

Sermon

Oct. 29, 2017

Based on 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

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Over the past few weeks, we have been focusing on something I call evangelical hospitality. On the first week, we looked at when Jesus sent seventy people, two by two, to go ahead of him to towns and villages in order to heal the sick and proclaim that the kingdom of God was near. We talked about how hospitality is an event where there is a mutual exchange of gifts. The apostles received whatever food and drink was offered them while they offered to their hosts peace, healing, and the announcement of the coming kingdom of God. Hospitality, the mutual exchange of gifts, is central to how the gospel is to be shared.

On the second week, we looked at when Paul and his companions came to Thessalonica, how they moved into the community. They didn't just come to Thessalonica to preach the gospel and then move on to the next town. No, they settled in, contributing to the life of the community. They wanted to be good neighbors. And in return the Thessalonians welcomed Paul and his companions. By being good neighbors, a hospitable environment was created. And this led to opportunities for Paul and his companions to convert the Thessalonians to become followers of Jesus and to give up their other gods.

This week, which is the conclusion of this series on evangelical hospitality, we are going to focus on the intentions of Paul and his companions. What were their motives? We are going to see how their intentions among the Thessalonians created the possibility for Paul and his companions to give of their very selves, to have a relationship that was so deep, so strong, so caring, that they were able to love deeply. Because their intentions were pure, they were able to convince the Thessalonians of their sincerity and good faith. And this made it possible for them to evangelize the Thessalonians, transforming that community.

The other point I want to make today is that it took time for trust to be built up among Paul and his companions with the Thessalonians. Developing relationships of deep care takes a while. It doesn't happen

quickly. With enough time, and with enough trust building, Paul and his companions found themselves able to give of themselves fully. Developing relationships of deep care are what made the difference in transforming Thessalonica, at least among those who came to faith in Jesus.

So let's look at how Paul talks about his intentions among the Thessalonians. Whether Paul felt the need to defend himself, or he was trying to teach the Thessalonians something, Paul chose to take up space in his letter to make clear what his motives were among them. What were his motives?

First, Paul says he did not come to them because of vanity, to make a name for himself. Instead, Paul came to them with courage to proclaim the gospel. He needed that courage after what happened to him in Philippi. That's where they were before they came to Thessalonica. In Philippi, they were doing what they intended to do in Thessalonica. They had moved into the town, settled in, were good, productive neighbors. They were preaching the gospel. But the message was not well received. Paul and his companions were led out to the public square and beaten with rods. They were then flogged. Bloody and beaten, they were then taken to the prison. You can read the details in Acts 16. The point that Paul was making was that if he was on a power trip where he was trying to satisfy his own vanity to make a name for himself, there were more promising activities he could have taken on than taking the real risk of being beaten and thrown in prison for the message that he was proclaiming. They took a real risk of taking on great suffering for the message they delivered. It wasn't vanity but courage that motivated Paul and his companions to take that same message they delivered to the Philippians and give it to the Thessalonians.

What else did Paul say about his intentions? He wrote that they did not come with deceitful intentions or trickery or greed. See, in those days, there were a lot of traveling preachers or philosophers with all kinds of ideas and theories. They provided a form of entertainment. They made their living by peddling their philosophies. Their only concern was to con people out of their money. They did that by playing people for fools, telling them what they wanted to hear, impressing

people with their rhetorical flourishes. But that was not what drove Paul. He wrote that his only intention was to please the One who gave them this message and authorized them to give it. In other words, Paul was not driven to please people. He was driven only to please God. He wasn't serving himself. He wasn't aiming to please people by telling them what they wanted to hear. He only wanted to please God, whose message he was proclaiming. Paul was a true believer in the message he was proclaiming. Whether everyone embraced his message or he got beaten and run out of town, it mattered not to him. He lived his life before an audience of one. And I think having that kind of motive for your life is a critical one to have.

