

“Affirmation”

The Little Book of 1 Thessalonians

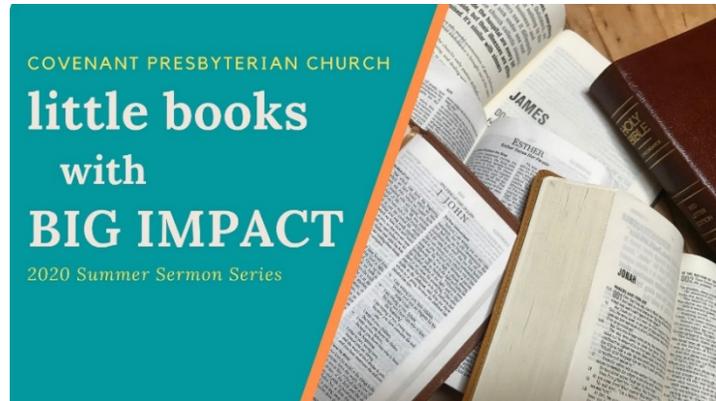
1 Thessalonians 1:2-5

Sunday, August 23, 2020

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Today we continue our Little Books of the Bible series with another of Paul’s letters – this one, the first to the church at Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Today it is the second largest city in Greece. Located at the top of the Aegean Sea it was not only strategic as a seaport, but also a stop on overland routes connecting the East and the West.

In Acts of the Apostles we read that after escaping jail in Phillipi, Paul with his companions went on to Thessalonica where he started this congregation. Traveling on to Athens, he longed to return, but could not. But Timothy went and came back with a glowing report of the faithfulness of the church in Thessalonica.

It is a letter –something that is a bit of a lost art these days. We communicate fast with texts, email – but there is something about that piece of paper, that card, we hold in our hand and the way it endures, like this letter.

This Epistle, most scholars agree, is the first of Paul’s letters -- written around the year 50 of the Common Era. It the earliest writing in the New Testament predating the writing of Mark some 15 or so years later.

The letter was a collaborative effort -- Paul along with Silvanus, or Silas, and Timothy. It is a letter of encouragement -- of affirmation -- of the church there, an affirmation of God’s work among them, and a bit unexpected, an affirmation of Paul’s ministry.

Even though it is an early writing, it is one that introduces several themes in Paul's theology – and describes a congregation that we would recognize today. It is not a big theological work like Romans. It was not a congregation in conflict like in Galatia and Corinth. It is a letter to a church simply striving to be faithful.

The letter begins:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; Grace to you and peace.

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. (1 Thess 1: 1-3)

How affirming to hear one's congregation described with words like "your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope". The Thessalonians seem to be primarily Gentiles born into a thriving pagan culture with its myriad of philosophies, theologies, life perspectives -- all dominate over this new Christian faith. But they held firm to their faith in God and Christ Jesus.

And the best thing Paul affirms? Their faith was not just belief. It was seen in their works – and the news of their faith had traveled far and wide throughout Macedonia. They had been "evangelized" by Paul and they in turn became "evangelists" – using evangelist not in the street cornering speechifying or handing out tracts in front of the grocery store sense – but in their lives, through the core of their being, sharing and bearing witness to the Good News.

If you think about how Covenant "evangelizes" – and yes, we do – even if we struggle to get that word – e-van-gel-ism -- from our lips – it happens when others hear about who we are and what we do. "Oh, that is the church that has all those bikers raising money for the Boys and Girls Club; that is the church that had the crazy anti-gay pastor protest in front of them; that goes to Guatemala, Peru, that helps schools, that is the church that serves those really good donuts, the church that has good music, relevant adult education, strong programs for children and youth, -- Good preaching? Oh, that church is doing so much online these days."

The list of comments by folks out in the community causes heads to turn and ears to be open to seeing and understanding how faith in Christ Jesus informs us – how it informs our relationships with them.

We affirm our faith: -- with words and through what we do.

Paul wrote about something else about affirmation in his relationship with the Thessalonians. There like other places where he began churches, he likely did it as much through conversations while he worked on tents, over coffee, tea, whatever. It probably included preaching, but it was about relationship with each other.

He recognized that in the process of affirming others, in ministering to others, he himself was affirmed. He knew joy because of them: *How can we thank God enough for all the joy we feel before our God because of you? 1 Thess 6:9*). He was encouraged by them. Affirmation was not just one way – but mutual – and as such was an affirmation of God. We often capture this when we add after doing something for and with others, “I felt so rewarded.”

I recall a youth mission trip to Appalachia. A large group comprised of some 60 youth and adult advisors from six Presbyterian churches in northwest New Jersey, we were divided into teams of six – 4 to 5 youth and 2 adults for each project. My team worked at Mary’s house burrowed in a holler of western Virginia. Mary had two young children who missed their dad -- in prison for car theft – for something Mary described sounding more like the crime of being taken in by shysters.

The house had caught fire one night in early spring. She and the children got out. A neighbor helped to contain the blaze to the kitchen. Youth groups ahead of us had repaired the kitchen. Our job was to begin the work of repairing the chimney that fire officials felt was the origin of the fire.

Testing this not very handy advisor, the first moments there, the youth joined in a chorus that I be the one to climb the ladder to check out the top portion of the chimney. I totally freaked. Laughing off the idea totally escaped me. No way. It was Glen, the other adult on the team – and engineer -- who climbed. He discerned the problem was at the bottom.

So, we pumped out gray water standing under the house and filled it in with gravel, eventually pouring a solid footing for a new chimney. It was hard, heavy work.

But what was memorable was being with Mary and her children. Mary owned the house but leased the land, a common arrangement there we learned. The landowner came by one day, looked around, handed her a paper, and left. She handed the paper to one of the youth to read because she was legally blind. It was a notice that the land

owner was raising rent on the land because of all the house improvements. Our outraged youth calmed down and sat with Mary as she called Legal Aid. Another youth, from the tony fox-hunting horse farms area of New Jersey, commented that the home's furnishings were just a kitchen table and chairs, an old couch, mattresses on the floor, and too many broken toys. She said, "I am learning something about being poor. It's not her fault. Too much is working against her."

As we prepared to depart on Friday, the little boy hugged Glen saying, "Your boy has a good daddy." Mary gave each of the youth a granola bar -- and me this pin. It isn't much -- a little plastic ladder with a fake stone. She had seen me freak out about climbing the ladder. I reached to hand it back to her explaining that I could not take a gift. She closed my fist around it. "No, it was just handed out somewhere I went. I didn't pay for it. You need it so you won't be afraid to climb. Thank you. Remember us. Pray for us." For a while, letters did go back and forth between a couple of youth and the 9 year old daughter.

Who was ministered to that week? Who was affirmed? Who experienced God's love and grace? Mary, her children, the youth putting a face on poverty, Glen being hugged, me with the ladder in hand. Doing ministry, sharing the Good News of the Gospel is mutual. It goes both ways. Paul knew that in his relationship with the Thessalonians. Such joy!

And finally, in Thessalonians, we read the core affirmation -- affirmation of faith in God -- the God who is at work in us through the Holy Spirit. Paul affirms the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who calls us forth as those chosen to do the work of ministry. When we act, Paul reminds us, it is God working through us in our work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope.

We can take these words that are nearly 2000 years old -- take them on for ourselves as we affirm and are affirmed through the Good News of Christ.

This next week just perhaps we can write a letter, make a call, serve others, pray -- and also allow ourselves to know the joy we receive when we say and act on our affirmation of faith in our God the Creator, Jesus Christ our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit our Sustainer.

So be it, for you and for me.