his claim over this world. Sure, now it looks like the world is not interested in God's rule, but that will not stop God. To borrow one more image, when the Allies liberated France in the D-Day campaign to win World War II, the goal of the mission was not just to cut their losses, gather as many displaced French citizens and settle for rescuing them *out of* occupied France to give them new lives in England permanently. The mission was to *liberate* and to *restore* the rightful rule of the country, because the Allies never gave up on the conviction that France did not really belong to the Nazis, but to the French. The Allied invasion was, in many ways, about the rightful rulers returning to their own places. This is the way Paul talks about Jesus' coming--except, for him, the victory is already won. In Jesus' death and resurrection, the battle is fought, won, and over, and now what remains is for Jesus to be welcomed back home in triumphal procession back to what is his already.

What does any of this mean today for us? For one, it means that God does not think this world is disposable or something he will give up on. Jesus still claims this world of ours as his own rightful

property. Second, it means that our hope is not to be *beamed out* of trouble so that we do not have to face trials or suffering in this life--our hope is to welcome Jesus back to this world that has been his all along. We are not only missing the point of this Bible passage if we insist that it is about a "secret rapture" where true Christians will disappear while the world goes to hell in a handbasket, but we are also settling for less than God is apparently willing to settle for. The Allies would not give up on France and leave it to Nazi occupation--and God will not give up on the world and leave it to the rebellious, idolatrous emperors and Caesars of human arrogance. God will not settle for plucking a few good people out of the world and then letting it fall apart--God is committed to restoring, reclaiming, and redeeming the whole thing. That is what we wait for. That is why we live our lives now with an eye out the window and on the driveway. We are waiting to pledge our allegiance to our Lord in celebration of his coming. We are waiting to welcome home our Beloved to the place where we will dwell together.

Come, Lord Jesus. Reclaim, restore, and redeem, and keep our eyes watching to greet you and welcome you home in the mean time.

Encouraging Each Other

Originally written for November 12, 2010--1 Thessalonians 4:18

"Therefore encourage one another with these words."

This is the reason Paul has been talking for several verses about Jesus' coming and the resurrection of those we have loved and lost--he has been giving us the means to encourage each other. Note, then, what that implies Paul *does not* intend us to do with these words of his: they are not meant to instill *fear*, nor to be used to *beat people up with*. Maybe Paul even foresaw the way we Christians could end up twisting his words to cultivate fear or unrest about Jesus' coming, and he wanted to stop us right off the bat. Maybe none of our 20th and 21st century 'rapture' inventions would have ever even occurred to him. But in any case, Paul makes it clear here *why* he's been writing, and what the *point* has been all along: we are to be encouraged by our hope that Jesus will not let go of his people, not even through death. And Jesus will vindicate and honor even those who seem forgotten the world but who remain beloved to us. And in the midst of it all, Jesus will not give up on reclaiming *the world* as his rightful territory, not just snatching up a few good saints to heaven and writing off the earth as a loss.

This is what Paul has wanted to hammer home all along, and he's done it so that we can be encouraged--so that we can have strength when we lose sisters and brothers in faith to death, or when we are separated by miles. We can be encouraged when the world's amnesia makes it forget the names and faces who have mattered to us and know that they still matter to the living God. We can be encouraged when it seems like the whole world is aching and groaning to be put right and know that this is *precisely* what God has promised to do in Jesus' coming, and that at the last we will have our great Homecoming as we meet Jesus out in the driveway and walk with him back into the house we live in called the earth. All of that is meant for our *encouragement*.

But wait... there's more to be said about this verse. Notice one more thing--one more wonderful, blessed thing--in Paul's direction here. He intends us to encourage *one another*. That's something *more* than Paul just saying, "I'm telling you all this so that you can be encouraged and then the news stops with you." He's not just saying, "Hey, remember all this stuff about Jesus' coming and the

resurrection of the dead so that you, yourself individually, will be strong when you need it." He says he's been telling us all this so that we can *all keep* encouraging *each other*. Our responsibility is to keep nurturing the hope, to keep holding onto the promise, not just for ourselves, but for one another. Today, it maybe you who are strong for me and tell me what I am needing to be reminded of: *God will not let us go, Jesus will come in glory and raise the dead, and God will not leave the world broken forever*. But maybe tomorrow it will be my turn to remind you of that hope, and the same Easter news will be for your ears. We keep doing this for each other, and that keeps our movement alive.

This is what has kept the revolution of Jesus' followers moving--even as it has stumbled and slowed and started over the years--the news that sustains us keeps being shared! We keep telling not only "new" people who have never heard before, but we keep telling it to each other to encourage one another. We keep holding on to the resurrection promise. We keep holding on to the promise of a world restored and reclaimed. We keep telling each other that God insists that death will not get the last word. We keep telling each other, as Paul dared us to do from the first generation of Christians onward.

When we hear these resurrection promises, we are not just to keep them in for ourselves. They are to be shared, far and wide--including with those who, as the old hymn says, "know it best," for they "seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest." Encourage one another with these words, says Paul. Let us do that today.

O God of Life, keep us grounded in your promises of life so that we can encourage one another with them, too.

Ready in the Outfield

Originally written for November 15, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:1-2

"Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."

What makes the players on the local college baseball team better athletes than the kids just signing up for their first year of little league? Why is it that when a ball gets hit out to center field in a little league game (or rolls there because none of the infield players got it as it went past), you either watch the outfielders act surprised to see a ball come their way at all, or you see kids fumbling all over each other, all trying to get the same ball? And yet you don't see that kind of reaction by the time the kids are in high school and college and have been playing for a while. Why is that?

Of course, some of it is just physical growth and physical repetition. But there's more to it than that, I think. Somewhere along the way, good ball players learn to *anticipate* what is going to happen. That's not to say they can *predict* which pitch will be a ball or a strike or a hit. But they are ready for *any* one pitch to be "the one" and posture themselves to be ready to make a catch at *any* time. In a game where even the best players only get a hit about a third of the time (only one major league player ended the season in 2010 with an average above .333, for example), you know that not *every* pitch will send a fly ball your way. In fact, if you play the odds, you can bet that a majority of pitching *will not* end up in your part of the field. And that can make it that much harder to keep yourself prepared for the one that *does* come your way. You have to be watchful, you have to be ready to move, and you have to be able to stay still, too. You have to be postured, in other words, like any pitch could be hit out in your direction, and you have to be able to get there and get under the ball to catch it. That's something the kids just starting out in little league haven't developed yet,

because most of them are either afraid of the ball coming their way, not paying attention to what's going on *all the way over* at home plate, or convinced that every ball is their to retrieve and then colliding with the other outfielders when a ball is hit.

This is the posture Paul would have us take when it comes to preparing for Jesus' return. It's very much like learning to be a good outfielder. Paul's imagery for it--which seems to have been inherited from Jesus, who used the same comparison--is like a thief breaking into your house in the middle of the night. And the point, whether it's Jesus or Paul who's making it, is that none of us will get to know when Jesus, or "the day of the Lord" is coming (the phrase "day of the Lord" is a phrase the prophets in the Old Testament used quite a bit to refer to numerous times when God stepped into Israel's history in dramatic ways, but the New Testament writers borrow the phrase to talk about Jesus' coming). But the idea is about the same, whether we're talking burglary or baseball--you can never tell exactly what moment you will need to be ready, so you had better be ready *all* the time. You have to be alert enough that a single noise in the night or the trajectory of the ball as it leaves the pitcher's arm can signal you that you are going to need to move. But you can't be so tense that you lock up or expend all your energy being on "red alert" for nine innings, nor so worked up about possible burglars that you cannot get any rest. In other words, for both baseball and burglary, you have to be *ready, watchful, and flexible*.

In the coming verses, this is the direction Paul is going to be headed: we are all called to be *ready* for Jesus' coming without ever knowing precisely when he will come. The only choice for us, then, will be to live our lives *now* as though we would be glad to be caught doing whatever we are doing when he comes. You don't want to be caught staring into the sun or looking out at the bleachers when a fly ball finally comes your way. And you don't want to be working *against* the other outfielders, either, going after the fly balls that are in their territory and then colliding into one another. You want to have your eyes on the ball, to be able to breathe and be ready to run, and also be prepared for the possibility that you could wait for a while, too, before anything comes your way. For us, too, living in the time between Jesus' resurrection and his coming again, we want to be living our lives now in a way that we don't mind being caught at when he comes. We don't want to be distracted by things that are not important, and we don't want to get so worked up that we can't snap into action when it is time to snap into action.

