

## Even So, We Hope

I Thessalonians 1: 10 October 22, 2023 GCPC

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After that meditative and reflective reading of Scripture it feels a little uncomfortable and vulnerable breaking the silence. What if my words don't measure up to your thoughts or your thoughts don't measure up to my words? The truth is it doesn't really matter. We're all here to take risks and to worship God; to be vulnerable to each other and that is what matters.

I Thessalonians isn't one of my "go to" books in Scripture and I bet it isn't yours either.

We like to think the Gospels were the first books written in the New Testament.

However, if the New Testament was ordered by the year each book was written, I Thessalonians would be first. It was written around 51 C.E. which makes it the earliest Christian writing and the earliest evidence we have that Christianity even existed.

It was written by Paul, Silvanus and Timothy together although scholars believe Paul wrote parts of it himself. In any event, they were a team and Paul wasn't alone.

A long time ago, I worked as a waitress in a busy family style restaurant. I had never waited tables before and I learned real quick that my gifts lay in other areas.

The worst part of the job was carrying those huge trays. The first tray I carried was on the day the regional director of the restaurant decided to pay a surprise visit.

I saw him staring at me as I tottered through the seating area carrying this huge tray of food that appeared it was about to fall crashing to the floor. The manager had just yelled at me for giving the cook an order with all the wrong abbreviations. When I saw her boss sitting there, I was certain I would be fired.

One evening as I hustled about trying to take orders, deliver food and pour coffee, I noticed we were running short of silverware. When a customer asked for a spoon and there was none to be found, I hurried to the kitchen only to discover a gigantic pile of dirty dishes.

I frantically searched for the man whose job it was to wash the dishes and found him sleeping in the back room. No one noticed him sneak from the kitchen to take a nap but all of us felt his absence.

Although Paul, Silvanus and Timothy weren't waiting tables and we don't know what each of their jobs were, each of them must have mattered or the letter would have come from only Paul.

They wrote to mostly Gentiles who were following Jesus in the first century in Thessalonica. By the time the three wrote the letter, Thessalonica had been under Roman rule for over two centuries.

It was a port city and was located on a major Roman highway so it would have been exposed to a wide variety of social and cultural influences.

Sometimes we think of the world prior to the advent of Christianity as impoverished concerning religious options. That does not describe Thessalonica at all. They had plenty of

gods to follow so the three tried in their letter to Thessalonica to help them follow Jesus in a world of many gods.

We learn from the letter that the three of them had visited the city together to teach and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We learn in vs 9 that some Thessalonians “turned to God from idols” and joined them in their expectation of the return of Jesus Christ.

After the three left – and we don’t know why they did -Paul was unable to go back so he sent Timothy to see how things were going. Timothy has now returned with news of the city, so Paul, Silvanus and Timothy respond with this letter.

The book of Acts paints a different picture of Paul’s visit to Thessalonica. Beverly Gaventa, a New Testament scholar and my professor at Columbia seminary in the 90’s, believes this letter written before Acts is more reliable. If you have a minute, check out Acts 17 and notice the differences.

Let's stop and look at a sentence in the beginning and see what it might be saying to us. We are “constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

That sentence packs a whole lot of punch. “Work of faith.” “Labor of love” “Steadfastness of hope.” What do they mean? The first phrase- “work of faith” may seem awkward. The Greek suggests the phrase is better translated as “work that stems from faith.”

The Open Door Community began with a bible study. Be careful when you study the bible for it may lead you to do challenging and imaginative things!

Ed Loring and Murphy Davis, pastors of a small church in Atlanta that worked with people experiencing homelessness, and another couple began a bible study in the late 70’s. All were white, middle class and college educated. They discussed each bible passage and asked themselves the question, “what does this mean for how we ought to live?”

They read Matthew 25. I invite you to read it all but basically is says if you feed “those who are experiencing hunger and poverty) if you clothe the naked and take care of the sick, if you welcome the stranger and visit those in prison, then you are doing this for Jesus.

