

Sermon
August 5, 2018

Covenant Presbyterian Church
Rev. Zeta T. Lamberson

Living Expectantly: Imitating the Master
I Thessalonians 1:1-10

I think I finally got vacation right this year! It began and ended with grandchildren together with their parents. And for me that is my happy place - wherever my family is all together. And that doesn't happen all that often for me or for them. The three girls, my grandchildren, were so excited about getting to see each other again. When Sarah Kate and Kinsley were preparing to come from South Carolina at the end of June they kept asking when they would get to see their cousin, Gabriela Elisa, who lives here in Atlanta. They were excited to be with me but they couldn't wait to see their cousin. And then at the end of July when I was in South Carolina with them they kept asking how many more days until Gabriela Elisa arrived! And I understand Gabriela Elisa was asking the same thing of her parents! I didn't take it personally that they were so excited to see one another because I too was excited to see them all together. And we had a wonderful time - many memories made together. I thank you for the gift of renewal and rest and time with family.

As we anticipated our time together we were living expectantly. Living with an excited feeling that something was about to happen, something good and fun and memorable. You know what I mean - remember how you feel before a big event - a family gathering, a wedding, a once in a lifetime trip, a special vacation. Living expectantly brings us joy and excitement for we are anticipating the future. It shapes our days and brings us hope keeping our eyes and thoughts on what is to come.

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy traveled to Thessalonica on Paul's second missionary journey. They preached and taught the gospel of Jesus Christ and a community formed that *"turned to God from idols."* Thessalonica was a bustling cosmopolitan city located in the northern part of Greece. As the capital city of Macedonia and a port city, located on a major Roman highway that connected Rome and the East, the

people of Thessalonica experienced a wide variety of social and cultural influences that included a very diverse religious community that worshiped many different gods. Unlike the Jewish communities that Paul preached to that had an understanding of worshiping one God the Thessalonians had to make a choice to turn away from all the other gods to worship the one true and living God. And that was made more powerful because religious life in Thessalonica penetrated every dimension of political, economic, and community life. Hellenistic cities lived their lives in public and therefore changes in lifestyle were obvious to others. It was no small thing for these believers to turn from idols to the one living and true God.

After Paul, Silvanus and Timothy left Thessalonica for Athens Paul sent Timothy back to check on how they were doing. When Timothy returned and reported that they were continuing to live expectantly and faithfully remembering all they had taught them this letter was written in response. For all three were so thankful to God for their witness. And we are thankful that they did for First Thessalonians is the earliest Christian writing found in holy scripture written between 49 and 50 AD - some fifteen years after Christ's death and Paul's conversion. And in this letter we discover through Paul's encouragement how this community came alive as they lived expectantly.

Over the next several weeks we will explore together how their experience can strengthen us as we seek to be faithful in a world that is more and more pluralistic. For the world we live in now is more like the world of the first century than the world our parents grew up in. We are proclaiming the gospel message into a world with many choices and many voices - and yes, many gods. And our witness is more important than ever. We can no longer continue to just keep on keeping on. It is time for us to turn to God - to live expectantly and to share our joy, faith, love and hope with others.

The community of faith in Thessalonica was chosen by God not just because Paul preached the gospel to them but because the Holy Spirit came upon them. Something amazing happened among them.

Eugene Peterson in the Message says “*The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions.*” And friends, that is what needs to happen among Christians today. We need *steel in our convictions* to speak out and to live as Christ called us to. For we need the steel to support us and undergird us when the opposition rises its head urging us to live by the world’s standards instead of God’s standards. And it is the power of the Holy Spirit that strengthens us and fills us so that we can proclaim the grace and love of Jesus Christ and live expectantly as the early Christians did.