As we keep exploring what it means to be keeping an eye on the ball and having our legs bent and feet ready to move, for today maybe it is enough to say this: each day when we wake up, we are called to be ready in the outfield for whatever will come. From your own days playing ball as a kid, or from watching it over the years, think about what makes a good outfielder, and consider how you could do the same with the day laid out in front of you.

Lord God, help us to be ready for the day when Jesus comes to restore all things and to put creation right, and let us have a posture ready for you to move among us. Help us keep our eye on the ball today.

Don't Buy the Hype

Originally written for November 16, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:3

"When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!"

Neil Postman had a book years ago entitled, Amusing Ourselves to Death that took a piercing look at how our culture was losing its ability to think and speak clearly and critically in an age of entertainment and technology. Now, beyond his insights about how television and sound-byte news reporting have dumbed down our public discourse, I always have found just the title itself to be pretty haunting. The idea that we could be so interested in being entertained and kept numb that we would not even notice the things that are slowly killing us, well, it just shakes me up every time I think about it. And Postman wrote his book something like 25 years ago--before cable news was constantly filling every moment with unprocessed sensationalism, before Twitter and text messages taught us to think that a meaningful message should take no more than 140 characters to say, and before smart phones and high-speed internet made it possible for us to be literally entertained by our favorite TV shows at almost any place on earth at any moment.

While Paul wasn't thinking necessarily about cell phones or Facebook when he wrote to the Thessalonians, he has his finger on the human pulse in much the same way Postman did. You know, sometimes, we can get to thinking that the Bible's end-times passages are not very practical for you or me, or that they don't really affect our day to day living. But Paul is really writing a parallel warning to the one that Neil Postman ran with in the late 20th century. Paul tells us--from the vantage point of the *first* century--that it is all too easy for us to amuse ourselves to death, and to become so interested in "peace and security," that we become numb to the things that will eat us alive from the inside out. It is so easy for us to become so fascinated with gadgets, entertained with mindless television, caught up in popular movements of the day, or just interested in making ourselves "happy," that we stop paying attention to things that *matter*. We can become so concerned to be *comfortable* that we stop caring about whether we are being *faithful* to the way of Jesus. Paul is warning us, then, not to become so focused on our own momentary happiness or distraction that we are willing to sell our souls for "peace and security," whether it comes from amusement at having the latest *thing*, or amassing a large enough 401(k), or filling the void inside us with more food, more drink, or just *more* of anything.

If you think I'm twisting Paul's words by suggesting he has his sights set on our culture and the things we fill our actual lives with, consider this: Paul didn't make up the phrase "peace and security" himself. He lifted it from a Roman imperial slogan, which promised the people "peace and security" (or in Latin, *pax et securitas*), all if they would only accept Rome's vise-like grip on them. Why would people let an empire trample them without any resistance? Well, if you were *entertained* enough and *comfortable* enough not to care anymore. The way the Romans got you to feel like they were making good on their promises of "peace and security" was to keep you fed and amused enough not to put up much of a protest--"peace and security" was really "bread and circuses" dressed up so sound more impressive. Get enough people to buy into that, and it's just a matter of time before the decadence eats your society from the inside out. It doesn't take smart phones and Twitter accounts to get us to amuse ourselves to death--those things just make it possible for us to become numbly insulated by entertainment that much faster.

So what would Paul have us do? Get rid of our technology because we might misuse it? Stop voting for *anybody* because they are all just making the same empty promises that propagandists have been making for thousands of years? Probably not--but Paul would tell us to get nervous anytime

anybody tries to sell us something that will guarantee our "peace and security" or will be sure to make our lives complete. Whether it is the peddler of a new kind of technology or a candidate promising to fix everything for us, we are being swindled. The moment someone guarantees us that they can offer us the *one* thing that will make our lives truly happy, *that* should be our wake-up call. That should be the moment to check our pulse, to shake our slumbering arms and legs awake, and to make sure we are not being amused to death. We Christians may well still make use of the technology around us, or vote for leaders who have visions for improving our way of life. But we had better be sure we do not pin our deepest hopes on any of them, because they can all vanish in an instant. We Christians will look different to the rest of the world, not because we won't go to *any* movies or watch *any* TV, or because we will not have *any* technology to improve our lives--but because at our most faithful, we will not let them rule us. We belong to another, who gives us life, and whose Spirit grieves when choose anything else, anything less, to try and fill the empty spaces in us. Today, don't fall for the slogans, and let us take an honest look at what things we have already begun to allow to numb us, so that we can instead invite the Spirit into those places within us that are aching for real life.

Good Lord, give us honest enough vision to see where we have fallen for empty promises and spiritual junk food. And come and replace those things in our souls with your own Spirit.

Ready To Be Surprised

Originally written for November 17, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:4-5

"But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness."

This is one of those days when I want to say to Paul, "Which is it, Mr. Apostle?" Today he says that the coming day of the Lord and Jesus' return need not surprise us "like a thief," but two days ago when we were just three verses back in the letter, the same Paul said to these very same readers, "You yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." So... which is it? Will it be like a thief or not? Will it **surprise** us when Jesus comes or not? Should I get on the bandwagon right now of those radio preachers on our dial right now who are certain they know the day and the year when Jesus will return? Should I just not think about Jesus' coming at all, because I don't know when he'll come again? How can Paul say two things that seem utterly contradictory in the space of just two or three sentences?

Maybe we need to go back to baseball for a moment. A couple of days ago when we first entered the fifth chapter of this letter, we said that Paul, and really the whole New Testament, teaches us to be postured like a good outfielder in a baseball game. You have to be aware enough of what's going on that you can be ready for *any* pitch to become a line drive to the your part of the field, but you have to be loose enough to run whichever direction the ball comes and patient enough to know that it might not come right when you want a hit to come. And when that hit comes, of course at one level it will be a surprise--at least in that you can never be quite sure which pitch with which hitter will connect--but you don't have to be caught *off guard*. You can be *looking* for surprises, so that when they come, you are delighted by them rather than upset by them. That outfielder posture is what Paul is talking about--we know that Jesus is coming, so even if we don't know *when*, we don't need to be caught off guard by his coming, but can be living now like the Lord of the Universe, who wears scars from laying down his life for creation, is coming still to put right all that is in disorder in

the world. We don't know what day he will pick to come back to us, but it will be fitting and right when it happens. A good outfielder might not know for sure which pitch will be the one that has his name on it, but if he's paying attention to the game and the players, he'll know which players on the opposing team can hit his pitcher's change-up. Well, Paul seems to have the same kind of anticipation in mind for us with Jesus--except Paul is convinced that Jesus is *not* on the other team, but on our own! We don't know the *when*, but we do know the *who*, and that helps us to be ready for what to expect when Jesus does after all come to us. We can be *ready* to be surprised, in other words.

It helps us, too, to know that we can *trust* the person (Jesus, in this case) who is going to surprise us, too. I've been thinking this week about the surprise birthday party I threw for my wife a year ago (her birthday is Nov. 18). Now while she didn't know for sure what I was up to, she was willing to leave the plans for her birthday up to me. There's nothing odd about that. It makes perfect sense that spouses trust each other with those kinds of surprises, because there is already the foundation of a solid relationship underneath. You don't trust a perfect stranger to take you out for an evening when you don't know where you're going or what will happen, but you can trust yourself to be surprised by someone who has won your trust and who loves you. (Even for those who go on blind dates--which are a notorious gamble at best--a couple meets somewhere they both agree on, don't they?) And yet when it is someone you have learned to trust, you can let yourself be surprised much more easily. It seems obvious when we're talking about birthday parties and spouses that the difference in being surprised has to do with *trust*. So, was my wife surprised when her friends appeared and shouted, "Happy birthday"? Yes and no--yes, in that she couldn't have perfectly predicted what I was planning, but no, she wasn't caught off guard exactly, either. She could trust that whatever I had up my sleeve would be *good* and would be fitting with my character and with hers. My wife might not have known the *when* of her surprise birthday party a year ago, but because she knew *who* was in charge of orchestrating the day (me), she could trust that the *what* would somehow seem right.

