

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. **3** We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, **5** because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. **6** You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. **7** And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. **8** The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, **9** for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, **10** and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

SERMON: “This Thing Called Church” The Rev. Brent Damrow

It was a bold experiment, even though many called it a fool's errand. Vegas, had it existed, would not have even bothered putting odds on it working at all. If you want odds on that thing working, maybe check out the Mega-Ball Lottery odds. You know the one that statisticians say you don't actually increase your odds of winning even by buying a ticket. They're that low. Some might have noticed what those people were up to, and others I think walked on by thinking they had far more important things to do. But I wouldn't mention any of that to Paul, because Paul rejoiced in them. Paul gave thanks for them. Paul understood them as family – he a part of them, them a part of him. All of them together a part of something so much bigger, so much better and more important. Nothing short of the Body of Christ, the very embodiment of God and God's love.

There were plenty of gods on full display in Thessalonica. It was a capitol city of the great Roman Empire. No other empire before it had ever been as powerful. Princes and principalities sought and claimed divine status. It was on a major trade route, so captains of industry and commerce demanded respect, attention. And they told you, “Buy my goods and your life will be better. Buy my goods and all will be well. Buy this and life will be saved.” Thessalonica was artistic and worldly, cultural and cosmopolitan, it was status driven and stratified, it was intellectual and aspiring. There were many things vying for attention, power and devotion, and all loudly proclaiming just how valuable they were.

So you can understand how this group might have been missed. You can understand how this small fledgling group that met behind closed doors simply gathering around this very table for a simple meal. Not with anybody at the head or the foot, because only Christ was at the head, but rather a meal of equals. You might understand how this group of people who gathered to study the Word, to learn from Paul, to listen to this letter read over and over and over again, until they

went out in love to serve in the world. You might understand how they got completely looked right past. Others might have patronizingly tolerated them, or others even worse.

But don't tell that to Paul or that fledgling little group, one of the first and earliest churches. Not because they would retaliate or rise up, but rather they would do something Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber would tell you is far more dangerous. You see, if you listen to the reading this morning, what that group would do is they would welcome you in. They would draw you closer to God. And Nadia Bolz-Weber doesn't understand, even though she's an ordained pastor, why we pray so much to draw closer to God. Because she says the only thing that happens when you draw closer to God is that your whole world gets turned upside down, or rather as she would say, it gets turned right side up. Because, you see, when you draw closer to God, you see the world for what it really is, and you know the world for what's truly important. Not all those things that people want us to think as such, but rather you come to know what really is important. That whole idea of justice rolling down like waters, that whole idea of pouring your love out in waterfalls of tenderness, that whole idea of giving yourself to someone no matter where it takes you. Nadia Bolz-Weber would say that's a crazy thing.

But here's what we know. This thing of being church is not and cannot be a benign thing. It has to be a transformational thing. It cannot be a mere hobby or pastime. Rather, Paul the zealot would write that being church is a full-on commitment of everything you are. Going to church might be something we set aside time for now and then. But what I've seen you do, what I've seen us do together – being church – that a whole other thing. That's the thing that caused Paul to say "I give thanks for you," and I give thanks for you.

Being church is showing up. But being church is also a work of faith, as Paul writes. It is a labor of love, as Paul commands. It is steadfastness of hope. And it changes everything. Not just because it demands so much, but because it gives so much. Blessings we never understood or recognized come popping up all over the place.

Yesterday on a hill in West Stockbridge as we celebrated the life of Russ Fadding, we saw how being church comes together, didn't we, Patty? We saw it in family, we saw it in community stretched across that hillside. We saw it in tears shed, we saw it in lives well lived, we heard about the lives that had been transformed.

I will tell you this, though. It was on another hill in Tyringham, shortly after Jon and I moved here, about a year and a half in. If you remember that time, things were going well. Things were so alive here, it was such a joy. We were picking up our CSA farm produce, and there was a wonderful young woman that we began a conversation with – can you remember those times when you could walk up to a complete stranger, stand side by side with them without a mask and simply start talking to them? Don't forget that, because it will come back. So we started talking as we were picking our vegetables. And then of course she asked that question that I am still struggling how to answer. The question of "So what do you do for a living? What brought you here?" I told her I was a pastor, I told her I was the pastor of this great church in Stockbridge. Do you know what she said to me? She stammered, and I'll never forget, she said, "Well, isn't that sweet? I didn't know, does anybody still go to church anymore?" My joyful mood of being

outside was transformed in a heartbeat. And there were many things I wanted to say to her. But thank God, what I said to her was “Come and see.” She hasn’t.

