

#51 15-16

Psalm 119:137-144

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 (10)

Luke 19:1-10 (13)

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Learning To Love

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring. To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have been in the process with Hope Partnership for almost a year! On Sunday, January 10th, 2016 Debbie Blair and I brought forth to the congregation during an annual planning session, the possibility of asking them to help us transform our congregation, and at the board meeting on February 7th, the board approved and we moved forward. The application was filled out, and then sent on March 1st. We filled out all kinds of forms and had the assessment on April 11th. We received our results and had our leadership training on June 17th & 18th. We started our house meetings in August, finished them towards the end of September, and met last Wednesday night with Rick Morse and got some great insight from him, as well as the assurance that we have 3 months of further support from them.

I share all this, because I think, especially as a result of this scripture today, we need to review all we have been through, and acknowledge where we are today! Also, I want to share my personal gratitude to everyone who said yes, and participated in this process. It has not been easy, and yet, today we can look forward to a new church year, in 4 weeks, with a sense of accomplishment and joy. Joy that we have been true to our calling to serve God through this church and true to our love for each other.

And these two things - being true to God and loving each other, is what Paul is highlighting in this scripture as something that can be boasted about all over the growing Christian community! In fact, Sarah Birmingham Drummond writes about this "Feasting on the Word":

The telos {Greek word for goal} for the church can be found in Paul's greeting to the church at Thessalonica . . . Paul begins the letter by praising the success of the church in remaining faithful amid persecution. He then offers a special definition of that success: they are growing in love for each other and in God. This is the telos for the church: to grow in love for each other and in love for God . . . By placing love for each other and love for God at True North for church decision making, Christians can find simplicity and fulfillment . . . love is the guiding light for the [church].

And this is something we know we can do, because this *is* what we do. We have perhaps, gotten a little worked up thinking we have to do more complicated and fancy things in order to prove we are worthy, or in order to combat the growing culture of NONES (those people who classify themselves as have "none" when asked about their religious affiliation), or we also feel the

pressure to save this beloved church. But look at all we have been doing, as believe that it was very good! It was worthy!

And now, we can look within, and focus on our spiritual lives, our emotional growth, our communal caring for each other. Until we know the next things we can do ~ let us not worry, as Christ has told us so often before, and let us live in Christ and share the grace and gratitude of that relationship with each other and those we come into contact with. Being people of gratitude who live in grace, is what Christ has always wanted for us. The peace that surpasses all understanding comes from living in that grace and gratitude.

But perhaps we have been wanting some more advice on how to learn how to love more. I have known this saying by a man who lived between the 16th -17th century, St. Francis de Sales, for years now, and wish to share it with you:

"There are many besides you who want me to tell them of methods and systems and secret ways of becoming perfect, and I can only tell them that the sole secret is a hearty love of God, and the only way of attaining that love is by loving. You learn to speak by speaking, to study by studying, to run by running, to work by working; and just so you learn to love God and man by loving. All those who think to learn in any other way deceive themselves. If you want to love God, go on loving Him more and more. Begin as a mere apprentice, and the very power of love will lead you on to become a master in the art. Those who have made most progress will continually press on, never believing themselves to have reached their end; for charity should go on increasing until we draw our last breath."

So, it seems, our task for now, is to practice loving each other. And this is where we get a lot of help from the written word. There is so much about love in our Bible. The more we know, and the more we look within to judge ourselves and learn and grow, the less we judge others and can live in God's love and grace.

Verses 5-10 in this chapter have been excluded from today's lectionary reading, some say it is because it is hard to comprehend without feeling hopeless. But most religions have some sort of admonition, some sort of confession, as part of their spiritual cleansing process. It is up to each of us to seek growth, and we cannot grow if we are not honestly scavenging through our motivations and striving to be true to our God of love.

And this scripture promises us that if we can do so, we will be rewarded. Time after time, Paul assures the persecuted that there will be divine justice. And from that sense of grace, we can share our gratitude with the entire world! This steadfastness and faith emphasizes not the content of our faith but the degree of our devotion. Again, Sarah Birmingham Drummond: "Paul . . . writes to boast of the faith of the Thessalonians, and in doing so he highlights growth. He focuses on their improvement; not unlike an elementary school teacher, he commends not only their performance but their effort."

May we go forth in practicing love, and grace and gratitude ~ now and forever more, AMEN.