

Church in Thessalonica

May 3, 2020

In 1966, when I was 10, my dad felt the call of the Holy Spirit to move our family to Germany where he became a missionary with Youth for Christ. His job was to share the good news of Jesus with teenagers of American military families. He would bring over teams of American college students who would sing and share about their commitment to Christ. They would perform concerts of secular music in the American high schools, and then they would invite students to come to a chapel service that night where they would share stories about their faith. My dad's ministry was fruitful. Young people committed their lives to following Jesus. And I got to hear some great music and meet some wonderful young people I could look to as models of faith.

After Jesus was raised from the dead, the apostles Paul and his colleagues travel around the Mediterranean to share what they have experienced of Jesus. In our story today from Acts 17, they are on their second missionary journey. Just like my dad, they needed a strategy. So they would arrive in a city, and look for the nearest Jewish synagogue. They did this because Paul was Jewish, Paul had been a Pharisee, Paul knew the Jewish Scriptures, and he had a connection with Jewish people.

So in today's story, they arrive in the port city of Thessalonica, which is in northern Greece. For three consecutive Sabbaths, Paul teaches in the local synagogue, arguing with them from the Scriptures. They are Jewish. They are expecting a Messiah, so Paul says, Let me share with you who I think the Messiah is. The Jews were expecting a kingly figure to arrive and provide deliverance to the Jewish people- political, economic, spiritual deliverance. There were lots of would-be Messiahs who had come and gone. And most Jewish people thought, That Jesus who was crucified by the Romans, he can't be the Messiah. That didn't work. He wasn't the one.

But Paul had had a vision of the resurrected Jesus, who had said, Why are you persecuting people who are following me? Paul came to realize that Jesus was the Messiah who saved the world in a different way than they had imagined. This Messiah saved with self-giving, unconditional love on the cross. This Messiah was

saving the world. And Paul and his friends want to get this message out. So they start by finding a Jewish synagogue wherever they go and by trying to convince the Jews there.

Notice they *argue* with the Jews in the synagogue. Having debates and arguments about what Scripture meant was common and is common in Judaism. You had different interpretations of what various texts meant. And there is a long tradition of trying to argue people into becoming Christians. Sometimes people use apologetics, which means providing a defense for our beliefs, reasonable explanations for the faith.

And so discussions where we can argue various points can be helpful. Sometimes our minds are changed when someone lays out a rational argument. But I also wonder if Paul shared some of his story with these folks in Thessalonica. Maybe he said, Let me tell you a story of what happened to me on the road to Damascus. Many people are changed with the power of a story. The times in my life when I have changed my thinking often happened when someone shared a story from their life that opened my world wider. Their story caused me to think in a new way.

And Jesus' ministry was less arguing people into a certain faith stance, and more about loving people where they were. He didn't argue with the tax collector Zacchaeus, but that he had dinner with him and his friends. When he *was* arguing, it was usually with religious leaders who were small-minded and judgmental.

Paul argues with these folks in the synagogue, and some of them, including some Gentiles, come to believe. I do believe that we can continue to have discussions and debates about how to interpret the Bible for our day and time. But let me share another way. One of the ways we can share our faith is to really notice people and to listen to their stories. Then we can share a story from our lives.

I'm reading a book by John Pavlovitz called *A Bigger Table*. When he was a youth pastor at a large church in Charlotte, they sponsored a Sunday youth event in September at their student center, which had a full-on game room, a stage, a concession stand. A hundred middle school and high school students were mingling and having fun. He thought, What a huge success!

But off in a corner he noticed a teenage girl and her brother standing alone, looking uncomfortable. He went over to them and found out they were Tracy and Caleb. The pastor tried to engage them in conversation. Nothing. He tried a few cheesy youth pastor jokes. Barely a smile. The pastor said he hoped to get to know them over the coming year, and then left feeling a bit defeated.

A couple days later he received an email from Tracy. She began by saying, You probably won't remember me, and then she recounted her version of the conversation they had. She shared some of the difficulties she had in the past; she'd made some choices that caused some previous pastors and students to judge her. So she felt really uncomfortable at church, and her parents had made her come that Sunday. But Tracy wanted to thank this pastor for speaking with her and wanted him to know what a difference it made. And then she said these unforgettable words: "People usually don't notice me or they pretend not to see me. You made me feel visible."

I wonder if a part of sharing our faith is just noticing people, and to see where the Spirit leads. Do you remember last week, when God heals the lame man in Jerusalem through Peter, and Peter and John say to him, Look at us. We want you to see us- we see you! We notice you!