Well, it seems that this is the same kind of relationship Paul invites us to have with Jesus, too. We don't know the *when* of his coming and the great surprise party that will unfold when it happens. But we do know what Jesus is like. We do know the *who*, and so we won't be (or at least we don't *need* to be) caught off guard when Jesus does come. We may not know the moment it will happen, but when it does happen, there will be something about the moment that will fit perfectly with who Jesus is and how he has related to us before. We can look ahead with hope rather than with fear because there is a foundation of a solid relationships underneath already. So, as Paul says, the day of Jesus' coming does not have to surprise us like a thief--that is, in a fearful, defensive way. But it can surprise us the way someone who loves you throws you a party--we who have learned to trust Jesus this far in our lives can let our defenses down enough to *let* Jesus surprise us, and to trust that it will be just what we have been waiting for after all.

O Christ our Lord, we will do all we know to do in this day to let you in and to let ourselves be watchful and hopeful. Surprise us as you will, Lord, but be faithful to your own good character as you do, and we will be joyful in it.

Ready for a New Day

Originally written for November 18, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:6-8

"So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation."

Most people I know who are coffee drinkers reach a point in their day when they stop drinking regular coffee and will only have something decaffeinated if they drink anything else, so that they are not kept up late into the night. They are mindful enough of what the caffeine will do to them and of what time it is that they make different choices: "Oh, it's past 7:00pm already? No, I'd better have decaf." It's a common enough response.

And on the other end of the day, the choices we make are even more obvious. People who are coffee drinkers--and who can have caffeine--will pass on the decaf when they first wake up and drink "the real stuff" to help them get energized and face the day. And pretty much, working people know not to start the day with a beer or a glass of wine, because they know, too, that the alcohol will slow their brains rather than activate their brains. It has to do with knowing what time it is, and what is appropriate to each time. If you are really trying to get *ready* for a new day--and not to get *away* from or *out of* a new day--you will make certain choices because you know that you are at the *beginning* of something, rather than watching yourself unwind at the *end* of the workday.

The early Christians had a deep conviction that they were at the beginning of something, too, and that, if you can believe it, we are still at the beginning of it. We are on the verge of a new day beginning--at the leading edge of the Reign of God, which is just on the verge of breaking loose. We live--and in fact, we have spent the last 2,000 years--in that moment before the dawn where the sky just begins to lighten in the east, and where, if you are facing the west, it still looks like the middle of the night. This is the way that Paul talks about our waiting for the coming of Jesus--like people who are just on the verge of a new day, the day of the Lord, and who have the choice either to cover their eyes with a pillow and deny it, or to wake up and get ourselves dressed for the day ahead and all that will unfold in it.

And if you really did see yourself at the start of a whole new 'age' like it was the beginning of a new day--as Paul sometimes talks about it--you really would ask some questions about what choices make sense to prepare for it. If you know not to start a work day in your regular weekly routine by drinking a couple of beers and a shot of whiskey before driving off to work, well, then, by analogy, what are some things that would make us *less* ready than *more* ready for the coming of Jesus and the breaking in of the Kingdom of God? It's all about analogy--if there are some choices that make sense at the start of a literal work day (*like getting dressed, rather than lounging in your pajamas or sweatpants, for one, or drinking coffee rather than Coors*), then what are the choices that make sense at the start of the day of the Lord, even if it feels like it's only just the edge of dawn right now?

Hopefully, this helps us understand what Paul's saying about drunkenness and soberness, too--while Paul is never in favor of *excess*, this passage isn't so much about *actual* alcohol as it is about the *analogy* between getting ready for a new day in your regular routine and getting ready for the new Day that begins when Jesus comes. If you know enough not to let your senses be dulled and your thinking distracted by drunkenness when you're starting a work day, well, then we should not let ourselves be dulled, distracted, or numb by *anything* that would impede our ability to step into the new Day of the Lord ready to live in it full and deep. Paul isn't arguing against literal *alcohol* any more than he is arguing against literal *sleep*--Paul's point is not to say that Christians should not literally go to bed at

night because Jesus is coming. He is using both sleep and drunkenness as metaphors for being distracted and numb to the coming of Jesus. Just like you are missing out on the good things of a new day if you hide yourself under the covers or crawl into a bottle and waste the daylight, Paul calls us not to let ourselves be distracted or slumbering our lives away as we look ahead to Jesus' coming.

So it comes down to this. This morning was the start of an ordinary Thursday--your clock told you, the morning news told you, and eventually the light in the sky told you, that a new day was beginning. So what choices did you make to get ready to face this ordinary Thursday? Well, if we dare to believe what the Scriptures tell us, we are on the verge of a new day, too, as creation groans for the coming of Jesus: so what choices will we make to live in anticipation of that new Day? How will we treat each other in the fullness of the Kingdom? With jealousy or generosity? With selfishness or self-giving? With apathy or with love? Well, if you can imagine what it *will* be like in the full sunlight (or Son-light, if you like) of that Day, Paul says to us, "Go ahead and live like that now--after all, that's the kind of Day that is just about to dawn among us." Today, let us begin to live like that Day for which we have been waiting really is dawning among us.

Lord God, open our eyes today, and give us the faith to believe you really are bringing about a new Day in Jesus.

The Ace Up God's Sleeve

Originally written for November 23, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:9-11

"For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

There are a number of card games--Spades, Hearts, and Euchre, for example--where you play with a partner and certain cards or suits will be used as "trump" cards, cards that can beat whatever other cards have been laid down first. If you spend much time at all playing one of these games, you get to a point where you feel a certain rhythm to things, and where you can tell if your partner has a trump card to bail you out when you only have low cards yourself left in your hand. In other words, there comes a point where you know that, whether you have the cards to make a win yourself or not, your partner has you covered. She has a trump card when you need it, or he has an ace of spades ready and waiting to beat the other team's king. And sometimes, based on which cards have already been played, you can tell that no matter what *you* do with your turn, your partner can ensure the win, whether you've got a hand full of trump cards or a measly batch of off-suit fours and fives.

Well, to hear Paul tell it, Jesus is the ace up God's sleeve--the trump card of all trump cards, whose life offered up for us guarantees our own lives in him beyond death. "Whether we are awake or asleep," Paul says, we are enabled to live with Christ, because of what *he* has done for us, and not dependent on the cards in *our* hand. That's a pretty powerful idea by itself, but consider for a moment that Paul has just been beating his drum to get us to "stay awake" and "keep watch." We don't want to be like those who sleep, Paul said. We don't want to be like those who waste their nights getting drunk rather than looking ahead to the dawn that is about to break. And we all nodded our heads along with Paul on that point--yes, Paul, we will do our best to keep awake. We will do our best to keep alert. We will do our best to keep our hands busy so that when Jesus comes he will find us doing what he has called us to do. Absolutely, Paul. But now, the apostle reminds us

that in the end, the promise of eternal life does not stand or fall on what cards *we* play or how much *we* do. Whether I am alive when Jesus comes or not, Jesus will raise me up to live with him. Whether Aunt Rosie died before Christ's coming or not, it does not stop Jesus from playing the trump card of resurrection, and what do you know, Aunt Rosie is given the Easter promise, too. Whether or not we have good cards in our hand, our Partner across the table has a trump card that he is willing to play for our sake: "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation..."

There is a song that has become pretty familiar among the two congregations I serve, by a Lutheran band called Tangled Blue. And the refrain echoes this passage so wonderfully--it goes, "No matter what, no matter what may come, no matter what may come I will not let you go." It's another way of saying what Paul says here, "Whether we are awake or asleep," we can count on the power of Jesus' life given up for us so that "we may live with him." It's all trump-card table talk--it is the promise of God that regardless of whatever cards you are carrying today in your hand, your life is covered. Jesus lays himself down to cover you, whether you felt like you had a shot on your own or no chance of winning by yourself.

Unlike so many of the offers out there in the world--offered by religions, by self-help writers, or by the vague fuzzy thing we call "the American dream"--the Good News of Jesus does not start with the caveat, "As long as you do your part first..." The Good News does not start with, "If you can play your cards right, you can win..." Rather, the Gospel begins with, "Regardless of what you bring to the table, Jesus is enough for you, too." That makes the Christian Good News subversive of all the other games being played out there, but it also makes the Gospel genuinely *good* news rather than a deal or a trick. Today, that is the message we offer to the world--that our partner at the table is none other than the living God, who has an Ace up his sleeve for our sakes like you wouldn't believe.