But yesterday, there was somebody who came up to me after worship, and asked what time does our church gather, what time do we meet. Because she said she grew up going to church but hasn’t been in a long time. She needs meaning in her life. I wanted to add, yeah, meaning and truth and love and togetherness and connection. Come on over. Come and see. I think she will sometime.

I know each of you can remember the people who have come through our doors, maybe not forever, maybe not for always, but came through these doors in times where they had need, and walked with us as long as they could until they found the strength to carry on wherever their journey was taking them.

The question that is before us this Stewardship Sunday is “What is this thing called church?” What is it? To me, it is nothing short of transforming everything that we are, and all that we belong to, until we see it together. Not because I say so, but because we say so. Not because of any rules or codifications. Not because our steeple is the tallest, or our shutters look the best, or that we have new carpet on the floor, or that the paint is gleaming. But rather that we are church because those people out there, the people on the hills of the CSA farm in Tyringham, they know we exist, just like they knew that the church in Thessalonica existed.

Do you remember what Don said in the Scripture reading, because you need to. They didn’t give thanks for the church in Thessalonica because it was a gleaming architecture, or music sounded forth from it, or it was this pillar of the community. Because in fact, folks, do you know what happened to the church in Thessalonica? Nobody does. It’s gone. It does not exist anymore, and nobody even knows where it was located. But Paul reminds us here that that is not what church is. That is not how we send our message. The truth is that people from all the regions around knew that church, not because of a great website, or not because of good preaching, or not because of great educational programs or Rally Days for kids, or any of that, even though that’s all critical. They knew it because all of that ended up shaping the people’s lives into lives of faith and love and steadfastness of hope. Jesus said they will know you are Christians by your love. And Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, “Good job, because the people know you are church because of love.”

Friends, what we do in this place, what we do together, people out there may mock. They may not even notice. They may be scandalized if you tell them come to church. I don’t know. But here’s the thing. That church in Thessalonica, even though it may not exist anymore, but it continues to shape churches like ours that do. I am committed to building up this church in all ways – in our buildings and grounds, in our music, in our ministry, in our learning, in our kids, so that we can pass something on to future generations.

But this stewardship season, you also need to know we have a job right now, right now to be church. And I don’t know what the coronavirus is going to do. It is wearing us all out and wearing us all down. But we have steadfastness of hope, and we are not giving up.

What is the church? It is living into this moment right now, when the world needs us more than it ever has. I am exhausted, and I am tired. But I am not broken. And I know that these are the very times that are made for church. These are the times where we are called to offer more studies, more worship. These are the times that we are called to bring you together. Why? Not that our coffers might grow, or our rolls might grow -- though they might -- but so that the coffers might grow that we might put money and ministries into the world, that our rolls might grow so that people outside can look and say there goes the Body of Christ, even if they don't know that you come to *this* church.

I know this. One of the reasons I'm in ministry is because I believe that the church by its very nature is doomed to fail. That's what Dostoevsky taught me. But it's in the doing that we succeed. It's in the doing that we live. We may never achieve the perfection of the Body of Christ, but we are called to keep giving it a try. Amen?

Paul wrote this in his letter to the Romans. He said we are afflicted in every way, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed but we are not driven to despair. We are persecuted but not forsaken. Struck down but we are not destroyed. We are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus might be made visible in our bodies, in what we do and who we are.

Friends, take this stewardship season seriously, because this is the time meant for the church. Think and pray about how it is that we show being church to the whole world. And then humbly, courageously and boldly give as you can, so that we can equip this Body of Christ to *be* the Body of Christ for as long as we yet draw breath, and for generations if not millennia to come.

It is a joy to be your pastor. It is a joy to be part of your family. Friends, let us be church together. Amen.