



Roanoke, Virginia
October 14, 2018

“Words of Encouragement”¹

I Thessalonians 5:1-22
George C. Anderson

I am going to divide our passage in two and I will ask you to listen to each half differently. Before I read the first half, though, I have a pastoral word for members of the Stewardship Committee. Here it is:

Don't panic!

The verses I will read are often quoted by those who say we live in the “*end times*” and the time is now or never to accept Jesus as Lord and escape damnation. That I would choose this passage for Commitment Sunday might lead one to suspect that I've resorted to fear tactics: “**The end is near, pledge before it is too late!**”

As I said, don't panic. My sermon will not resort to fear tactics, and I don't think the passage does either. This passage has been misheard. It really is an encouraging word for a new community of people who are just starting to figure out what it means to live with joy, hope and purpose in dangerous times.

When I say, “new community of faith,” I mean *real* new. Scholars I trust place the date of these letters to the church in Thessalonica only 22 years or so after Jesus' death... about the time the Gospel of Matthew was written. This is an *early* church in the *early* stages of figuring out what it means to be a church.

And Paul is figuring things out too. Just as this Christian community in its early years, Paul is early in his career as a church leader. These letters are less about theology and more about pastoral care and guidance for a church Paul wants to encourage. He is convinced that this church will make a powerful difference in each other's lives and in the world if they just hang in there with

¹ The sermon was previously titled, “Join the Crowd or Join a Community,” but the sermon did not end up fitting the title.



each other and with Jesus. His message to the Christians in Thessalonica might be summarized with this popular quote: “You’ve got this!”

As I read the first half of our passage, imagine that you are part of this newly formed community of followers of Jesus. All that holds you together is a shared, voluntary commitment to each other to hang together in obedience to Jesus in a land where obedience to Rome is required. The motto for the Roman empire is *Pax Romana*, which means “Roman Peace.” What it really means is, “Only in submission to Rome will you find peace.” Paul is not one to buck Roman rule. In fact, he is a Roman citizen. But he knows empires don’t last. In our passage, he will speak of a different kind of peace than the enforced peace of an empire and a different kind of salvation than can be offered by Rome’s protection. Listen for the theme of peace.

Imagine, also, being a community of those trying follow in the way of Jesus while living in the port city that is Thessalonica. Port cities of the first century are dangerous places, especially at night, when drunken behavior often is violent and criminal behavior. Listen for images of night and day, of drunkenness and sobriety.

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 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! ⁴ But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶ So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷ for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

If you didn’t hear a “You’ve got this,” passage but still hear a “Get ready, or else” passage, it might be because of an unfortunate translation. The pew Bible, the *Revised Standard Version*, and the Bible from which I read, *New Revised Standard Version*, both botched a verse. In verse 8, they have Paul calling for choices rather than naming gifts. They have Paul saying: “...let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” In other words, “Geer up! The boom is coming and if you don’t have faith as armor, you’ll be smashed.”

A correct translation of the Greek has Paul saying, “Since we are children of the day, clothed with breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation, let us be sober.” In other words, “You already have faith, love and salvation as gifts, be calm. You’re not in this alone. You have God and each other and you’re well equipped to face whatever comes.”

So, with that encouragement in mind- with Paul’s reminder of the gifts we have from God already in mind- the second half of our passage which I have not yet read will make more sense. We can now hear Paul’s real purpose: not to warn the church to escape the fire coming like a thief in the night, but to encourage the church to be faithful.



Basically, he is encouraging the church to remain odd. He wants the church to stand out as a community that thinks differently and lives differently. So many in the world that live are either anxious or causing anxiety, either afraid or spreading fear, either exploited or exploiting others. They live in the night. Be at peace, sleep at night and live in the day. Love each other and share the light, because God loves you and has given you the light of faith and salvation.

Then, Paul gets specific. And since we don't need to worry about the Thessalonian Christians facing the end of the world anymore, listen to the second half of our passage with different ears. Listen to the second half as encouragement of us as the community of Second Presbyterian Church to be today what Paul wanted a fledgling community of Christians to be around 2 millennia ago. I am going to go verse by verse, because each verse is something we Second Presbyterians can hang our identity and faith upon.

Verse 11: **¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.**

We're all trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus and it is not always easy. Just as children need more encouragement than criticism, we, who sometimes falter and make mistakes; who sometimes doubt or slip in our commitment; need encouragement from each other as we try to be more confident in our faith and in showing God's love.

Encouragement of each other can look like being together in worship and fellowship because it is when we gather as fellow believers that we are more likely to spend time figuring out what that means.