Lord Jesus, for whatever else happens in this day, and whatever else the hours ahead will bring, let your life, given for me, be enough to let me live in and with you. And let me trust that it is true.

Playing the Classics

Originally written for November 24, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

"But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves."

When I first read today's verses, I thought this was going to be an especially difficult and awkward day's devotion to write--at least for a pastor. There is something uncomfortable about a pastor commenting on verses from the Bible about how people should appreciate pastors. It seems self-serving, to the say the least.

In fairness to Paul, he is not writing for his own sake, but on behalf of new pastors and leaders who are carrying on in his absence there in Thessalonica. Paul made it pretty clear earlier in this letter that he is not there *with* his friends in Thessalonica, and that while he wishes he were there, other leaders are having to carry on in his absence. So at least when *Paul* says in today's verses that this congregation is to "respect," "esteem," and "love" those who are placed in leadership roles in their church life, he is not merely looking out for his own interests. He has a new generation of leaders--pastors and teachers, whether they would have been called by these titles or not--in mind.

But again, we come to trouble--or at least I did--when I read these verses myself. I *am* a pastor of congregations. I *am* currently in a position of leadership, and it seems really awkward for me to pick up Paul's words today, for fear that it sound like I am only interested in commanding more respect or esteem or love for *myself*. There's the rub--Paul can say these things and not come across like a selfish or insecure kind of guy, but it's hard to see how a currently serving pastor can.

Except... on second thought, what if we really take a look at what Paul thinks is *worthy* of respect? It's not what I thought at first--to read Paul closely here, he doesn't say to respect pastors and teachers because *they* themselves are so great or so worthy, but because the *work* they are called to is in and of itself so worthy by itself. The work of sharing the news of Jesus and building a community of people around it to embody it, that is work that is worthy of *all* of our appreciation, because the *Good News* is so good, and not necessarily because the people who speak it do such a good job of telling it. Really, Paul is not that interested at all with the *egos* of pastors and teachers--he is captivated by the goodness of the Good News, which cannot help but elicit our love and respect, even when it is told and shared by people who are mediocre, immature, too old, too young, or too whatever.

The more I think about these verses, then, the more I hear a high school orchestra in my mind. I was a member of such an orchestra as a young student, playing the string bass. And there were more than a few classic pieces of orchestral repertoire that we studied and learned and eventually performed--I remember Barber's *Adagio*, movements from Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, Copland's *Rodeo*, and others that simply captivated me. I could remember hearing those pieces played on recordings or on the classical music station on the radio from childhood (or in the case of *Rodeo*, the old "Beef: It's What's for Dinner" commercials!), and I can remember being in awe the first time it dawned on me with those pieces of music that I was actually going to get to be a part of playing these beautiful, compelling, captivating pieces of music.

And yet, I am quite sure that our eager, but not very skilled, high school orchestra did not do those pieces justice. I am certain that the applause we were offered at our concerts had more to do with an appreciation of the music itself rather than *our* performances of them (well, that, and a fair amount of parental sense of obligation). There was something simply compelling about the music itself--about the beauty of what a composer had arranged--that it shone through even when our playing did not do the music justice. There is something that makes an audience stand every time the *Hallelujah Chorus* is sung, regardless of whether the sopranos always hit their pitches or the basses come in a half-beat late. There is something that makes *any* performance of *Our Town* wring a smile out of me, even if it is poorly performed or there is a crying baby in the audience or blaring sirens outside down the street. The play, the music, the song, the words themselves--they just have a power all their own that is worthy of appreciation, and that appreciation extends to any who attempt to perform them.

I think that's the same way we are called--myself included--to an appreciation of *any* who are involved in the leadership of the gospel-community, the church. They have at least as many warts and sins as anyone else, and yes, it is fair to hold them to an even higher standard than most because of their public role. But because the Good News of Jesus *itself* is so good, so beautiful, and so compelling, anybody who handles the Good News is worth treating with love, not because of themselves or their talent or their charisma, but because of the gospel itself. Every Sunday when countless sermons are being preached, every day when children learn the stories of Jesus, every time a gathering of disciples studies the Scriptures together, an amateur performance of a great symphony begins. The delivery, the *playing*, may or may not be very worthy of recognition, or it could just as easily be quite forgettable--but the music itself is so compelling that it is worth standing up for, even

when the people involved are mediocre musicians at best. As one of those mediocre musicians (in several ways throughout my life), that is no longer a matter of shoring up my insecure ego--it is a humbling thing, in the best possible way. It is beautifully humbling to hear the applause of the audience after the last chord has been played and the bows have all stopped, and to know that it was really all about the beauty of the music I was *privileged* to play, a beauty that could still come through even despite my limited ability. That is a sign to me that what we do in the church is so much bigger than any one of us, or even all of us put together. We have been given a compelling story to share with the world--news so genuinely good that it turns the world upside down and gives life even in the hands of poor preachers and mediocre musicians. Praise God.

Lord God, use us all this day as instruments for sounding forth your Good News. Keep us honest enough to remember that it is the power of your Gospel that is so compelling, so that we will be neither crippled by insecurity nor paralyzed with pride at what we do in sharing it.

More Than Only Fair

Originally written for November 29, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:14

"And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them."

This is Christianity at its most revolutionary. I say that because of the way this single sentence challenges *everybody* within the Christian community in order to *build up everyone* at the same time. Everybody--no matter where you fit among the followers of Jesus, no matter your income, your status, your skill set--is held accountable in this sentence and challenged to live in ways that strengthen the family of God. This, in other words, is what it looks like when we hold each other responsible for living out the command to *love* one another and to look out for one another.

On the one hand, Paul is sharp and direct in addressing the lazy people in the congregation. And let's be honest, there are lazy people who are also Christians. Not everyone will put in 60 hours a week at work and more at home or in community service on the side doing thankless jobs. Not everyone who has a full time job will do their 40 hours, even--not everyone who *can* work *does* work. And not everybody challenges themselves to do the best they can even when there is no direct incentive for working harder. Paul pulls no punches with these folks--he just tells the rest of the congregation to hold these folks' feet to the fire and get them off the couch. There's no excuse for it, in Paul's mind--if we all belong to one another in Christ because we all are part of one body, then we all have an obligation to be able to take care of each other, rather than needlessly draining the energy of the rest of the body. So if I refuse to work or do something productive, but the rest of the community continues to care for me and provide for me and my family, I am exploiting the love and care of my sisters and brothers in Christ without offering myself back to them when I could be a help for someone else. If I really do belong to a community--to a *body* of people larger than myself--in Christ, then I don't have the *right* to say, "I can be as lazy as I *want*--it's my life!" because it's *not* my life anymore, to be truthful about things. It's just *not*--I belong to Christ, and that also means I belong to my sisters and brothers in Christ, and they belong to me as well.

This is radical stuff--we are much more accustomed to polite indifference to our neighbors, rather than accountability and a sense of belonging to one another. In our culture, we are used to saying we each have the right to be lazy if we choose to be, or to be isolated from others if we choose to be, or to be as self-centered as we want to be. Paul simply rejects those assumptions and takes it as a given that we belong to one another because we belong to Christ, which gives no one the excuse

of sitting on their hands or standing around like wallflowers when there is work to be done for the sake of all.

But on the other hand, Paul doesn't just dump on the people who are unemployed--he doesn't assume that *all* people who are not working are *lazy*, but sees that there will be people who need encouragement, support, and help from time to time. And Paul insists it is just as much the Christian community's responsibility to help those people get back on their feet as it is the responsibility of individuals to work and feed their families as well as they can. *Nobody* has the "right" to walk away from the needs of another in the Christian community. So Paul says that those in a *strong* position are to encourage and help those who are weak or faint-hearted. They will provide for the needs of those who can't make ends meet, until they can be brought back to being able to provide for themselves, much the same way the rest of your body diverts some energy and nutrients to help repair a broken arm and will bear with the brokenness while the bone is healing and growing strong again. A broken arm is not a *lazy* arm, and the body knows that, so it endures and it gives the time your arm needs to be well again.

Notice how radical *this* side of the conversation is: Paul *assumes* the whole congregation has an obligation to care for those in their midst who are weak and need help getting back on their feet. He does seem to assume that they will be able indeed to *get* back on their feet, and that they will not likely need the help forever, because in turn they will become strong to help someone else when they are weak. But there is no option of saying, "I don't want to help him because I would rather have that money or time or whatever for myself." There is no option of saying, "I have the right not to care about the weak ones!" There is no option of saying, "Let the faint-hearted ones pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, because I don't have to care about them if I don't want to." Once again, Paul is not *nearly* as interested in talking about our "rights" as he is in talking about our *belonging* to one another and our *obligation* to care for one another in turn, each of us helping the other when we are able, and each of us leaning on the other when we have the need.