The first and most important way this community of faith responded was by imitating their teachers - Paul, Silvanus and Timothy - and most importantly Jesus Christ. Today we often think of an imitation as a cheap copy but that is not what is meant here. To imitate is to follow someone as a model - to be a disciple. I have heard that the greatest compliment you can pay someone is to imitate them. Not mocking them but choosing to model our lives upon their actions. “In declaring that the new converts have become imitators of both Paul and the Lord, Paul is not here pointing to particular features of his or Jesus’ personal life that have been copied by the new believers, but to the pattern of his life as a whole...The Greek word *typos* does not refer to a pattern to be copied, but to the mold used to form the stamp or seal that leaves its impression. As the stamp has been formed by the mold, so it marks other things with its own impression. In an extended sense, it can then be used to mean “example.” (I & II Thessalonians: The New Testament Library, M. Eugene Boring, p. 66) The Thessalonians very lives were filled with joy, love and hope and it was contagious. Everyone was talking about what had happened in Thessalonica. For they were living as Christ lived and it was different and appealing.

It began when they “*turned to God from idols.*” This is the first step. They had given up the ways of the world - rejected other gods and placed the living God first in their lives. They had chosen to live differently from the world around them. This was no small feat in the first century and the same is true today. For my friends for us to place God of scripture first we must leave behind the pettiness of the

world. We must place others first and love others as God loves us. We must be mindful of our words and our actions being sure that all honor God and bring joy into our lives and the lives of those we encounter. We must be prepared for suffering and strong in our resistance of the ways of the world. For once we turn to God our focus becomes living as Christ taught.

The second step was that they were *servng a living and true God*. As Christians we are called to live a life of service. This is not a punishment or an imprisonment but a response to the one who gives us life. Serving others becomes a way of life that offers joy and freedom. It affects all of our relationships with one another. For when we serve a living and true God we place others first. We think of their needs before our own. Our focus becomes the community and not our individual needs. Friends, in the “me first” culture we live in today this is radical and life-changing. It is what makes the community of faith different than the world around us. It is the defining characteristic of a follower of Jesus Christ - the characteristic that creates the family of faith. For when we serve others, loving and placing others first people notice and some - those most influenced by our actions - will choose to imitate our lives.

Once there was a woman by the name of Dranafice. Dranafice, also known as Rose, was a poor woman who lived many years ago in Albania. Rose and her husband opened their home to the poor and hungry in their town. Whenever one of Rose's daughters would ask who the new visitor at their dinner table was, Rose would answer that it was a relative. Rose's daughters grew up believing that they came from an enormous extended family.

Even after Rose's husband died, and the family was plunged into poverty, Rose found a way to give food to the hungry and help to the destitute. One of Rose's daughters was greatly influenced by her mother's example of sacrificial love and service to others. And now, as Paul Harvey would say, for the rest of the story: This daughter, Agnes, grew up to become an advocate for the poor all over the world. She devoted her whole life to caring for and serving those in need. For young Agnes grew up to become

Mother Teresa, the twentieth century's living example of Christ in the world. ("Teresa's Mother," by Kay D. Rizzo, SIGNS OF THE TIMES, May 1998,4 retrived from www.sermons.com/sermons/setting-an-example/1347775) Friends, this is why it is so important that we learn to imitate the Master - for when we do our actions lead others to follow our actions and imitate Christ as well.

The final step that defined the Thessalonians was that they waited for the arrival of Jesus. This is the only time in the New Testament that this active verb form of wait is found. What the Thessalonians were doing was unique and others were amazed by their actions. The Message translates it this way: *"They marvel at how expectantly you await the arrival of his Son, whom he raised from the dead-Jesus, who rescued us from certain doom."* Most of us think of waiting impatiently for things to happen. That is a passive waiting. But what was being praised here was that they were waiting expectantly - actively - with excitement and anticipation about the future. Waiting brought them joy and hope for their lives were filled with anticipation of the day they would see Christ face to face.

Friends, this is what it means to hope. For the first century Christians the return of Jesus in the near future was part of the Christ event, part of the resurrection faith. It was the completion of what had happened. It was the hope they held on to. It gave them something to look forward to and to anticipate that promised more love and joy in their lives. We struggle a little with this concept because it hasn't happened in the last 2000 years and yet my friends, to wait expectantly is what we are called to do. For Christ will come again. He promised he would.

But friends, what we are called to do in the meantime is to live expectantly with joy and hope loving and serving as Christ taught. For friends, when we do others notice as they did in the first century. Others will talk about our witness and be drawn to the life of Christ within community. And so our challenge today and everyday as those who have turned to God, my friends is to live expectantly imitating the Master.