

Sermon

Oct. 22, 2017

Based on 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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Last Sunday, we began a series of sermons in which we are focusing on what I called evangelistic hospitality. We considered how hospitality is more than tea and cookies. It is an event in which gifts are exchanged. The host offers what they have to the guests. The guests receive what the host offers and in return offers what they have to the host. For example, the host offers food and drink and a place to sleep. The guest offers stories or perhaps a gift of some kind. The point is that in the event of hospitality there is a mutual exchange of gifts. And what we talked about last week is that when Jesus sent out the seventy, he instructed them on how to practice hospitality among the people they went to, receiving whatever was offered and in return offering the gospel and offering healing to those who received them into their homes. Basically, what Jesus sent the seventy out to do was to practice evangelistic hospitality.

This week, we are going to see how evangelistic hospitality was practiced by Paul and his companions among the Thessalonians. Along the way, I'm going to lift up a few points that will hopefully get all of us to thinking about how we can be more effectively hospitable to our neighbors who do not yet know Jesus. Paul's experience with the Thessalonians really was amazing, almost ideal. There is no guarantee that we will have similar experiences as we try to live out evangelistic hospitality. But it is a story that gives us encouragement to keep at it, to become more committed to live a lifestyle of hospitality among our neighbors.

Thessalonica was a coastal community located north of Greece. One of the important things to know about Thessalonians was that they worshipped idols. One of the idols they worshipped was to a god named Cabirus. He was a martyred hero who occasionally came back to life in order to aid those who worshipped him. Now ask yourself. How do you think Paul was able to take their worship of Cabirus and say to them, "I

know of someone who was martyred and who has come back to life and will return some day to deliver those who believe in him from the wrath that is to come. His name is Jesus.” This is a great example of knowing the culture and then proclaiming the gospel in ways that make sense and that offers a better hope.

What are the idols that people worship today? We talked about this a little last week: the idol of wealth, the idol of advertising, the idol of sports, the idol of partisan politics. Maybe we should add the idol of technology. People put their faith in all kinds of idols these days, idols full of promise, idols that demand sacrifice of time, money, or energy, idols that never fully satisfy the hunger of the human heart. How might we communicate to people that the faith they place on their idols would be better placed on Jesus?

Maybe Paul already knew about how the Thessalonians worshipped Cabrius and he saw an opportunity to proclaim to them another God who is better than Cabrius. Maybe he found that out after he went there. But the point I want to make is that Paul and his companions went to the Thessalonians. He did not wait for them to come to him. Just like how Jesus sent out the apostles like laborers to the harvest, so Paul and his companions went out as laborers to the harvest, just as we have been sent out to people rather than waiting for people to come to us.

And Paul and his companions proclaimed the gospel, not just with words, but with power, the Holy Spirit and conviction. This was not some prepared speech. This was not a matter of passing out gospel tracts. Does anyone remember the four spiritual laws tracts that Campus Crusade for Christ used to distribute? I did my time distributing those tracts. Doubt if it did much good. Paul didn't pass out tracts. He told the story. He talked about Jesus. And he talked about Jesus as if it really mattered to him. He advocated for Jesus. He talked about Jesus with conviction. He talked about Jesus like some people talk about their favorite sports team or their political views on taxes or health care. And it wasn't just Paul talking. The Holy Spirit was with him. There was something about how Paul talked about Jesus that moved people. People didn't just hear what Paul said. They were moved by what Paul said.

But here's the thing. Paul didn't set up a soapbox, or throw up a tent, and hold a week long revival, save a bunch of people, and then hit the road. This was no drive-by evangelism. No, Paul and his companions moved into the neighborhood. They settled among the Thessalonians. And they did not want to be a burden on the Thessalonians. Paul was a tentmaker by trade so he opened up his tent making shop. He contributed to the local economy. He put down roots. Paul and his companions lived among the Thessalonians, contributing to their well-being. This was about building neighborly relations by means of hospitality. This was not a fly by night operation.

What does this look like for us? How are we proclaiming the gospel with power, the Holy Spirit, and conviction? Do we advocate for Jesus with as much intensity as we advocate for our pet political issues, our favorite sports team, or the best place to get donuts? I will confess to you that I'm often more worked up over issues that have nothing to do with Jesus. Truth be known, I wonder how many of us, if we were honest, could say in confidence that we spend a significant block of our waking hours advocating for Jesus. I hope I'm wrong about that.

Of course, the question then becomes, why would we want to advocate for Jesus? What's the point of proclaiming the gospel with power, the Holy Spirit and conviction? All I can say is I am glad there were people in my life who saw the point of it when I was a kid, with no real direction in life and not sure if my life really mattered. There were people in the church I went to who believed my life mattered. They knew that God loved me and had a purpose for my life and they said that to me in many different ways until one day it finally sunk in. You had people in your life that also saw the point of proclaiming the gospel. That's how it works. We don't wake up one morning and suddenly believe in Jesus. People have to tell us about Jesus. They have to show us Jesus in ways that are convincing and believable. Otherwise, none of us would have come to belief. We would not have come to know how much God loves us and has a purpose for us to fulfill. We are the beneficiaries of those who saw the need to advocate for Jesus. Do we see the need?

