

Sermon for Sunday, April 21, 2024

Acts 17: 1-9

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

These are not the words that I usually open my sermon with but I do so today because they are the words that Paul uses to open his letter to the church in Thessalonica.

Grace and peace. Calming words; encouraging words sent to a church that is under stress as they undergo persecution. Grace: God's unearned love given to all, including the believers in Thessalonica who responded to Paul's message about Jesus. Peace: the sense of tranquility and serenity that comes to a person when they know they have nothing to fear. With these words Paul reminds that church that no matter what happens they have God's grace and God's peace. No circumstance and no one can take that away from them.

These two readings are paired because the passage from Acts 17 explains the stressors that the church in Thessalonica was experiencing. Therefore it is appropriate to examine that passage a little more closely. Then we will return to the Thessalonians passage and use Paul's words for our own encouragement.

Last week's healing story from the third chapter of the book of Acts tells a story with Peter as one of the main characters. This story takes place in Jerusalem and the primary characters were Jewish. But as the book of Acts unfolds the ministry emphasis shifts from reaching out to Jews to reaching out to gentiles through the missionary journeys of Paul into Roman cities in the Mediterranean basin.

In today's Acts text we are introduced to Paul's missionary tactic. When he comes to a new city he begins by seeking out the local synagogue to worship and hear the reading of Scripture. From the readings that Paul hears he begins to debate with other people in the synagogue. This was a common practice. Just as we participate in Bible study and talk about the message that the text is bringing to us; the Jews would do the same. In this debate Paul would present Jesus as the Messiah. Sometimes people were convinced, sometimes they were not. (This shouldn't be surprising because it's an inherent part of the nature of people and it still happens even

today. I don't need to give you an example, you experience these differences of opinion all the time.)

Now the Acts text tells us that Paul succeeded in convincing some of the listeners present. Verse 4 says, "Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women." Good on you, Paul! Your arguments were convincing. But let's pause and consider a couple of details with the context.

1. The Jews of Thessalonica were likely a small group. Like any small church that you can imagine, they didn't want to lose members! So it's bothersome when some of the synagogue attendees are persuaded.
2. As a small group the Jews didn't have a lot of social or political power/clout. In that world it was advantageous to have a patron or benefactor to sponsor or protect you or your group. This would be someone who was higher up on the social/religious/political ladder (who had more power). If you didn't have a benefactor and it was perceived that you were causing trouble it was likely that you would be imprisoned or forced out of town. No, the Jews in the synagogue didn't want trouble.
3. People who study the Roman empire and the cities of the Mediterranean will tell you that at that time it was almost impossible to separate government from culture from religious practice. For many the only way to survive economically was to "worship" the emperor. Then there was the plethora of Greek gods and goddesses. You might give first religious allegiance to the emperor but to be on the safe side you would also offer a sacrifice to any number of other gods and goddesses to insure a good harvest or the safe delivery of a baby or healing from a disease.

When Paul presents opinions counter to the prevailing political/cultural/religious opinions of the day it is not just upsetting; it is dangerous. An important part of Paul's argument is that there is only one God and that God sent his Son Jesus as Messiah. This Jesus suffered and died by crucifixion. BUT, this Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven. These are religious statements.

Here's the thing: at its core, Paul, Silas, and Timothy's offense is not the religious message they are speaking about Jesus. From Paul's Jewish perspective Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture: Jesus is the messiah and that means that Jesus is king. But from a

political perspective there is only one “king” in the Roman empire and that’s Caesar. Their offense is that they are “destabilizing a political structure.”

As one of Paul’s accusers stated, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also...” The folks for whom the current system (this intermingling of political/cultural and religious life) was working did not like the idea that something had radically shifted. They didn’t want their world turned upside down. This is one way of saying that the “way things have always been done” is being destabilized. Those who are thriving under the current system don’t want their world destabilized. They are afraid of losing power and security. They don’t their world turned upside down. Trouble is that this is exactly what Jesus came to earth to accomplish: to turn the world upside down.

There is an enormous irony in the fact that the people here who are so concerned about law and order are the very ones who find ways to enact violence in the name of law and order. It happened 2000 years ago; it still happens today.

Understanding the context that the Thessalonian church exists within helps us to understand why Paul says what he does in his letter to them. Three bits from Paul:

1. “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly.” Why? Because Paul knows that they are undergoing persecution. Paul isn’t there with them but he believes in the power of prayer and believes that praying for them and telling them that they are being prayed for will help them to endure the pressures that they face.
2. “Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul specifically names their faith, love, and hope, to encourage them. He reminds them that they are the beloved of God, that God has chosen them, and that the Holy Spirit dwells among them. God is with them even during this hard time.
3. When Paul mentions other new churches in in Macedonia and Achaia, he is providing an extra layer of encouragement by telling them that people in other places heard about their faithfulness. The word has spread far and wide and the Thessalonian’s faith in the face of persecution has encouraged those other new churches to persevere even when it gets really hard.

To the best of our knowledge the letter to the church in Thessalonica is one of the earliest of Paul’s letters. At the end of today’s reading we get an introductory reference to Paul’s belief that Jesus’ return is going to happen soon. In my opinion he intended those words to be an encouragement: stay faithful, finish the race, don’t stop now because Jesus is coming soon.

There’s an old saying that goes, “Even if I knew I were to die tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today.” As followers of Jesus we are called, not only to remain faithful looking forward to his promised return, but to live life focused on today! We are called to keep planting apple trees, figuratively speaking, because our world needs our good deeds, our encouragement, and our actions demonstrating perseverance. And our world needs it today. Through our actions we bring hope to a tired and hopeless world.

It might be true that Jesus will return tomorrow, but does that absolve us from providing relief to those who are hurting today? No. The message that Jesus is going to return tomorrow cannot be received by people who are hungry, thirsty, sick or imprisoned. The return of Jesus tomorrow isn’t good news for them. They need help NOW. They need help today.

For that reason we are called to live with faith in the place where God has placed us. We are called to live buoyed up by the gift of grace and peace that God plants in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. We are called to do what we can to be God’s helping hands here on earth today.

Paul reminds the church in Thessalonica that no matter what happens they have God’s grace and God’s peace. As followers of Jesus we too have God’s grace and peace. Nothing and no one can take that away from us. Grace and peace my friends, today, tomorrow and always. Amen.

“A crucial aspect of Christian faith is the claim that there is a radical difference between the world as it is and the world as God wills it to be. The reign of Caesar is not the reign of God. Where God is king, there can be no other absolute ruler. Therefore, every absolute claim is undermined. Neither nationalist absolutism, nor ideological absolutism of the right or the left, nor military absolutism, nor ecclesiastical absolutism, are compatible with Christian faith.” (Acts: the Gospel of the Spirit by Justo L. Gonzalez, page 198.)