

I have to tell you something about me today. Many of you might already know this but this could be new news to some of you. I am a fan of Paul's letters to the churches.

It is absolutely amazing to me that the letters that he wrote to them became part of the Bible and here we are two-thousand years later still discussing those words.

Now, I do think that it is important to have some background information, context if you will; so please allow me to set the stage a little for you this morning.

From what we can tell, the church in Thessalonica was not the first church that Paul and his team started. However, it is the first letter that Paul penned that we have record of.

From all accounts, when the church received the letter, they incorporated it into their worship service. When they finished reading the letter, they did not throw it away; they help onto it. They not only held onto it but they entered into a permanent relationship with the text. They let the words reside among them.

It might also help us if we understand that this letter is simply not a letter from Paul but it was from his ministry team. We can come to this conclusion because Paul and his team had concerns about the church and the community. A mission team member, Timothy, went and checked in on them and came back and gave a report and that report is what prompted this letter.

Thessalonica was a very important Roman City at the time. It was also a very diverse city, with members of the city from many different countries. One of the reasons that it was an important city was it's location and the road system that led to the Adriatic Sea.

Now, I am sure that you can imagine that because of the diversity, there were many religious options for the individuals in the city and the followers of Christ were still under 20 years old; so, it was still new. In their city, there was a major shrine to Caesar Augustus.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Paul's letter is that he used the political context of the time to form the religious language of the first century and the language that we still use today. For example, when we hear the words Father, Lord, and Savior; the majority of us automatically think of Jesus Christ. Well, in the first century; the Roman Emperor held those three titles.

So, Paul is walking on thin ice per se. He is taking words that are being used for the emperor and applying them to Jesus. Then, many were pointing to Paul, the letter, and the church that they were using language to rebel against the authority at hand.

Paul and the team used this language because they were very worried that their faith was not going to stand. Now, please understand, Paul and the team were doing this out of deep concern. They loved this community deeply. We know this because earlier in the letter, Paul wrote these words: "*we were made orphans by being separated from you-in person, not in heart.*" Paul wrote this with a pastoral heart and in the letter; he was sharing some important truths.

In the early section of the reading, there was the word joy and it was going to my intention to preach on joy this morning. However, when I was examining the text and looking at the text through Paul's pastoral heart, my mind changed.

When you look at Paul's letters, you can see that he understands each one of them and their unique characteristics. Because of this, the texts are authentic and heartfelt. As a pastor, when I preach, I try to understand what is happening in the community and the context that I am in and bring that either into my sermon or at least allow what is happening to dictate my direction and that is why I moved away from the joy section.

I want to rest in the last part of the text. Individuals have debated whether the last part is a prayer or a benediction; a sending out. To me, that is not what is important. What is important is the three sections that we find in the text that may be a prayer and or a benediction. Let's take a look at those three components.

The first petition leans into hope. In essence, the hope is two-fold. One, he is hoping that they, the missionary team, will be reunited with the church in Thessalonica. They are hoping that Christ will return. Until Christ's return, we must allow Christ to live in us, carry Christ everywhere we go and begin to reflect the glory of God here and now.

As I was studying the first petition more deeply; there was this sentence that stood out to me. Hear these words from J.R. Daniel Kirk: *"Individualism must fade in the bright light of community identity."* I have mentioned many times recently that Christianity is not about a personal or individual journey; it is about the community. As I look around Bay View, there are many times when this is shown. I want to encourage you to continue to love on another and to be there for each other. It is vital to do life together.

The second petition definitely builds off of that concept. Paul prays for the community to be stitched together with love. Before I touch on stitched together with love; I want to "bore" you a little with the words that were chosen in this text. The translators who chose the word pray leaned in this direction because it is more elegant and a gentler word. The better word choice that could be considered a little cruder would be begging. I want you to think of a time where you experienced someone begging and maybe even begging to the point that you were a little annoyed. That is this text. Paul is begging the church community to be stitched together with love.

Here is an interesting aspect of love that I had not thought of in a long time in regards to this text. There is no love without there being a lover and a beloved. Thus, it is impossible to fulfill the greatest commandment on its own. For us to live out the commandment, love one another; we need a "another". Community is so vital. Friends, when we find that other and love them; we are being Jesus to them. To be a neighbor is simply to be the one who loves.

The third one has always been a tough one for me. There is a word that I always got stuck on and had trouble communicating. So, I leaned into others again to help me come up with the language to help me and then help you and then hopefully, once again; help us a community here at Bay View. Paul prays for holiness. If you flipped open a dictionary; you may see the definition as the state of being holy. Then you go, ok, now what. You then look at holy and see sacred or consecrated to God and you may be tempted to close down the dictionary and simply state; let's get to the conclusion.

Before I get to the conclusion; let me give you this insight and definition of holiness and maybe you can grasp it better than the other definitions that left me frustrated. Holiness is the display of the love of God as we love both God and neighbor.

Paul concludes the prayer or benediction and his conclusion now sets up the rest of his letter. In the rest of the letter, Paul reminds the readers of what a life pleasing to God looks like.

Friends, today, we begin a new liturgical year. Just like December 31 or January 1 when individuals might be flipping the calendar and go, I wonder what 2022 will bring. Or, maybe individuals will set a goal or resolution for themselves. We have the opportunity to do that as a church community.

I have no clue what this year might bring for us. I know that there are many things that I would love to see happen in our community and I think that we can do some amazing things. But, today, what I want us to focus on is the following:

God holds the future.

God is pulling us towards that future.

I do hope that we take time to plan, dream, and brainstorm and then put those plans into actions.

Theodore Wardlaw says that churches at their best are joyful, faithful, generous, and courageous.

May you grab a hold of one of those words and live it out as you live out loving God and loving Others and as we are in the season of advent; may you **proclaim** the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.