Now let's look a moment at verse 7. There are a few different ways this verse can be translated. I want us to look at this because I think it helps clarify what Paul is trying to say, and it is going to help us as we consider how we live out our discipleship among our neighbors. In that verse, many translations say, "But we were gentle among you." That word, gentle, is in Greek, *epioi*. However, there are a large number of older copies of this letter that does not have the word *epioi* but instead *nepioi*. This word means "infants." Just one letter, "n" makes a big difference. I agree with a lot of other biblical scholars that the better reading is of Paul writing, "But we were infants among you." The reason why I think that is better is because it captures their intentions. Paul and his companions were not cynical, manipulative, or deceptive. Instead they were innocent, honest, real, and pure like infants. It makes me think of when Jesus said that we are to be as little children. That means to reclaim the innocence we once had when we were young. It's a choice that we have to make, to not give in to cynicism, to not play games with people. That's no way to build healthy relationships. The relationships that make a difference are those in which the intentions are innocent, honest, real and pure.

So what are our motives for reaching out to our neighbors and building relationships? I know all of us here want to see St. Luke's grow. We want to see more people in church on Sunday. We want to see more young people. We want more people who can pitch in and help, to

provide more leadership. We want to fix our church. That is totally understandable.

But what if our motive was not to fix the church and instead our motive was to make disciples? There's a great quote from Mike Breen: "If you try to build the church, you will rarely get disciples. But if you make disciples, you will always get the church." Junius Dotson, who is a leader in the United Methodist Church, is challenging the church to focus our efforts in this way: "Our focus must move away from 'fixing' churches toward making and growing disciples." What motivates us more to reach out to our neighbors and build relationships? Is it so that our church can thrive again? Or is it so that our neighbors who don't yet know Jesus can be transformed into people who love God and love one another? I believe it matters whether our intention is to get people to join our church and give of their time and money or our intention is to be used of God to transform the lives of people. And I think people will know the difference between persuading them to come to our church or loving them and walking with them into a relationship with God. It's two different things. I believe loving people and witnessing to them what the Christian life is about is what we should all be about. How this may or may not fix our church is of less concern. I agree with what Mike said, if our motive is to make disciples, the church will be just fine. We can trust God to do what God does. After all, the church belongs to Jesus and not to us.

Now let's look at this other metaphor that Paul writes in vs. 7. He said that they were like a wet-nurse tenderly caring for her own children. That goes along with what he wrote in vs. 8, that they gave the Thessalonians not just the gospel but their own selves because they have become very dear to them. How vivid an image, that Paul compares himself with a mother breast feeding her own children. It conveys a relationship that is intimate, nurturing, and self-giving. He is saying that they are giving of themselves in order to nourish the faith of the Thessalonians. In other words, this is personal for Paul. So he says they do this because the Thessalonians *have become* very dear to them. That's a key phrase, "have become." It took time to build their relationship to the point where they could pour their lives into the

Thessalonians. They could not impose themselves on the Thessalonians. There had to be a relationship of trust, of mutual care, to make it possible for this level of self-giving.

Miroslav Volf is a theologian whose work I admire. His homeland is in the Balkans, which, as you may remember, was a place of ethnic cleansing and terrible warfare. Miroslav wrote a book entitled *Exclusion and Embrace*. In this book, he uses the image of two people embracing as a way to talk about the hard work of bringing two warring groups together, to heal the wounded divide. He said that when you are going to hug somebody, you have to open your arms out wide, making yourself vulnerable. And then you must wait for the other person to respond. Will they fold their arms in an act of exclusion? Or will they also open their arms wide to receive the embrace? The choice must be made. Relationships that are healthy, healing, life giving, cannot be forced. They can only be entered in to by mutual consent and with a mutual willingness to be open and vulnerable.

Think about the deep relationships in your own life. How did they come to be? Certainly the relationships you have with your spouse or your closest friends took time to grow and deepen. There have been highs and lows. There were crisis points where you and your friend had to decide to stay committed to the relationship and work things out. Through it all there was mutual consent, honesty, vulnerability, and, most of all, patience. The deepest relationships we enjoy in life are the products of long and intentional creation.

What I am challenging all of us to do is to put our energies and efforts into creating deep relationships with our neighbors. And as we develop these relationships, we will find opportunities to share our faith in God, the blessings and comforts we have experienced in our relationship with Jesus. We know the Holy Spirit is working in and through us to bring us into relationship with others. I'm talking about the Spirit of love. And I want us to be committed to this great work for no other reason than to express our love for God and love for our neighbors. Doing this for love is reason enough. Not to save our church. Let's focus on the main thing and trust that God is also at work, caring for the church that belongs to Jesus. Our purpose is not to save the church. Our

purpose is to love well. And we do this by practicing evangelical hospitality. So let us commit ourselves to this effort.