And then capping off the whole thing is the command that *everybody* be "patient" with one another, especially when we begin to get that nagging feeling like someone is going to get a free ride. Before we break into an angry outburst about how *some* people are getting help and how *some* people are awfully needy, Paul calls us to patience--probably biting his tongue beyond that to keep himself from lashing out that *all* of us have been getting a free ride from Jesus, who has saved us and given us all he has as a complete and utter gift of grace. All of us are called, without exception, to bearing with each other, because Jesus is bearing with all of us. You can protest that it doesn't sound very American, or that it doesn't talk enough about your individual rights not to care about other people, or that it doesn't seem "fair" to help others without a guarantee that they'll pay you back with interest. But Paul, quite frankly, believes that the Christian life is something that is, as one wise and wistful love song puts it, "more than only fair." What makes Christianity so revolutionary and so powerful is that starting point--this was never about a life that is "only fair"--where I only *get* as much as I *give*, and where I have to *earn* my place at the table. The whole Gospel of Jesus is about God doing something that is *more than only fair* by saving us through Jesus' death and resurrection without our earning it, and then how we live in a community together with a bunch of other people who "got in" beyond our deserving and beyond what was "only fair." Today's verse gives us a window on what it is like to actually *live* this way--not just to say that Jesus loves *me*, but to recognize that each of us has received more than was "fair" and that we are called to treat each other with the same patient love.

Today, do something radical and revolutionary--work beyond what the bare minimum is so that someone else's life can be made better and their load a little lighter. Strengthen someone who is

weak and needs help getting back on their feet. Honor someone else enough to hold their feet to the fire when they need to get off the couch, too. Don't settle for insisting on your "rights" or for what is only "fair." After all, we are, and always have been, a community of more than only fair.

Lord Jesus, help us to love one another genuinely, in real life actions and with compassionate patience, and enable us to receive help when we need it and to give help when it is asked of us.

Breaking the Cycle

Originally written for November 30, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:15

"See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all."

It's about refusing to play by someone else's rules--and instead, playing only by Christ's.

This is, along with yesterday's verse, some of the most potent, and most revolutionary, thinking around. When the world tries to lure us into seeing life *its* way, or baiting us into reacting with wrong in response to wrongs done to us, Christians from the very beginning have been taught *not* to return evil for evil done to us. It is a way, not of rolling over for evil, or letting evil walk all over us, but of refusing to play by evil's own rules. We have been called to defy the very *undergirding system* that the world accepts, in which you are supposed to hate your enemies and make their lives as miserable as possible and do as much evil to them as you can.

That truly is revolutionary--Christians are called, not to target other *people* as our enemies, but rather to subvert the whole *way of thinking* that accepts returning evil for evil as a way of solving our problems. We are called to bring about change, not by wiping out one set of violent crooks to replace them with a new set of violent crooks (the way so many revolutions end up doing, and becoming the very thing they were trying to bring down), but by living *now* as though the rightful Ruler of the universe really is in charge of things, and refusing to use violent, crooked ways to get what we want. As Walter Wink says in *Jesus and Nonviolence*, "Violence is not radical enough, since it generally changes only the rulers but not the rules."

So when the first followers of Jesus were taught to refuse to repay evil for evil (*and again, note that 1 Thessalonians could quite possibly be the first of Paul's letters and therefore the oldest of the New Testament writings*), they were not being told just to keep their heads down and not to rock the boat--they were being told to question the way the world was being run by the powers around them, powers which accepted repaying evil for evil as the best way to solve your problems. And by questioning that *order* of things, the followers of Jesus pointed to a very different *kind* of Kingdom altogether, with a very different kind of King. The followers of Jesus were witnesses to their King, Jesus, by using the same tactics that Jesus used to bring about his Kingdom--suffering love that breaks the cycle of revenge. Jesus' death on the cross at one and the same time paid whatever debts stood against us, but it was also a sign of God's refusal to repay evil for evil to us for having crucified the Son of God! Christians are only doing what Jesus taught us to do and did for us by following suit in response to the little evils committed against us.

Today, then, you and I have the opportunity to be truly revolutionary--to question the system that so many people around us are still living in--by our willingness to live by Paul's words and to refuse to return evil for evil. We will do good, not only to other Christians, but as Paul says, "to all," whether they are *insiders* or *outsiders*, whether we consider them to be friends, strangers, or enemies.

And in doing that, we will point to a different sort of King who governs a different sort of Kingdom. We will break the cycle of wrongs to repay wrongs that sets up a never-ending, self-feeding chain of revenge. And we will be living signs of the cross of Jesus, where no less than God in the flesh did the same for us and refused to pay evil for evil to a sinful humanity, but did good for us by giving us his own life.

Lord Jesus, help us to see the chances we have in this day to return good when we are shown evil, and do to it, not as a sign of defeat or apathy, but as your revolutionary way of rejecting the rules by which the world plays.

Constant Conversation

Originally written for December 1, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

It's not about faking a smile or pretending to be an optimist. It's about keeping at it with God in an ongoing conversation. That's how it is possible--really, it's the *only* way possible--to rejoice, to give thanks, and to pray in any and all circumstances. Paul is not telling us to put on a false self, a mask, with God and pray only happy prayers non-stop. Who do we think we would be fooling?

No, Paul is not teaching us to try to *lie* to God. And yet, at the same time, neither is Paul giving us three unconnected and unrelated directions. He is not just offering disjointed pieces of advice as they come randomly into his mind. All three of these directions: "rejoice always," "pray without ceasing," and "give thanks in all circumstances" are connected. They all have the sense of keeping at something, and of being a part of an ongoing, unfolding *relationship*.

Let's start there: when Paul says to "pray without ceasing," it's not a matter of ritualistic repetitions, like starting every morning with "Our Father, who art in heaven..." or "God is great, God is good..." from rote memory without thought and just reciting the words for hours until bed time, and then sealing the day with an "Amen." In fact, it's just the opposite. Instead of trying to cram the day full of as many self-contained nuggets of prayer as possible, Paul has in mind a conversation that never really has to start up again because it has never really stopped.

It works much the same way with the people to whom we are closest--our family members and our dearest friends--when we talk with them. We may pause the conversation as we go our different directions for the day, but we can pick right back up with them where we left off, because we are not trying to *accomplish* something by talking with them, so much as we just *value* the conversation itself. There is something just inherently good about an open-hearted conversation with a friend--it's not about trying to *get* something as a result of the conversation, or to make the other person *do* something for you, or even about having to constantly butter the other person up to get them to like you. With your closest relationships, the conversation *by itself* is worthwhile, and a source of joy, just because the other person is in the room--or on the phone, or even, albeit to a lesser degree, on the other end of an email conversation. When you can leave off and pick up in a conversation with someone else, you have moved away from it being a *transaction* to becoming a point for *communion*.

Well, this makes a huge difference in how we understand what prayer and praying are all about. If prayer is simply a transaction--some kind of "I'll do this for you, God, if you'll do this for me" kind of *deal*, then it makes no sense for Paul to tell us to "pray without ceasing." Then, either we are

constantly going to be coming up with things to ask God for--and thinking that we have to ask for them or else we won't get them--or we are going to see prayer as some sort of religious gold stars to be racked up and exchanged later for something we want. This is often how we *do* pray, but it's not how we're *meant* to pray. The moment prayer becomes a *means* to an *end*, we have made *God* into a *means*, a way of getting what we want, rather than Someone worth our while in and of himself. But if we see prayer as something inherently beautiful and joyful because it is an ongoing conversation with someone whose mere presence in the room brings us joy, well then, it makes perfect sense to see your whole day as the space in which to carry out a never-ending prayer.

