

IN EVERY PLACE YOUR FAITH IS KNOWN¹

I Thessalonians 1: 1-10

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

November 9, 2008

We always give thanks to God for all of you...constantly remembering before our God...your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.... Knowing this was part of my sermon text for this morning, I thought of it off and on this week as we prepared for two funerals. On Thursday we remembered with gratitude the life of Oris Norwood, who for 30 years made coffee for the church. Every Sunday, it was a *work of faith and labor of love*.

And then the next day we remembered the life of Jean Podell, who represented several generations in this church. In her Bible was a newspaper clipping showing a photograph of the first service held in this sanctuary. The pews are packed full, and the article says that more than 800 people heard the Rev. Dr. Thomas Roy preach on *The Keys of the Kingdom*.+ Some of you here today can remember that service. The completion of this beautiful place of worship represented a *work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope*.

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, November 9, 2008 . The title of the sermon is a paraphrase of I Thessalonians 1: 8.

I

Sometimes we need not so much a challenge to get out there and do something, but the invitation to stop and remember those who have gone before us with a *work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope*. Other generations before us have lived through challenging times. We are the recipients of their faith.

I once conducted a funeral in an old cemetery in Mystic, CN. It wasn't like the newer cemeteries with manicured lawns and flat gravestones. It was one of those ancient cemeteries with all kinds of stones and monuments, and over the years trees have grown up all around the graves. It is a beautiful, shaded place. On the day I was there for the funeral, a powerful wind and rainstorm blew in. A huge tree limb fell just a few yards from where we were standing. Limbs were blowing about, umbrellas were turning wrong-side-out, and rain was whipping up under our raincoats. In the midst of that storm, over the howling wind, we read: *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult...The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is*

*our refuge.*² Then we heard the words of Jesus over the screaming storm:
*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though
 they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never
 die.*³

Those promises, and others like them, make up the heart of our faith. When the storm is raging, the center of this faith will hold. A meaningful life, or what Peter Gomes has called "The Good Life,"⁴ requires a reliable center. If the center of life is made up of transient things, that center will not ultimately hold in times of storm. The old gospel song that many of us sang growing up had it right:

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
 When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
 By the living word of God I shall prevail,
 Standing on the promises of God.⁵

II

In the midst of the howling storm of life, there was once a little sapling of a church in a far-off place called Thessalonica. It was bent over in the wind, its roots barely clinging to the earth. It was in danger of being ripped apart in the storm. In the midst of that storm they received a letter from

² From Psalm 46.

³ John 11: 25-26.

⁴ Peter Gomes, *The Good Life, Truths That Last in Times of Need* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002).

⁵ Words and tune by R. Kelso Carter, 1886.

their founder, the Apostle Paul. He did not criticize them for their failures, which surely were many. He did not attack them for failing to meet their budget or for elements of their doctrine or for their attendance. Do you see what he did? He thanked God for them! *We always give thanks to God for all of you*, he said.

It is worthwhile to ask why he was thanking God for that struggling church! It can be seen in the letter itself, and it is worthwhile to point out because, frankly, I think we need to stop and thank God for this church that is willing to live with integrity and stand tall for things that are right. And we need to know why! So here are the reasons Paul thanked God for that church.

First, God chose them. *God has chosen you*, he said to them, *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....*⁶ Is it possible that we live under the delusion that we are here as a church because we chose to gather and search for God in this place? Perhaps the truth is just the reverse: that God chose us! To paraphrase the words of Abraham

⁶ I Thessalonians 1: 4-5.

Heschel, long before we searched for God, God was already searching for us.⁷

On June 30, 1812, in the midst of a war with England and a financial crisis in this country, 28 people who called themselves Baptists began holding worship services in the borrowed meetinghouse of the Unitarian Church in Worcester. They would eventually constitute themselves as the First Baptist Church of Worcester. Generation after generation of faithful folk have borne witness to the unique Baptist version of the gospel in this place, not because they decided to be a church in Worcester, but because God chose them to be a church in Worcester. When we do our part to uphold and sustain this church, we are sustaining something that God has chosen from the beginning. It doesn't matter how the demographics change in this community over the decades, we will sustain this church because God chose to put it here and still has a mission for us to fulfill!

Let us pause today, not to criticize what we have failed to do, but to thank God for what we can do because God has chosen us, because the message of the gospel has come to us not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. It is just as true for us as it was for that little church to whom Paul wrote this letter.

⁷ Abraham J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955), p. 136.

But there is more: **Paul thanked God for them for the way they had welcomed him and his colleagues into their community.** It was their sense of welcoming, of embracing new people, of gathering Paul and Silvanus and Timothy into their little community like old family friends. New people will never forget that!

That's human nature, and it hasn't changed in 2,000 years! When Paul says that they became *an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia*,⁸ it wasn't because they had the greatest attendance, or the biggest budget, or the most extensive outreach programs! It was simply because they genuinely welcomed people! Paul and his associates never forgot it! They were on a long journey, and they needed the sustenance and support of that little community of believers.

Things haven't changed that much. All of us who enter this church are on a journey, and God knows we need the sustenance and support of this community of believers. I receive a number of church mail-out bulletins from all over the country. In one of them I saw that the pastor of the church was facing triple bypass surgery, the replacement of a heart valve, and the repair of an aneurysm. Here he was facing surgery with tremendous risk to his life, and he made one primary request of that congregation. It was not

⁸ I Thessalonians 1: 7.

that they pray for him, or that they remain faithful in attendance or that they keep giving to the church budget. His one primary concern would be summed in his one request: love my family. Love my wife and children! They need this community now more than ever!

Just pause today and thank God for this: we are in a community of caring. The quality of our witness in this community and this world depends more on how we love than on the complexity of our programs. Caring counts! It is the most important outreach program in our church! Yet you will not see a line item in our budget called CARING. But thank God that it underlies every line item you will see in our budget.

But there is still more: **Paul was thankful to God that, as he put it, *in every place your faith in God has become known.***⁹ Paul's goal in establishing churches was to travel from Jerusalem all the way to Spain. He never made it that far, but if he had, he would have traveled about 10,000 miles! In that day and culture, such a goal is staggering! We know that he made it as far as Rome, and everywhere he went, he said, *your faith in God has become known*. Allowing for some hyperbole here, it is still significant that this little struggling church in Thessalonica made a name for itself, not so much for their physical work, but for what Paul called

⁹ I Thessalonians 1: 8.

their *work of faith*. They made a name for themselves, not so much for their labor in constructing buildings, but for what Paul called their *labor of love*. They made a name for themselves, not just for their steadfastness, but for what Paul called their *steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ*.

How do you measure the work of faith, the labor of love, and steadfastness of hope? I contend that you cannot measure it easily, but that it is the absolute foundation and center of this church. These are qualities that cannot be voted on; they are a gift of God. For these gifts we can say with Paul about our church that *we give thanks to God for all of you*.

III

It is true that in this financial climate we have great challenges. But it is also true that we have a strong and mature congregation who knows what is important and is willing to sacrifice to make it happen. We have a mission and vision that can meet the greatest challenges before us. We really are ~~a~~ a community of believers who seek to grow in our faith and understanding as we live the Way of Jesus Christ.+

We have a message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that has come to us not in word only, but, to use Paul's language, *in power and in the Holy*

Spirit and with full conviction. If we are to reach our full potential as a congregation, it will be because we have reaffirmed our distinctive role as an authentic, courageous, and faithful Christian witness in this community and the world.