I was at Fred Meyer doing my weekly grocery shopping last Monday, and there is an associate who works in the produce section that I usually try to at least acknowledge and ask how she is. So last Monday, each with our mask on, and socially distanced, I said, How is it going? She shook her head, and said, Today isn't such a bad day, but some days are terrible. People are getting really agitated and short-tempered, telling me I'm in the way as they grab a head of lettuce. I told her how grateful I was that she came in every day. She so appreciated that. And then another shopper passed me and said, That was kind of you. I try to do that too. We both acknowledged that workers need to hear these words of encouragement. It's a small way to share our faith in the One who noticed people.

I haven't finished the story in Acts. After Paul shares about Messiah Jesus for three weeks in the synagogue, some of the Jews, and some of the Greeks who have been attracted to Judaism, and some of the leading women became followers of Jesus. But the Jews became jealous, and gathered a mob, and Paul and his colleagues and

some of the Christians in the town were arrested. When a local Christian named Jason posted bail, they moved along to the next town.

A little later on this trip, they arrive in Corinth, where they stay for a while, and from Corinth they write a letter to the Thessalonian Christians, and that is our second reading today. And what do they do in this letter? They encourage these new Christians! They thank God for them! Paul can't be there. He is isolated from them. He can't look them in the eye. But he can thank God for them, and pray for them, and encourage them through this letter. That sounds relevant to me in these times. We cannot be with each other as we would like to be, but we can thank God for each other, we can pray for each other, we can encourage one another.

Notice what he says at the beginning of this letter- "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." What are those three attributes he mentions to God? Their faith, their hope and their love. We remember that Paul mentions those three characteristics of the Christian life in 1 Corinthians 13- So faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.

But here Paul puts each of these in a phrase- it's the work of faith. Paul here talks about faith that gets us to step out of the boat, as Peter did to follow Jesus. There is the work of faith, the step of faith into something unknown. This pandemic is causing us to step out into new territory. We don't know what the future holds, but we step out in faith believing that God will be in that future working what God wants to do for the good of this world.

And Paul thanks God for their labor of love. The kind of love Paul is writing about is agape love. This isn't a warm feeling. This is intentional love for someone perhaps hard to love. This is the kind of love that prays for our enemies and wants the best for them, even when we struggle in our relationship with them. That is a labor of love.

And Paul speaks of their steadfastness of hope. This isn't just optimism, although optimism is good. These Thessalonian Christians were suffering persecution in their town- they were refusing to worship the emperor. They were turning from idols- their neighbors thought they were a strange religious cult that refused to

worship their gods. For these Christians, steadfastness of hope meant to keep on keeping on, simply believing that God was present, and in life or in death, it would be ok.

There is also a word of inclusion in this passage. When Paul first met these Gentiles, they were described as devout Greeks- that means they were attracted to the Jewish faith, they were attracted to the idea of one God, but they hadn't been circumcised. They knew the story of Abraham being chosen, and but they were outside that story. Paul says, You have been chosen. You are included in God's unconditional love. Who are the people who need to hear that message, who perhaps have heard a different message from the church?

One last note about this passage. Paul says they have a reputation in the surrounding churches for turning to God from idols and for waiting for God's Son from heaven. There is a common Greek word for waiting- Paul does not use that here when he says they are waiting for the return of Jesus. He uses a term that the Jewish historian Josephus used to talk about waiting for the Roman emperor to arrive in your town. This is a political statement- Paul dares to compare a crucified and risen Messiah with the power of Rome. They are waiting for Jesus as some would wait for the emperor.

Paul says-- You have a king who is above the reigning power. Jesus is the Lord of heaven and earth. You may not see it now, but his way to rule will eventually win out, the way of unconditional love, the way of forgiveness and mercy and justice and peace. As we wait for that ultimate day to come, we pray, your Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. And we actively work for that kingdom.

So how might we share our faith this week? Let's ask God to open our eyes to really notice people, at the supermarket or through Zoom, and to help us listen to their stories, and then, if the Spirit leads, to share a story of God's work in our lives. Like Paul did for the Thessalonian Christians, let's pray for each other, and thank God for each other, and find ways to encourage each other.

And let's realize that we are part of systems of empire that stand against God's purposes at times. The Thessalonian Christians had to choose to turn against empire. Let's ask God's help to courageously turn towards what is life-giving for all people and for this planet. Amen.