Then, Paul's other directives in these verses, to "rejoice always" and to "give thanks in all circumstances," make sense and do not simply boil down to faking a smile for God. If we are in constant conversation with Someone who gives us joy simply to be in communion with, well, then, by definition, we are able to rejoice all the time, and to give thanks *at least* for that relationship. Paul isn't saying to give thanks *for* everything that happens, but *in* everything that happens. Paul isn't saying we have to rejoice *about* every thing that happens, but that we are able to *rejoice* through anything and everything that happens, because if nothing else, we still have unbroken access to our joy-giving God. We still have that unending conversation with this One who delights us and who delights *in* us. If you've had that experience, even just in fleeting moments, with your closest friends--the experience of finding joy just to talk with them regardless of the subject--then of course there should be *at least* that kind of joy available to us with God. After all, even your closest friends will let you down at some point. They will flake out on you when they don't realize how important something is to you. They will miss your call or not be in the room when you need them. And yet with God, there is never any flaking out, and there is never a time when God misses your call. Because God is *always* in the room, it is possible to "rejoice always" and to "give thanks in all circumstances," if for no other reason than just because God is in the room.

Today, how can we pick up in a conversation that has already begun with God? And how will we let there be joy just in letting ourselves be more and more aware of the presence of this living God in every moment of your life? I suspect, the more each of us is able to "practice the presence of God," as another wise Christian once put it, the more we will realize what we have to give thanks for, and the more we will find ourselves rejoicing constantly, like it is the most natural thing in the world.

O God, let my whole day today be prayerful--so much so that you could not sift out individual "prayers" from my ongoing thoughts, words, and actions, but woven into the fabric of my life itself. And in knowing that you are constantly with me, let me find joy in your presence, and offer my thanks freely and with love.

A Good Fire

Originally written for December 2, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

"Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil."

Not every fire is a good one. The opening line of Ray Bradbury's classic, *Fahrenheit 451*, which is all about a society which burns every book it finds, along with the houses where they are found, is a haunting enough reminder of that: *"It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed."* Quite likely, we don't need fiction to tell us that fire is often an awful, awful thing--having known people who have been burned or lived through fires in houses or

workplaces. Too many family stories here in Indiana County include a chapter that begins, "Then the barn burned..." for us not to know that fire is often a wickedly destructive thing.

That said, however, there *is* such a thing as a good fire. And where such a fire can be found, you don't want to put it out--you want to let it blaze and shine and radiate a good heat, the kind that pulses out in waves. *This* is the way Paul talks about the Spirit of God--like a *good* fire. Maybe he's got the stories of that Pentecost day on his mind, and how the Spirit descended on the first followers of Jesus like little flames of fire on their heads, transforming them from cowardly fishermen into courageous witnesses who passed the news of Jesus along like one candle wick lighting another. Maybe Paul has just seen the Holy Spirit work in ways that could only be described as *catching fire*--the way the light from one person just catches another person, until they are both shining witnesses, and then both keep burning bright for others, so that they can be brought in, too. Maybe Paul is thinking about the way a flame resists being tamed or boxed in, the way a fire moves with a restless energy that can never stay in one place, or the way it radiates an energy that has to be respected. Maybe the answer is "D: All of the above." But in any case, Paul pictures the Holy Spirit like a moving, blazing, stirring fire--and a *good* fire, at that.

...Which is why Paul's direct command here is not to *quench* the Spirit. Don't stifle, don't choke out, don't box in the living movement of God, even though it seems risky and dangerous and means giving up control. Don't insist on being the boss of the fire--let the flames go where they will and move as they will (the same way the wind "blows where it wills," as Jesus says about the Spirit in the Gospel according to John...). Don't let the desire to control the burn or the fear of fire lead you to put it out all together, in other words. You can't master the flames, of course, but you can squelch them, and then your world would be a darker place.

In other words, Paul's most basic direction here is not to trample on the places you see the Spirit shining brightly and moving with restless energy. Where you see the Spirit at work--in someone else's life, in the ministries of God's people, in a moment of conversation with someone hungry for good news, in an opportunity to serve with reckless love in Jesus' name--don't be so obsessed about controlling the moment or keeping it contained that you put out the flames. Or, to cut to the chase, let God be *God*--which means admitting that God will move in ways you cannot predict or box in.

The rest of these verses, then, flow out of this command to let a good fire keep burning--when the Spirit inspires (or kindles, if you prefer) other faithful saints to speak with the same fierce brilliance as on that Pentecost morning, let the Spirit do his work there. In the early church, of course, the idea of "prophets" was not limited to the books and scrolls of Isaiah and Jeremiah and their fellow centuries-old-and-dead colleagues--the word "prophet" was a looser term that included those who were still being raised up to speak and preach and teach in the name of Jesus. (For example, in the book of Acts, you've got several different figures who were not from the original twelve apostles who are called prophets, who speak forth a Word from God.) So now that Paul has said *categorically* not to quench the Spirit, he adds now *specifically*, "...And don't mess up what the Spirit is doing in speaking through someone else! The Spirit doesn't have to ask your permission, after all!" Paul would have us give a holy respect to the people through whom the Spirit speaks and moves and acts--even though, again, it means admitting that God's work and motion and designs will not always (or even often) be under our control.

We have known people like that before, haven't we? People who just burn with a light and an energy that is not their own--that is a sure sign of the Holy Spirit's moving. We find our lives challenged and encouraged by theirs at the same time, the way a good fire keeps you on your toes but can also brighten and warm you when you need it. It is a gift--if not always an easy gift--to have

such blazing people in our lives. Jon Foreman, the lead singer and songwriter for the band Switchfoot, had a song about someone he knew whose life burning like a fire that was kindled by the Spirit. In "Amy's Song," he sings, "*Salvation is a fire in the midnight of the soul... it lights up like a can of gasoline.... yeah, she's a freedom fighter, she's a stand-up kind of girl. She's out to start a fire in a bar-code plastic world.*" Marilynne Robinson has the narrator of her novel *Gilead* say, "It was the most natural thing in the world that my grandfather's grave would look like a place where someone had tried to smother a fire."

That is what Paul has in mind when he pictures the Spirit at work in us--as a *good* fire, one that catches in the lives of the blessed saints around us--and spreads. Of course, not every fire is a good one, and not everybody who is excited about something is burning with the Spirit. That's why Paul says to test everything, and everyone, who is all hot and bothered about something, to discern which are the good fires--the bonfire beacons, the roaring hearths, and the campfire rings on a dark, starry night--and which are the ones not worth adding any fuel to. And once we've done the testing, Paul says, we keep the good stuff--we let the Spirit shine and blaze and burn where and how he will--and then we let the bad stuff go out. There is the triple challenge of this day: letting go and surrendering enough to let the Spirit move and act beyond our boxes and attempts to control what God does on the one hand, and on the other, letting the frivolous or the destructive flames go out--and learning to tell which is which. That may not be easy, but that is part of what we do as followers of Jesus--and part of why we don't do it *alone*.

O Spirit of Life, burn brightly around us, among us, and within us--and shine in us as you will it.

Wishers and Blessers

Originally written for December 3, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

"May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."

We Christians are not just *wishers*. We are *blessers*. The difference is crucial--it is the difference between magical thinking and a confident trust in a mighty Lord. It is the difference between flowery words with no force and the potent invocation of a powerful God.

And yet, at first blush, these two, wishing and blessing, might look very much the same. In fact, they might both use the very same words--the question is what we think our words are *doing*. When Paul, now beginning to wrap up his letter to the Thessalonian Christians, says "May the God of peace himself sanctify you..." what does he think he is doing? What power does he think his words have--and where does that power, if there is any, come from? Well, if Paul is *wishing*, there are two possible answers. When you wish for something, either your words have a lot of power *in and of themselves*, and by your sheer wishing willpower, you can make things happen as you want them to. This is sort of the Disney picture of "wishing up on a star," where, as the song says, "anything your heart desires will come to you." The power is in the strength of your *wanting* it--whatever *it* is--and your wish can make things happen by the latent force of your wishing. So if Paul were *wishing* when he says, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you," he would be thinking that because *he* wished it, God must do it. God, in this way of thinking, is something like a cosmic genie, who will do great and mighty and wonderful things, but only according to the wishes of the wishers. And following that train of thought all the way out of the station, it means that God will only do things when

summoned to do them--so that it's really *our words* and *our saying them* that make good things happen. This is one way of thinking of *wishing*.

Hopefully, it is clear that this is not what we Christians believe, nor is it what Paul believes he is doing. In this picture, God is reduced to our butler--a very powerful butler, but a butler nonetheless. And really, it makes God a *means* to an end, and even almost just an abstract, impersonal *force* rather than a Person to whom and with whom we can relate. That seems pretty sad--if we imagine that God is just a force you can channel and put to work for you like harnessing electricity or magnetism in an elementary school science lesson.

