

Covenant Presbyterian Church
October 18, 2020
First Thessalonians 1:1-10
Faith, Love, and Hope

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the public assembly of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. (Rome: Peace and Security)

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not only through word, 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.

⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of tribulation, you received the word with joy, inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For 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. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God away from the gods (in Thessalonica – the Emperor of Rome was honored in temples like a god), to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, delivering us from the wrath (orge [or-gay]) that is coming. [Please note that it is not “**God’s** wrath” that is coming. Dr. Carol Dempsey, OP Dominican writes: “Rather the wrath that is coming, and is already in our

midst, is the inordinate continued and calculated misuse and abuse of power on the part of many world leaders that will eventually leave the planet in ash heap of ruins.”]

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Scholars are convinced that First Thessalonians is the first extant New Testament or Greek Testament writing, dating it to around 50 AD or CE. I’ve always thought that gave it more significance that we usually give this modest three-page letter, which most of us have difficulty finding! When we do find it, we find an encouragement which has lasted through the ages. How many of us, when sitting down to write a letter – or even an email – expect that it would be among the most published of letters of all time?

The “historical context” as much as we know of it from the Book of Acts is that Paul, having left Philippi, the resort for retired Roman officers, traveled to Thessalonica, capital of the Roman province Macedonia, a hub of commerce, central to both land and sea trade routes. There he imitated Christ among the people there, and some of them turned to God, and away from Emperor worship.

According to Acts, the “Jews” became jealous, and, with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.” [I guess somethings never change...] With the looming threat of arrest, Paul was suddenly and covertly taken out of the city to Borea. Unable to return, and with his time with the Thessalonians cut short, Paul writes a few words, and sends Timothy to deliver them, as the authorities in Thessalonica would not recognize Timothy.

Separated by distance, as we are separated by social distancing, Paul’s letter to those in Thessalonica reads like rain in a drought for those who had just recently turned from a culture of

idolatry to the one true God. Even with all the uncertainty that a letter, written and delivered by hand, would carry, the writing of it must have been a balm to Paul's soul, as well. He had to say good-bye too soon. He missed his people.

Certainly, the Thessalonians were disconcerted by Paul's sudden departure, and perhaps even fearful for their own selves. Counter-cultural behaviors have always drawn criticism and even retribution. And Paul is beginning to discover just how much persecution or tribulation he, too, will have to bear. It is as if, in the writing of the letter, Paul is assuring himself as well as the Thessalonians, because this first chapter is written, not in the singular nominative I, but in the plural nominative We. We give thanks to God for you; we know that God has chosen you; we don't even need to tell you about how much faith you have, because we hear about your faithfulness everywhere we go and everyone already knows about it, even beyond Macedonia and Achaia. Paul is not an authority here. Paul is a friend. A team player. A coach. A mentor.

When I read one of these letters that Paul wrote, his salutation of Grace and Peace, his thankfulness for those gathered in Christ's name, his assurance that his people are in his prayers, I can't help but nod my head. For I am deeply thankful for you all and I remember you all in my prayers. Indeed your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope are gifts you give to each other, to me and to Lubbock, as well as to God. What an assurance it is to serve and live among such deeply faithful people, who preserve through the challenge of this pandemic, accepting the suffering that comes with faith, laboring on in households and teams, collaborating with me and with one another to adapt to the challenges we face.

Being a MoreLight and EarthCare Congregation, your faith and love are a beacon of hope in a world in chaos. Thriving during three pastoral transitions involving four pastors! Loving one another still, and nurturing the faith of young people! Your confidence in God's provision and in

the love you share for one another is palpable. Yes, these are trying times. Yes, there is sadness in our separation from one another. Yes, this is not where we expected to be. AND, we will continue to work together in faith, labor in love, and hold fast to the hope which we have been given through the power of the Holy Spirit, which binds us together in Christ's name. Together, we practice living out the promises God has given us, courageously moving toward a deeper knowledge and understanding, a deeper faith, a deeper love, a deeper hope. Each and every one of you is an example of the living God, the living God whose word and Holy Spirit bind us together as we wait for deliverance to come.