For the four founders it meant leaving their small church and forming a residential Christian community, one where they would live in solidarity with those pushed to the margins by systemic poverty. It meant finding a place big enough for a soup kitchen, showers, clothes closet, public restroom, and worship. It meant living together with people from all racial identities.

On December 16, 1981, they moved to the former Women’s Union Mission just outside of downtown. They had lots of work to do. They battled roaches and grime. When Murphy’s parents came, they were met with a jug of Clorox and a mop at the back door. Murphy greeted them, “Here make yourself at home.”

Their “work that stems from faith had begun.”

Looking back at Thessalonians, the Greek word for “work” in work of faith implies your occupation or your “day job.” The Open Door’s entire “day job” was their work for and with those pushed to the margins by symptoms of oppression and exclusion.

Today we have wars in Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Libya, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and others. And now an atrocity in the Middle East. Thousands have died in the Mid Eastern war. Thousands more have been wounded.

What can our work that stems from faith be that is not trite or insignificant? As Marcia reminded us last week, we must pray. Second, we must take the time to read reputable and multiple news sources. We must speak up and speak out to our neighbors and family members. By doing this, we’re supporting those involved in this horrific war. We are doing the work of faith.

A story is told about a warm summer Sunday afternoon in New York on the train to Flushing from Grand Central Station. There were about ten people in the car, and no one looked at anyone else or acknowledged their presence.

People glanced at the advertising above the windows or watched the world as it passed by outside the moving car. No one’s eyes met.

At Queens Plaza the doors opened and in walked a woman with a young girl and they sat down. For one moment a man looked at them but then quickly went back to reading his newspaper. All twelve people remained deep inside their own little worlds.

Then at the next stop, with the doors open and the motor quiet, with the sounds of a summer Sunday afternoon in Queens buzzing in the background, the little girl looked up at the woman and said in a voice so clearly that everyone on the subway car could hear, “Mommy, I love you!”

The man reading the newspaper looked up at the girl, then at the mother then at the other passengers on the train. There was recognition in people’s eyes. For a split second in time, twelve total strangers were brought together by the experience and expression of love.

What if the mother had been in a hurry that morning, trying to get out the door to go to work and daycare? What if she had wanted her daughter to wear something she didn’t want to wear, and they had an argument? Perhaps this was a way for the little girl to make amends as children often feel they need to when an adult is upset. No doubt about it. Love can be hard and laborious.

Beloved knows something about labor. Beloved is a Christian community here in Asheville that works day and night to help folks without housing, food or other necessities. They created little pantries all over the city that they fill with food and essential items free for the taking.

Their most daring project is a little village off Tunnel Road behind Land of the Sky UCC Church. They are building tiny houses so that people who cannot afford housing in the Asheville

market will be able to afford a home here. Many businesses and individual folks have joined in the project by donating time, talent, roofing, carpeting, paint and other materials to build the houses.

Beloved is listening to God's creative voice and trying to provide something that is missing in our city.

Is there a labor of love that God is calling you to do? Perhaps it's just to listen – really listen – to the folks around you.

Perhaps they and you need to talk about Israel and Hamas, and you differ. Model what it means to love and still disagree. In our fragmented, disjointed world, we need more of this kind of love.

The Thessalonians believed that Christ's return was right around the corner. For this reason, they needed to be "steadfast in their hope" for his return. We know now it didn't happen that way so does this sentence have anything to say to us?

Hope is more than simply hoping you get a good grade on your test. It's more than hoping for that promotion or position in your office. It is more than hoping for a Chocolate Fudge Brownie ice-cream Sundae for dessert even though that's always my hope when dessert is mentioned.

Hope is deeper. Vaclav Havel, the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic said hope is an "orientation of the spirit."<sup>1</sup> Local singer, songwriter, and sometime theologian David LaMotte writes:

"Hope begins with an honest assessment of a given situation, but it grows into a conscious choice to lend your own energy to move that situation in a better direction."<sup>2</sup> (Worldchanging 101: Challenging the Myth of Powerlessness, 2014)

Some of you know that back in August of 1996 while serving as a pastor in Atlanta, I sustained a devastating traumatic brain injury in a car accident. I received physical, speech, cognitive and occupational therapy but when that ended, I knew I needed to get out in the "real" world. I still couldn't drive so I decided to volunteer at the Open Door – a short bus ride from my apartment.