But there is a second sense in which we use the word *wish*--a sense that is even sadder, if you can imagine it, even more pathetic. Sometimes we use the word "wish" and mean practically *nothing*. We *wish* for something that we know is impossible, or a lost cause, or just to express a wistful hope. "I wish my estranged long lost love would come back..." we say, or, "I wish it would not rain so much--I had driving in this kind of weather!" or, "I wish I had a million dollars." These are words we say without thought or restraint because we *know* they have no power. And sometimes, if we are not careful, it sounds like *this* is what we believe about our words and God. Sometimes we through around such weak, timid words and attach God's name to them that it seems like we think we do not believe our God is capable of doing much of anything. We pray for things fearfully, hedging our bets by making our prayers impossible to sift through for a *point*--or we make our prayers sound like self-talk and coaching. "Help me to learn for myself that hard work will pay off, God..." or "Dear God, let me deal with my issues," we might pray--either lobbing vague requests so that we do not ever have to face the difficult question of asking whether God has actually *answered* our prayers, or masking advice to ourselves as prayers to God. Sometimes we pray as though we do not think anything will...or even *could*...come from our asking. And so we might be tempted to hear Paul's words that way, too. We might hear "May God sanctify you" as just empty pious-sounding words that sound religious but carry no force. We might think Paul is wishing for something either so vague that he wouldn't know if his wish were granted, or perhaps that Paul isn't really asking *God* for anything, so much as masking a bit of advice or moral teaching in the *language* of wishing. And that, too, is pretty sad.

But like I say, Christians are not wishers--they are blessers. That is to say, when we are being faithful we do not do *either* kind of wishing. We do not think that our words, like magic, will *make* things happen the way a spell or a command of a genie would in the fairy tales. We do not wish, thinking that the power of our prayers is in how badly we want something or in our proper phrasing. But on the other hand, neither do we believe that our prayers are empty, flowery speech. We do not wish with empty words, just because it *sounds* nice to wish something pleasant for someone. We Christians believe that our prayer is *more* than simply wishing someone else a nice day or a merry Christmas.

In other words, we believe in the power of *blessing*. And the act of blessing is not about the energy of our willpower or the emptiness of polite pleasantries. To bless is to call upon God, who will be the One to act or not. To bless is not to use our own power, as though our words were magical in and of themselves, but to invoke a powerful *God* to do what we ask and call on God to do. This is *really* what Paul is doing here in these verses--he is *blessing* his beloved congregation, not wishing things for them. He is calling on God, and Paul is under no illusion that what he asks requires no less than the living God to actually do. "The one who calls you is faithful," Paul says, "and he will do this." Paul is convinced that the words of benediction he speaks have power--but that power is not their own. The blessing has power only insofar as the God on whom he calls has the power and will to do what Paul has invoked. Paul believes his words *mean* something, and even that his words

will *do* something, will *accomplish* something. But they accomplish something the way that dialing 911 accomplishes a rescue--it calls upon the ones who really do have the power to save, to rescue, to deliver.

This is what we believe is happening in every act of blessing: we are calling on none other than God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We believe that our words have *meaning* and *power*, but not on their own. We are doing more than wishing people a nice day when we say, "The Lord bless you and keep you," and yet we also realize that those words are not a magic spell that by themselves will guarantee you sunny skies and good parking spots until it wears off. We are not wishers, after all. We are blessers--people who are convinced that our praying has power because the God *to whom* we pray has power. Today, let us give up both the arrogant, prideful kind of wishing, and the apathetic pleasantries kind of wishing. And instead, let us be people who bless... and who recognize that we are blessed.

Lord God, bless us, your people, for our work: give to us those internal things we need to be faithful--courage, discernment, love, and wisdom--and give to us those external things that will let us thrive and do your will. Bless us, O Lord, for we do not merely wish it--we ask it in the blessed name of Jesus.

The Engine of the Revolution

Originally written for December 6, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:25

"Beloved, pray for us."

Jerry Seinfeld used to have a bit about how writing a check wasn't a very macho or masculine way of paying for something. He would say that writing a check is essentially like telling someone, "I don't have any actual money on me--but if you contact these people at my bank, they'll give you some money to cover this." And from Jerry Seinfeld's perspective that was the singular reason that check-writing is a bad choice--it shows weakness, because it is an admission of being dependent on someone else to get what you want. It is, in effect, an admission that the only power you have *access to* comes from outside yourself.

For Christians, however, this is the source of our greatest strength, and the engine of our revolution. Not check-writing, of course, but something equally dependent on Another to move and to act when we cannot. The Christian revolution, the movement of the followers of Jesus, is driven by *prayer*, which is, at bottom, an admission that we do not have power ourselves, and yet that we have a living connection with the Maker of the universe, whose gracious will keeps the world together moment by moment.

That is what is so compelling to me about the simple, stand-alone sentence, "Beloved, pray for us." This is what makes the Christian movement so radically different from the many other revolutions that ended up in the dustbin of history--at our most faithful, we have never lived in the illusion that we operate under our own power. We pray for one another, a move which puts each of us *twice* dependent on someone outside ourselves--both on the God to whom we pray, and on the people we ask to pray for us.

Plenty of revolutionaries ask for financial support from their followers; plenty of other movements or causes recruit more members. But Christians have this way of asking for prayer--of admitting,

"I've got nothing. I need God's power to bring me through this next challenge," and of compelling those who will pray to admit that the most *they* can offer is prayer, too!

For us, praying to God on behalf of someone else is very much like writing a check--it is essentially saying, "I don't have any actual power to fix this situation--or at best, whatever power I do have is spent and inadequate on its own. But this God of mine has the power to cover this." See, the world sees that kind of action and thinks it is a sign of weakness. We Christians do not disagree--we just think it is better to be honest about our weakness than to pretend we can solve all the world's problems by our sheer willpower and muscle. A quick survey of world history will quickly reveal how well *that* approach turns out. We don't deny, we Christians, that we are weak. We just do not see our weakness as an *obstacle* to getting things done--it is, in fact, the best channel we have for getting anything done! By praying, we simultaneously let ourselves be humbled and get our egos out of the way of a situation, *and* we invoke the power of a mighty God who *does* move in our history and in our lives.

But something else happens wonderfully in our act of praying--we followers of Jesus are drawn closer together into communion and connection. God surely *could* just go around fixing world problems without our prayers, pulling levers and pushing buttons to keep the universe in constant balance without needing us to bother with putting our needs into words on behalf of someone else. But God, clever as God is, has found a way for us to be bound together and knit into a tighter community as we ask in prayer. In other words, it is certainly *not* the most efficient way available for God to accomplish things in the world to be depend on prayer. God could (and surely reserves the right to) act without our praying. And yet *by* leading us to pray, and to ask on behalf of one another, God gets a two-for. God is both able to be glorified in the weakness of our asking, but also brings us closer into relationships of caring for one another as we carry each other's burdens and joys to God in prayer. It is one more sign of how clever God is, and how beautifully strange and compelling the Christian revolution really is. Rather than being one more cause convinced it has the man-power or money or polling support to change the world, we are a people who openly admit our neediness and find that to be the key to how God turns the world around and mends what is broken.

Today, let us keep being a part of that revolution in two ways--by praying for someone else who is on your heart today, and by *letting* someone else pray for you. Both are powerful, revolutionary acts--and yet both will look surprisingly weak to the watching world. Be a part of that kind of surprise today--beloved, pray for us.

Lord God, wherever your people are in need, provide for them. Correct us in our error, deflate us in our pride, strengthen us in our broken places, comfort us in our pains, and bless us where we are faithfully serving as your hands and feet. We ask it in the name of Jesus, who both taught us to pray for one another and who himself keeps on praying for us.

Love Without Sentimentality

Originally written for December 7, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:26-27

"Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them."

How many times in human history do you suppose the word "kiss" has been followed by the phrase, "I solemnly command you"? For that matter, how common do you think it is to describe a kiss as

"holy"? Those might seem like strange combinations, but they are also part of what makes the Christian movement so compelling. We are a community of love without sliding into mere sentimentality--or at least, we can be, if we dare.

