

Last week we began talking about St. Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians. We discussed that Paul was proud of the church at Thessalonica because of their faithfulness, and that they had experienced the gospel not only intellectually, but also experientially, through the power of the holy spirit. We looked at how the church at Thessalonica had developed a wonderful reputation with the Christian community.

And, we then began to investigate what our own reputation has been here at St. Paul's, and where we hope it to be again soon.

Today, St. Paul continues to explain to the believers at Thessalonica, what it means to be a member of the body of Christ.

He begins by telling them that, "they did not come in vain, but though [they] had suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, [they] had courage in God to declare the gospel, in spite of great opposition.

We can read the story of how exactly Paul suffered at Philippi in the book of Acts, chapter 16.

Paul and his disciples were evangelizing in Philippi, and many of the people there, who were likely pagans, were coming to believe in the good news of Jesus Christ. They also were seeing God perform miracles, so much so that Paul and the disciples were gaining a reputation.

Well, the Roman Empire was not too fond of this, and they had Paul and his disciples arrested. The officials stripped them down naked in front of the city, and had them flogged.

So here is this group of faithful Christians, who have done tremendous healing and good works in Philippi, and their reward for doing such wonderful things?

Being beaten while naked in front of the entire community. Have you ever felt like that?

Have you ever felt like you have done something good at work, or for a friend, or someone at church,

and your payment for your good work was to be shamed?

Or maybe even there was just a complete lack of appreciation.

I know we have some older members of our parish, who have dedicated many years of their lives,

and their energy, their talents and money to St. Paul's,
and they feel like that the younger generations have not appreciated it.
The opposite is true as well.

We have some younger families in our parish that serve until it hurts,
whether it be in the office,
doing landscaping,
music,
book sales,

or even the strawberry fest;
and some of the older folks make them feel naked and flogged by how they interact with them.
Our goal as a community should be to make sure that everyone at this parish who serves and
gives from their heart,
should feel great about it,
and not made to feel like second class citizens.

Is there someone here at St. Paul's that you need to treat better, or appreciate more?

Say thank you to them for something specific today.

Paul is also trying to communicate to the Thessalonians that even though he has faced trials,
he must continue to do the work of the gospel.

St. Paul's in the past decade has faced some real challenges.

I have heard from many of you about some financial problems,
pastoral concerns,
and inter-relational conflict.

When these things happen in a parish,
a church tends to try to hunker down,
and goes into survival mode.

Whereas this might be necessary for a season,
we must not get stuck in the trap of remaining in a defensive position.

How many of you have ever heard the old football saying,
"The best defense is a good offense?"

It means that the best way for a church to get out of its troubles is to begin to go on the offensive.

We are beginning to do this at St. Paul's.

We are beginning to come out of survival mode,
and entering into a kingdom of God mode.

I mentioned this last week in reference to our outreach opportunities.

For the past several years St. Paul's has had a ZERO outreach and missions budget.

To me, that communicates a complete looking inward,
and it is time that we begin looking outward.

I have had several conversations with leaders of churches that have experienced tremendous
growth.

And when I have asked them the cause of their success,
they all say the same thing.

Preaching the gospel,
prayer,

and moving into more of an outward focus as a church.

We as a parish are in the process of trying to think about some ways to get more involved in our community.

Maybe it means building a community garden here on our property, or how about this...

Jen and I thought it would be great to roast our own coffee, call it Jehovah Java,

sell it at the farmers market,

and use the proceeds to help with the ongoing cleanup efforts for the many of our neighbors who had severe damages after Irene.

Jen also has expressed an interest in brewing our own beer, calling it Martin VanBeerin ale and selling that.

Perhaps the proceeds could go to the food pantry, or the historical society?

One last one,

what if we took ALL the proceeds that the Strawberry Festival raised and gave it to an after school program for low income students?

These are some of things I have been thinking about and would like to see us really consider.

What are your ideas?

How could we bless others?