It was a fulfilling place to do ministry and I hoped it would help me get back to the pastorate again. I put my "all" into the work but as time went on, I realized it was just too chaotic of a place for me.

The next place I tried was a hospice for AIDS patients – the complete opposite of the Open Door community.

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<sup>1</sup> David LaMotte, *Worldchanging 101: Challenging the Myth of Powerlessness* (Montreat, Dryad Publishing, Inc., 2014), 28

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Again, I supported their work but by the time folks entered the hospice, all they wanted to do was sleep. I went from room to room seeing sleeping patients. I saw that wasn't going to work either.

I had reached the end of my rope. I spent a lot of time moping around the apartment wishing for a different life. However, a verse of Scripture kept running through my mind. "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (Isaiah 43: 18-19)

I felt I had tried enough things and couldn't think of anything else but deep inside, I still had hope that God would make a way... rivers.

Finally, one day my husband and I were driving by Wesley Woods Retirement Center in Atlanta GA. I figured I'd just go into the chaplain's office and see if they could use a volunteer while my husband stayed in the car. To my amazement, the director of the department was there. He talked to me for a while, showed me around and said he could use a volunteer to join the staff of chaplains.

That turned out to be the right fit. For the next six years, I was considered part of the chaplaincy staff and being there was exactly what I was looking for. It pushed me to work on tasks that were challenging for me after the accident: writing, reading, speaking, and leading bible studies on the various units.

I still hoped I would be a church pastor again but as time went on, I began to see the limitations I had after the accident. I could serve but I couldn't keep up the pace of the other chaplains. It took me too long to plan and write devotionals. I got overstimulated easily and had to do what I call "rest my brain." This is when I go off by myself and put in ear plugs, close my eyes and get away from all stimulation.

I do that here often. Once, I was in a choir rehearsal. We had been practicing for an hour and a half and my cognitive energy was gone. I left for a few minutes - but didn't have ear plugs so had to stuff my fingers in my ears. It's a good thing Cliff, the Property Manager, didn't walk by and see me for he wouldn't have known what was going on! I came back to the rehearsal refreshed.

As Marcia said in her video presentation, I'm the Minister of Vulnerability. I visit vulnerable people and have written a couple of articles for the newsletter. Basically, I serve as an incarnational presence at GCPC.

Webster's dictionary defines vulnerability as what "can be wounded or physically injured, easily hurt, sensitive."

Who would want to be hurt or wounded? Who would want to be injured? I like researcher and speaker Brene Brown's definition better. She says vulnerability is uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. She sees it as the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love. She believes it is the core of all emotions and feelings.

If we deny vulnerability, we begin covering up all our emotions. God has made us in such a way that it is impossible to choose what feelings and emotions we will experience.

I believe we can't be a vital and faithful church to witness to Jesus Christ unless we are open and honest about our vulnerable places. We can't have steadfastness of hope unless we love and respect each other so we can be the true body of Christ.

Even Jesus had vulnerabilities. He often went away from the crowds to recharge his batteries with prayer and solitude. If Jesus wasn't afraid to show his vulnerabilities, we need to follow him by being brave enough to publicly express ours and have hope we'll be accepted.

It's not possible to serve God without being vulnerable. The Open Door was vulnerable. They took a risk through their work that stems from faith, and they ended up with a creative ministry.

Beloved was vulnerable when they began their tiny village. Now the labor is almost done.

I don't know why I stopped into the chaplaincy office at Wesley Woods that day. I was frustrated and disappointed. I wondered if God was ever going to use me again. I wondered if my life was over. They took a chance on me and I took a chance on them. Our spirit was oriented to God in a way we weren't aware. Sometimes hope sprouts inside in situations we don't know or see.

We live in a world full of brutal atrocities, racism, hatred, and death. Even so, let's choose the work that stems from faith, the labor of love and the steadfastness of hope - which is an orientation of the Spirit - in our Lord Jesus Christ. Let it be so. Amen.