

“Celebrating 100 Years: the Ministry of the Laity”
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Sunday, October 16, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

A man was answering questions for a national poll. When asked for his church preference, he responded, "Red brick."

This reminds me of Pastor Ron, our Minister of Visitation, and his favorite quip when people comment on what a beautiful church we have. He inevitably replies, “Yes, and the buildings are nice, too!”

Today we start a 4-part series called “Celebrating 100 Years.” In case you haven’t heard, we are celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the United Methodist Church of Yucaipa on November 13.

Our particular theme for today is the ministry of the laity. We celebrate the people – not the stone buildings, although they are very beautiful – we celebrate the people as being central to the mission and the identity of the church.

The ministry of the laity, or the people, is lifted up in the greeting of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy to the people of the Thessalonian church.

I. The People

It’s fascinating to me how we end up with Timothy and Silvanus as Paul’s travelling companions.

Timothy is the son of a Jewish-Christian woman and a Gentile father, according to Acts 16. Timothy’s family symbolizes the divisions within the early church. Some believe that new

converts must be circumcised before they can become Christians. Others believe that Jewish practices ought not to be required of Gentile converts.

Paul, in order to keep peace with Jewish-Christians, asks Timothy to be circumcised. This tells us a lot about Timothy's commitment to the work, that he would undergo such a painful process in order to join the mission. How many of us today are willing to suffer at all for the mission of the church?

Paul's other friend, Silvanus, also known as Silas, is equally fascinating. He is a respected leader among the Christians in Jerusalem. Silas joins Paul, basically, through a parting of the ways between Paul and Barnabas, as described in Acts 15. Paul wants to bring Silas along on a new journey, but Barnabas wants to bring Mark, instead. Mark has been a disappointment to Paul in the past, dropping out partway through a previous mission trip. So Barnabas takes off in one direction with Mark, and Paul takes off in another direction with Silas, soon to be joined by Timothy.

Now Paul and Barnabas have been travel buddies for many, many mission trips. They have been through a lot together, including some jail time, a beating here and there, some near-death experiences.

Suddenly, over a disagreement in personnel, they have broken up their partnership.

And thus we have Timothy and Silvanus travelling with Paul when he writes his first letter to the church in Thessalonica.

It's fascinating to me, how God brings people together for a season, and then stirs the pot, bringing together new people for a new mission.

The new mission of Paul, Silas and Timothy results in Paul's writing of his first letter to the Thessalonians, a letter that is known for the overwhelming level of thanksgiving that Paul expresses. He is so thankful for the church in Thessalonica that he cannot contain himself.

Bruce Larson, as quoted in Charles Swindoll's book, Living Above the Level of Mediocrity, tells this story of the difference one person can make:

“When I was a small boy, I attended church every Sunday at a big Gothic Presbyterian bastion in Chicago. The preaching was powerful and the music was great. But for me, the most awesome moment in the morning service was the offertory, when twelve solemn, frock-coated ushers marched in lock-step down the main aisle to receive the brass plates for collecting the offering. These men, so serious about their business of serving the Lord in this magnificent house of worship, were the business and professional leaders of Chicago. One of the twelve ushers was a man named Frank Loesch. He was not a very imposing looking man, but in Chicago he was a living legend, for he was the man who had stood up to Al Capone. In the prohibition years, Capone's rule was absolute. The local and state police and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation were afraid to oppose him. But single handedly, Frank Loesch, as a Christian layman and without any government support, organized the Chicago Crime Commission, a group of citizens who were determined to take Mr. Capone to court and put him away. During the months that the Crime Commission met, Frank Loesch's life was in constant danger. There were threats on the lives of his family and friends. But he never wavered. Ultimately he won the case against Capone and was the instrument for removing this blight from the city of Chicago. Frank Loesch had risked his life to live out his faith. Each Sunday at this point of the service, my father, a Chicago businessman himself, never failed to poke me and

silently point to Frank Loesch with pride. Sometimes I'd catch a tear in my father's eye. For my dad and for all of us this was and is what authentic living is all about.”

The Apostle Paul is grateful for the Thessalonians on a similar level. He is grateful for sacrifices they make and the risks they take in order to claim the name of “Christian” in a hostile world. Paul is deeply thankful for the people of the Church in Thessalonica.

II. The Work

Paul is thankful for the work, labor and steadfastness of the Thessalonian people. Their work is a form of faith. Their labor is a form of love. Their steadfastness is a form of hope. Through their active living out of the gospel, they show faith, love and hope to the world.