In one breath, Paul tells his readers to pass along his personal greetings--in the traditional gesture of the day in the Mediterranean world, a kiss--and then in the next breath, Paul makes it clear that this letter was not just a lonely hello from a former pastor with attachment issues, but a vital reminder for living by their faith. And yet on the other hand, Paul doesn't just see his readers as merely empty brains in need of being filled with correct religious *information*. There is a relational connection that he can't ignore, either. Both halves are there, and both halves are necessary. As strange as it might sound, maybe you *can't* have the phrase "holy kiss" without following it up with a "solemn command," and vice versa. Without each, the Christian movement is reduced either to just a social club on the one hand, or an idea to be memorized, and neither is quite right. Neither by themselves is the fullness of what our revolution is all about.

Think about it--on the one hand, without following up the personal greetings of "Hey, give everybody a holy kiss back home" by adding, "But don't forget how important my actual *words* are," Paul runs the risk of just *playing church*. You know how "playing church" goes--we all just get together on Sundays and have a very *nice* time together. We smile when the children sing a cute song, and we are pleased if the sermon isn't quite too long, but has a couple of jokes thrown in to keep us laughing. And on occasion, we have a nice potluck supper together and comment about how the scalloped potatoes were a popular choice this year and how many desserts there are. And the most serious business we attend to when we are *playing church* is to keep things running well enough to let us keep playing church: to raise enough money (note how easily we shift from thinking about *giving offerings* to *making enough money*) to keep the lights on and have the creature comforts we would like to have in a church. If that's all we have, then "church" is just a self-feeding loop that only exists for the benefit of the people who are already in it--and that seems not only rather pathetic, but also just downright out of sync with the kind of community Jesus created us to be. If we are *only* about the "holy kiss" moments of pleasantries with fellow church members that we already know and like, we are missing something critical. We are missing the *Good News*, and we are missing what makes us *revolutionary* rather than just being one in a long line of social clubs. And maybe then the "kiss" ceases to be *holy* and just becomes another hello. Well, hellos are fine, and we all need people who can be a network of social support for us, but that will hardly turn the world upside down--and the movement that Jesus began had a reputation for doing just that when his followers blew into a town (Acts 17:6). If we are trying to be faithful to that movement, we cannot just settle for a once-a-week social time. We need someone to solemnly command us to live in light of the News of the Risen and Coming Jesus.

On the other hand, we can end up missing the boat if we lose the human connection between one another and leave the "holy kiss" behind. If we think that Christianity is reducible to a letter than can be read, learned, and memorized, or a systematic theology to be parroted back without being *lived*, then we have also emptied our faith of its power. After all, if Jesus had wanted to leave behind only a *book* but no *people* to live it out, he darn well could have. Let's assume for a moment--and I'm willing to say this is a safe assumption--that God could have arranged things however God wanted to. It could have been within God's options to beam down a supply of Bibles or catechisms or lists of commandments and doctrines for every human being on earth in history, and just left us all notes saying, "When you have read and studied this and are ready to take your final exam, give me a call. For those who receive passing grades, I'll see you in heaven."

But for whatever reason, God chose not to do things that way. Jesus does *not* say, "On this rock I will build my *Bible Society*, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." He says, "I will build my *church*"--that is, my *assembly*, my *gathered ones*, my *people*. For whatever reason, as messy as it is to live together in community, and with all the ways we can end up jabbing one another in the eye without jagged edges, God has chosen to work through a *community* of people who live their faith together. You can't have the "solemn command" or the written words without the community that lives out those words together and is bound in love and, yes, in signs of affection like an embrace or a holy kiss. And as much as it is possible for the church to become *only* a social club, it is also possible for us to become a collection of strangers who could not imagine a common purpose, common rejoicing, or common weeping together. But again, that's hardly the kind of community that the New Testament envisions. Without living in the kind of love that sees each other's faces and speaks words of encouragement, forgiveness, and hope to one another as we face each day, we will miss what makes us revolutionary among revolutionary movements and become just one more cold ideology in a long line of those. What really makes us stand out among the world's other "movements" is that at our center is not an *idea*, or even really just a *message*, but a *Person*--a crucified Savior in whom we meet God and see humanity as it was meant to be. Ideas, after all, cannot bleed--and that is their weakness, not their strength. An idea cannot love you back or love you *first*. An idea will not die for you, or bind you together with others in love. For whatever else makes them all distinct and different, the collection of history's other revolutions all boil down to *ideas*, and therefore cannot give themselves away.

That is what makes the body of Christ so beautiful, strange, and compelling all at once. We are the people among whom it makes perfect sense to pair a "holy kiss" with a "solemn command."

Lord God, bind us in love that does not settle for sentimentality, and keep us grounded in your Word without knowing the Word become flesh.

Hemmed In...

Originally written for December 8-9, 2010--1 Thessalonians 5:28

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

We end where started, but we are changed. This is the last verse of the book we call 1 Thessalonians, and it is a benediction--a blessing--just as the opening verse was as well. We begin and end, we end and begin, calling on our Lord Jesus to give us his grace.

T.S. Eliot writes in "Little Gidding," this observation:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."*

That seems to be much the way this letter from the New Testament comes out, too. Paul began invoking the name of God and "the Lord Jesus Christ" and the praying for his friends in Thessalonica, "Grace to you and peace." And now, having come through five chapters of Paul's heartfelt encouragement and teaching to live in light of their hope of Jesus' coming, he brings us to the very end of this letter with the same prayer: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." We have arrived where we started--but something is different. We are different people now than we were when we started through this letter, as surely Paul's readers were. The prayer is the same--we

are hemmed in by grace on all sides, grace in the beginning and grace at the end, but that grace has changed, and *is changing*, us.

For Paul, this prayer that we could be graced by Jesus is not a throwaway line, and it is not just a greeting, and it is not just a polite way of saying, "I'm starting now," and then "I'm ending now." For Paul this is an urgent, passionate, from-deep-in-his-bones prayer. If we are honest, that prayer is our only hope--or at least, the grace for which Paul prays is our only hope. Let us be honest about that fact, too. We have explored, through these devotions, how the early Christian community was like a revolution, and how the *continuing* Christian community (you and me) are a part of that revolution, too. But we have also noted that the Christian "revolution" is also rather different from history's many other popular movements, because from our earliest beginnings, we have not been taught to think that the momentum, the energy, the *power*, of this movement came from inside ourselves. It has always been dependent on Another--on the living God. And just as much, it has been our belief from the beginning that our *belonging* within the Christian community does not depend on how much you or I noticeably change the world. Our *belonging* and our *belovedness* do not have to hinge on how much notice we attract for the church or for Jesus, or how much of a measurable impact your words or my actions have on the institutions and times around us, or even on how "fired-up" any of us appear to be to anybody else. Our belonging and our belovedness hinge on the very thing Paul hems us in with: the grace of Jesus Christ. Grace--the surprising way God has of giving away for free what cannot be earned--is how we have come to belong in this movement called *church*.

And that, ultimately, is what makes the Christian life revolutionary among revolutions--it is not a movement that depends on your or my willpower or charisma or success, but one which entirely finds its power and direction from God, which means that we can do our work even with things that the world would call failure and weakness. You don't audition or have to prove your your mettle to get *in* to the Christian movement--you are drawn in by grace. Throughout this letter, Paul has given us a window on what it looks like to let that grace transform us--how grace binds us together in love with a collection of other not-good-enoughs called the church, how grace gives us hopeful trust that Jesus will not lose his grip on our lives even through death, and how grace leads us to question the assumptions and rules that the world lives by. Having come through the letter now, we end again at grace, but hopefully with a deeper sense of what "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" is all about, thanks to Paul.

So if it feels like today, we are ending where we had started, fair enough--we are. But hopefully, as we end and begin with grace bringing us in and grace bringing us home, too, we will not longer let it be just a religious bit of jargon. Now that we look around at the lay of the land and see that grace is the place we started from, too, hopefully we know the place more truly now, maybe even as Eliot says, for the first time.

Viva la revolucion, we might say--"long live the revolution," the revolution of Jesus, the revolution of grace for the undeserving, of belonging for the outsider, of life beyond death, of returning evil with good. We might say it that way, except we also know that the revolution does not really *need* our wishes of long life, for Jesus, our Lord and our Savior, is already risen from the dead.

Lord Jesus, give us your grace, and today let us know the depth and wonder and direction of your grace as fully as our hearts can bear it. Lead us out, changed and reflecting your Kingdom so that the world will wonder, and come to move in your sway, too.