Over time, as Paul and his companions lived among the Thessalonians, building relationships with them, sharing about Jesus, the Thessalonians became convinced. They gave up on their god Cabrius and exchanged him for Jesus. They began to imitate Paul, and to seek to imitate the Jesus way of life. And, Paul writes, they became full of joy. This didn't happen overnight. It took time to build those relationships. It took a lot of separate events where Paul and his companions gave of themselves to the Thessalonians and the Thessalonians not only received what was offered but they also gave of themselves to Paul and his companions. And when you add the power of the Holy Spirit to the mix, transformation took place.

How did it happen for you? How did you come to be converted? My guess is it didn't happen overnight. Nor was it just one event. No, I suspect for most of us, our conversion was a gradual process in which many different people gave of themselves for us and we in return gave what we could to the relationship. The Holy Spirit was also present, working through these relationships, opening our eyes and our hearts so that we could experience for ourselves this great truth that we are loved by God.

Paul goes on to say that the Thessalonians were full of joy in the Holy Spirit even while they experienced persecution and suffering. They had chosen to go against the grain of society. They had exchanged their idols for Jesus and not everyone understood what they were doing. Their conversion to Jesus put them out of step with the crowd. But in spite of the persecution they faced, they remained joyful. It is a powerful witness to be able to remain joyful in the face of persecution and suffering. Like Paul wrote, people all through the region heard about these Thessalonians who had given up on their gods, faced the persecution of their neighbors, but remained committed and filled with joy anyway.

Have you ever known someone or a group of people who remained joyful in the face of suffering? I got to know someone who I believe was from Ghana. He was the member of a royal family of the tribe he belonged to. He became a Christian and forsook the gods his tribe worshipped. For this, he was disowned from his family. He found his way to America, having been abandoned by his family because of his

faith in Jesus. But he was full of joy, a delight to be around. He lived up to the name that he took on for himself when he became a Christian...Jubilant.

There was a small town somewhere in Africa. The people had suffered so much because of war between rival tribes. There had been much killing. There was a lot of fear in the community. But on Easter Sunday, the Christians came out of their church and paraded through the streets, singing songs full of praise, exuding joy as they marched through the town. People came out and watched as the Christians marched past. It was a powerful witness of the joy that comes through the Holy Spirit in times of great struggle and hardship. Can this be our story? Can we allow ourselves to be filled with the Spirit of joy in times of struggle? It has been my experience that the tough times of life is when the power of joy is that much stronger.

So let me bring us back to the main point I'm wanting to make this morning, and it is about how hospitality is at work in the conversion of the Thessalonians. In vs. 5, Paul wrote, "You know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake." To prove that, Paul and his companions had to give of themselves in ways that contributed to the well-being of the Thessalonians. And the Thessalonians had to be open to what Paul and his companions offered to them. Giving and receiving over time made it possible for Paul and his companions to prove what kind of people they were. Then, in vs. 9, Paul writes, "the people of those regions report among us what kind of welcome we had among you." Again, Paul and his companions came to Thessalonica to move in to the neighborhood, give of themselves, proclaim the gospel, and the Thessalonians welcomed them. They could tell that Paul and his companions came with good will and good hearts. They were open to receive whatever Paul and his companions had to offer. Giving and receiving. It is all through this passage of scripture. It was this dynamic of hospitality that led to the conversion of the Thessalonians. It wasn't a meet and greet. It wasn't an occasional party or church dinner. It was day in and day out living, neighboring, that over time made the difference.

I ask you: can you rethink hospitality as not just a thing you do but as the way you live among your neighbors? I acknowledge that not everyone will be welcoming to you or me. But we can commit to living a give and receive way of life: giving of ourselves to others and receiving whatever others want to offer to us. Hospitality could be the character of our daily living. And my belief is that to the extent we can live out hospitality as a way of life with our neighbors, that over time we can transform our communities. We can bring those who do not believe in Jesus into a relationship with Jesus if day by day, through our witness and in our practice of hospitality, the Spirit working through us, we live the life of evangelical hospitality.

Finally, I don't want to miss this opportunity the scripture this morning gives me to talk about hope. Hope is also throughout what Paul wrote. First of all, Paul and his companions were hopeful that their living among the Thessalonians would bear fruit. They knew they had a message to share and a way they could share it that would make sense to the Thessalonians. So they moved into that area with hope that it would work out. The Thessalonians also had hope. It was their hope they had in Jesus that allowed them to endure great suffering. They believed that Jesus, the one who came back to life and remains alive, will come to their aid and deliver them from their strife someday. Their hope in Jesus got them through their times of struggle.

Just so, we can claim the power of hope during our time of trial as a church. It is the steadfastness of hope that keeps us coming here, staying together as a community of faith, as we discern and make decisions about how we will continue to be in ministry together for the future.

I love what Paul writes in verse 3, how Paul remembers their "work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Hope goes with faith and love. They work with faith that something good will come of it. And their labor is a labor of love, love for Jesus and love for each other. And they are steadfast in times of struggle because they have placed their hope in Jesus to see them through, no matter what.

This is a great guide for us in the months ahead. As we move forward, we keep working in good faith that we will make a difference in the lives of others. We do this out of love for God and for each other. And we are hopeful that no matter what may happen going forward that we belong to God who is our deliverer.