Paul is thankful that God has chosen the people of Thessalonica for a great work. He is sure that they have, in fact, been chosen. Because the words he preaches are received by them, “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” In other words, the people respond to the gospel message. They take action based on the word of God. In fact, Paul is convinced that, if God’s Holy Spirit were not at work, Paul’s words would be just that – words. The people would not respond at all, if it were not for the work of God among them. This is Paul’s proof that God has chosen the people of Thessalonica. They respond to Paul’s message, and they work for God in the world.

They work for God by helping the poor and the lost and the forgotten. They work for God by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and making new converts. They work for God by sharing faith, love and hope with one another. In fact, through their good works, they reveal their faith, love and hope to the world.

An article in the journal, Bits & Pieces, describes four main bones in every organization. The wish-bones: Wishing somebody would do something about the problem. The jaw-bones:

Doing all the talking but very little else. The knuckle-bones: Those who knock everything. The back-bones: Those who carry the brunt of the load and do most of the work. (Oct. 15, 1992)

The Apostle Paul is deeply thankful for the faith, love and hope of the Thessalonian people, as expressed in their work on behalf of the gospel.

III. Be Imitators of Christ

God is at work as Paul preaches to the Thessalonians, and so they have become imitators of Jesus. Paul's desire is to so embody the Spirit of Christ, that his words and his life express one and the same message. He wants to be a living example of Jesus. He wants the same for the Thessalonians.

And he is not disappointed. He gives thanks, once again, for their journey of faith. First they were imitators of Paul. But now the Thessalonians are, themselves, examples to be imitated by others. Those whom Paul has served now serve others. They have come, many of them, out of lives of deep sin and debauchery. They have come, some of them, out of lives of excessive wealth and greed and sinful oppression of others.

Now they love Jesus and serve the poor. Now they are known in every place, so that Paul hardly needs to preach anymore; the gospel of Jesus Christ has been so embodied by the people of the Thessalonian church that it is told far and wide.

Of course, this is a bit of an exaggeration for literary effect. Paul does continue to preach. There continue to be people who have not yet heard the good news of Jesus Christ. And there continue to be people who, having heard, do not respond.

But Paul gives deep and heartfelt thanks for the people of Thessalonica, who have responded in stunning ways, so as to become, "an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia...[and] in every place" (vv. 7 & 8). They have become imitators of Christ.

Caroly R. Gibson tells a story about Victor Daley, the Australian poet. He was being tenderly cared for in a Catholic Hospital as he was dying. One of his last acts was to thank the nurses for all their kindness to him. “Don’t thank us,” the nurses said, “Thank the grace of God.”

Very perceptively, the poet asked, “But aren’t YOU the grace of God?”

The people of the Thessalonian Church have become imitators of Christ. They have become “the grace of God.”

Now, being imitators of Christ does not mean we are perfect. No Christian is perfect, and no church is perfect, although we often feel pressured to be so. I don’t know the source, but it has been said that, “the purpose of the church is to bring together believers, to strengthen their faith, to organize their efforts for good, and to provide fellowship and worship opportunities. But churches are made up of human beings. Imperfect, flawed human beings. No matter how hard we strive, we cannot be perfect. When we complain that our church is not always a God-like institution, we must look to ourselves to see the root of the problem.”

The story is told of a man who once said, “As soon as I find a perfect church, I’ll join it.” His friend said, “Well, there are three reasons why that will never happen. First of all, a perfect church would never accept you or me. Secondly, you and I wouldn’t feel comfortable in a perfect church. And thirdly, as soon as you and I joined it, it would no longer be perfect.”

The Apostle Paul is deeply thankful that the people of the Thessalonian Church have become imitators of Christ. They are not perfect, but they are doing the work of the Lord. And for this, the Apostle Paul is deeply grateful.

Closing.

I am deeply grateful for the people of the United Methodist Church of Yucaipa – for the work they do for the Lord, and for their continued desire to be imitators of Christ.

Throughout 100 years of ministry, the people of this church have done the work of the Lord in stunning ways. They have been an example to believers in our local area and beyond. They have truly been imitators of Christ, in their church work and in their work in the home, on the job, and in the community. On November 13 we will celebrate this history and look to the future, with gratitude for the ministry of the laity in this place.

The slideshow you are about to see was compiled by Deb Davidson for our Charge Conference last year. She has added a few historical pictures, too. I think as you watch it, you will feel thankful, as I do, for the incredible ministry of the laity here at the United Methodist Church of Yucaipa.

[Ask Breanna to run the slideshow of our local “ministries of the laity”.]

Amen.