These are exciting times here at St. Paul's.

It is a time where we are moving out in faith,

and saying to the Lord:

we want to do Your work in our community,

and bring people to come to know You in a personal and intimate way.

I have heard some concerns from people that we can't afford to do this.

And if we tried to do this on our own,

they would be absolutely right.

It is going to take faith,

a healthy understanding of stewardship,

and a willingness to believe that God will provide when we are faithful in our giving.

Let me tell you a wonderful story about how we are starting to see God reward our faithfulness.

A couple of weeks ago,

we were paying the church's bills.

It didn't look like we would have enough to cover them,

when we realized we had just received our dividend check from Key Bank.

Not only did we have enough to cover the bills,

but we had some leftover.

Pat and I talked about how God really seems to be matching our faith as a parish,

and blessing the different things we are trying to do.

If you talk with Pat or another vestry member lately,

you will no doubt hear them say something about stepping out in faith!

We are entering into our stewardship season,

the time in which we get to say "thank you" to God.

Thank you for all that He has done,
and for all that He is going to do in our own lives,
as individuals,
and as a church community.

As we step out in faith and give sacrificially,
God will honor that beyond our wildest dreams!

(read bulletin insert)

We have a choice in this time at St. Paul's:
we can either go back into survival mode,
or we can continue to move forward,
as God has called us to do.

There is another important aspect of Paul's letter we need to look at today.

Paul continues in his letter to remind people of Thessalonica,
that his appeal does not spring from
deceit,

impure motives,
or trickery.

In Thessalonica there was a philosophical group known as the cynics.

The cynics were philosophers that practiced the art of rhetoric and debate.

They spoke with great eloquence and skill,
and made their arguments convincing,
primarily through beautiful speech.

The cynics would attempt to gain influence by being smooth talkers,
and by tricking their way into getting what they wanted through their ability to convince people
their way is the best,
even if it is all lies.

The primary goal of the cynics was to encourage people to join their group and dedicate their
lives to it.

Not because they had a true or better way of life,
but rather because it would provide them with greater influence and societal standing.

The world is full of people and groups who are vying for our attention, and want us to join them.

And one of our deepest human longings is to be part of something special (fraternal
organizations, rotary clubs, hunt clubs, country clubs, political parties etc...)

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that in the middle of voting season,
we all might be able understand who some of the cynics are.

Wendy,

I obviously am not speaking about all politicians!

How many times in political debates,
do we get suckered into believing the grandiose ideas that we hear?

Or,

we are told if we belong to this social club,

or that,

it will improve our image in the community.

The only organization that is doing the REAL good work,
is the church.

(And if we don't think the church is doing what it's supposed to, we as believers should make
that change from within.)

We need to be aware of the sweet talkers in our culture.

Are there ever times that we try to be sweet talkers so that we can get something we want or
desire, instead of what's best for one another or our community?

St. Paul makes it clear,

that we are to speak plainly and simply,
about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This means not being ashamed to declare that we were once lost,
and now we are found.

That while we were yet sinners,
Christ died for us.

This is how we continue to be on the offensive.

We march forward in confidence,
knowing that our speech,
and our message is the real McCoy.

There are no fancy bells and whistles to what we have to say.

We don't have fancy stage lights,
huge projector screens,
or a neon sign out front.

What we have is the gospel.

Plain and simple.

When we try to overcomplicate things,
we begin to be like the cynics.

There was a great protestant theologian in the 20th. cent. whose name was Karl Barth.

He wrote a 22 volume theological work known as the Church Dogmatics. (He covered every
difficult theological issue, from ___ to ___...)

He is held to be the greatest theologian of the past 100 years,

and at one point Time magazine called him the most influential thinker in the church.

After completing the 22 volumes of the Church Dogmatics,
which took thirty years,

a reporter asked Karl Barth what was the most profound thing he discovered in his studies and
writing.

He responded,

“Jesus loves me this I know,
because the bible tells me so.”

Amen.