Encouragement can be listening when one is trying to figure out how to be faithful when it is hard

- being a friend or a parent or a child,
- being ethical at work,
- or being brave and hopeful when facing health challenges.

Encouragement can look like grace and forgiveness when one who forgets to live in the day, slips into the night.

V. 12 and the first half of 13: **¹² 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; ¹³ esteem them very highly in love because of their work...**

We truly are a congregation blessed to have Elizabeth, Rachel, the Sandborgs and Kristen to lead us, and the office staff to serve us. And we are blessed to have elders who take so seriously, carrying on the programs and ministries of the church while taking care of finances and facilities. Paul says clearly what I, as someone on the payroll, have a harder time saying: "Support those who work for you and lead you." Using Eugene Peterson's translation: Paul says, "Overwhelm them with appreciation and love!"



Second half of verse 13: **Be at peace among yourselves.**

These last few years in Bible study, I have gained a real appreciation for what Second Presbyterian has in common with the faith communities to which Paul wrote his major letters: Thessalonica, Galatia, Corinth and Rome. We are a congregation with an incredible diversity of points of view. Paul's encouragement is for us to keep dealing with each other with the love, grace and respect that Jesus modeled. I think Paul would applaud how we hosted forums where we modeled respectful dialogue over difficult issues. That is a daylight witness to a nighttime world.

V. 14: **¹⁴ And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.**

Paul does not let people-pleasing get in the way of faith formation. He would have no problem serving on our Stewardship Committee because he shows no hesitation in encouraging those who are neglecting the habits of the heart and the disciplines of faith to pick it up. Every one of us is valued and needed, we all have our part to play, so he encourages those who neglect the disciplines of faith- attending worship, learning the faith tradition, praying, practicing what scripture calls us to do: show justice, mercy and walk humbly with God- to pick them back up. Those who are engaged in God's work are likely more engaged in God's love. Also, and this is very important to Paul, the difference that we can make in lives, in Roanoke, in the national church and in the Dominican Republic is not the kind of difference the individual can make on his or her own.

V. 15: **¹⁵ See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.**

Here is where I could make a case that Paul is a Calvinist before Calvin. He has a deep appreciation for how human beings can so easily give into their worst impulses. Anger, if not checked, easily leads to hatred. Anxiety unchecked can lead to pervasive fear. Vengeance seems logical unless we help each other see it really is crazy. Greed and power are seductive, but they can destroy families, communities and the soul. One reason Paul would have us hang in there with each other is that the world is better served when we help keep each other's worst impulses in check. Christians are not immune from sin, but in holding each other accountable, we can help each other be free: free to forgive, to trust, to live well and to love more fully.

Vv. 16-18: **¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing. ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**

It is right, in Paul's eyes, that on Commitment Sunday when we make pledges at Second Presbyterian Church, we do so as part of a service of celebration. We make our pledges with glad and grateful hearts because gratitude to God and for each other is the best strategy we have to stay



strong in the confidence of God's love, to find energy for the witness we make, and to find strength not to give into the hate, anxiety, fear and manipulations of those who live in the metaphorical night.

Vv. 19-21: **¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.**

Paul would praise youth leaders, Sunday School teachers, volunteers in mission, and friends and family who insist on talking about what is moral, ethical and right; what is good and decent in the eyes of God. The world can ridicule them and call them naïve, but we should praise and thank them. They help remind us of our oddity, and perhaps, what is most odd about a healthy, Christian faith is the Christian conscience. While we do not always abstain from every kind of evil, especially when certain forms of evil become trendy or socially acceptable, deep down we have this voice that nags us. We can be grateful that this voice pulls against us from doing more harm on oneself, others, or the world... betraying God's love.

I truly believe that Paul would offer these kinds of encouraging words to us as the community of Second Presbyterian Church. He would see the weaknesses we have as individuals and as a community. Yet he also would see the gifts we already have in us... gifts that may have come to us through faithful parents, friends and teachers; or have come to us by those who faithfully built this community of faith in years past. He would see that we have it in us to be even more the trusting, joyful, and caring community of faith that the world needs us to be.

In his letters, he often quoted back to churches what he saw inscribed on monuments, or hymns and prayers of the community. I think he would quote back to us our mission statement, "Finding direction by following Jesus," and then add that as far as making the witness that needs to be made, we don't have to do it alone. We shouldn't do it alone. We can't do it on our own. God is with us. We can be there for each other and for others as we live in the day and not the night.

