



“Your Work of Faith, Your Labor of Love”

Pastor Andy CastroLang

October 22, 2017

Scripture (CEV):

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 From Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

To the church in Thessalonica, the people of God the Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I pray that God will be kind to you and will bless you with peace!

²We thank God for you and always mention you in our prayers. Each time we pray, ³we tell God our Father about your work of faith and labor of loving and about your firm hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Thessalonians' Faith and Example

⁴My dear friends, God loves you, and we know he has chosen you to be his people. ⁵When we told you the good news, it was with the power and assurance that come from the Holy Spirit, and not simply with words. You knew what kind of people we were and how we helped you. ⁶So, when you accepted the message, you followed our example and the example of the Lord. You suffered, but the Holy Spirit made you glad.

⁷You became an example for all the Lord's followers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸And because of you, the Lord's message has spread everywhere in those regions. Now the news of your faith in God is known all over the world, and we don't have to say a thing about it. ⁹Everyone is talking about how you welcomed us and how you turned away from idols to serve the true and living God. ¹⁰They also tell how you are waiting for his Son Jesus to come from heaven. God raised him from death, and on the day of judgment Jesus will rescue us from the wrath that is coming.

Sermon:

I just cannot believe that beloved St. Paul planned to become Holy Writ.

I truly imagine that he might be turning over in his grave because the letters he wrote to specific groups of people, in specific towns, with very specific ups and downs of their own...have been set in stone and argued over for well over 1,500 years.

Not that a letter, or a sermon isn't useful beyond the one individual or group to which it is written, or the one Sunday when it is preached to a specific congregation. Great letters, great sermons have come down through the ages and enlighten many of us. But rarely is it a simple matter to discern the meaning and significance of that letter or sermon, without some work on our part.

I spoke about gratitude and giving last Sunday and I had one person hear about my giving and say, "Wow, you must have a lot of money" and another person say, "wow, you must never have any money."

It's funny and it's terrifying, because of course, talking about money can lead to misunderstandings just like that. I still have a mortgage, bills, credit card debt and some debt incurred to help our children through college. I have to pay those every month, but I don't wait until I am debt free to give to other groups and causes that I want to support. But I didn't say that last week!

Now, there may well be folks out there today who never incur a debt they don't immediately pay off. And that is just fine. I have a colleague who had a household expense, a new furnace I believe, that she told me, completely ended her planned vacation. It was one or the other to be paid. So she didn't go on vacation and paid for the furnace instead. Maybe she didn't like putting a vacation on a credit card? Maybe she already had debt and couldn't add to it? I don't know. We don't know. It was one conversation. We are urged not to judge, not to gossip, not to slander, or to envy another. We are urged to share and to support others, speak out love, practice compassion and mercy.

But all this has to be written and said, again and again, for those who hear it the first time, and those who don't.

So it is with Paul and his letter today.

He simply has to start with love and praise for the members of the Thessalonian house church, and he recaps for them their coming to faith in Jesus, their love and generosity, their work of faith and their labors of love that have made them known to the other Christian communities in the region.

It isn't that they are wealthy or powerful, as far as historians can tell, the earliest Christians were almost never wealthy or powerful, but...they were filled with the desire to live in Christ's model, and the desire to practice love and hospitality and live their faith, in Christ's name. They were eager to share the hope they found in Jesus and to love generously, in all the ways they could.

Last week, I spoke with you about giving, and I spoke with you about receiving.

I know, from experience among you, that you also practice generosity, in all sorts of ways. And not unlike the Thessalonian church, you too have a reputation among the people of our city, as a giving church, a servant church, an active and concerned church with members who speak up and care, who speak out in City Hall or on the street. You are more than just "nice", you are also passionate and active. And like Paul I want to say, 'Thank you', and 'Bless you'. In case you didn't hear it before.

My sermons won't last 1,500 years!

But if they did, I would want them to be about you; about your labors of love...to the homeless, the ill, the immigrant, the fearful and the the Gay or Straight or Trans or Gender fluid. Loving others as widely as you can, because you know the love of God.

And your work of faith...among the suspicious and the doubting, among the cynical and the alienated, those hurt by their previous churches; those hurt by religion, culture, family.

You live in your lives and actions, a message of welcome and hope for those who had no sense of the justice of Jesus, the compassion of God, and the joyfulness of the Holy Spirit.

I see this in you.

And like I said last week, and as Paul says in his letter this morning, 'I give thanks for you, and I pray to God for all of you'. Sometimes, you just have to say it again and again.

Thank you. Amen.