

Sermon May 1 2022 Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE:

Based on 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, written by Laura Bartlett:

We do not gather in vain, for God is working in our hearts. The love of Jesus Christ calls us together. Our worship strengthens and empowers us to share the gospel. The love of Jesus Christ shines in our lives. Proclaim the good news with boldness. The love of Jesus Christ is at work in the world!

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, “The Voice” Bible paraphrase:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church gathering in Thessalonica, those living in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus the Anointed. May grace and peace be yours [from God our Father and the Lord Jesus the Anointed]. We always thank God for all of you in our prayers. Your actions on behalf of the true faith, your tireless toil of love, and your unending, unwavering, unending hope in our Lord Jesus the Anointed before God our Father have put you consistently at the forefront of our thoughts. O brothers and sisters loved by God, we know He has chosen you. And here is why: what you experienced in the good news we brought you was more than words channeling down your ears; it came to you as a life-empowering, Spirit-infused message that offers complete hope and assurance! We lived transparently before you so that you would know what sort of people we truly are. We did it for your sake, and you have modeled your lives after ours just as we are modeling ours after the Lord. You took to heart the word we taught with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, even in the face of trouble. As a result, you have turned into a model of faith yourselves for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. In fact, not only has the message of our Lord thundered from your gathering into Macedonia and Achaia, but everywhere we go, your faith in God is talked about so we don't even have to say a thing! You see, they go on and on telling us the story of how you welcomed us when we were introduced to you; how you turned toward God and realigned your life to serve the one true living God—leaving your idols to crumble in the dust—and how you now await the return from heaven of His Son, whom He raised from the dead—namely, Jesus—our rescuer from the wrath to come.

SERMON: “Religio” The Rev. Brent Damrow

It is good to see you. It has been good to be here this long weekend, where yesterday we had a funeral celebrating the lives of two people, and then also an amazing concert welcoming in the community to hear the Stockbridge Festival Chorus. And now today celebrating the sabbath on this Celebration Sunday. Because here is the truth: I love church. And I don't just love the church universal, I love *this* church. I love *you*. I love what we commit to doing together.

To say that Paul loved church, though, is to fall so far short of what is true. It would be like saying David (our pianist today), for instance, has a not unfavorable position on music. To say that Paul loves spending time with church would be somewhat similar to saying our Women's Service League kind of likes to craft or bake. It would be like saying that people like Jeremy or Linda or Cathy or Terry, or any number of you who come to study after study after study, kind of

enjoy learning. It would be like saying that Anne Hutchinson (in charge of The People's Pantry) kind of likes feeding people.

Paul's love for the church is rooted not in the story of any particular church, but in the greater story of what God is doing. Paul's love for the church is occasioned by the fact that Paul believes that what we do when we gather matters. That how we live our lives, not just in this sanctuary, and for Paul least importantly in this sanctuary, but most importantly out in the world, that determines the whole fate of the world.

Paul was a zealot. There are things about Paul's zealousness that could not be mentioned this morning in the kids' time. To be a zealot meant that faith was so important that you could persecute people, you could hurt people, you could kill people. At least, that was Paul in the early part of his life. Zealousness based on the fact that what we believe and how we live are so critically important that to risk going astray requires the most extreme response.

Paul's zealousness never faded. But on that road to Damascus when he met the risen Christ -- the One about whom we say Alleluia -- when Paul came face to face with Christ, that level of zealousness, that willingness to do anything for God changed. Because Paul realized what we need to know: God has already done everything. That in the coming of Jesus Christ in his life, his death, his resurrection, that bridge, that connection between God and humanity has been brought together in a way that is already done. But it does not end there.

The word for religion -- *religio* -- is an important word for Paul. If you look at the root of what the word *religion* means, it means a connection. It means to intentionally and consciously and deeply connect things. When we gather as a church body, we connect. To read Paul, especially in Corinthians, it is to read about the connection of love. It is to read how we are one body in Christ. It is to read how we are connected in this place, as a family for this moment. And yet we are connected to all who have come before, and all who will yet come. For Paul, the idea of connection is critically important.

There is a phrase in this translation, *The Voice*. I love Paul, and yet sometimes, and I hadn't really noticed it until our deacon read this passage so well today. Paul had it going so well, didn't he? And then, of course, Paul ends with one of his trademark phrases: "our rescuer from the wrath to come." It matters to Paul. But in this translation of this reading, what I love about it is, did you notice that what church is all about? It is "more than words channeling down your ears." More than just one more place where we go to have someone talk at us, yet one more place to fill our heads with what matters, what we believe in.

Instead, Paul says this act of being church is to come together in a way that we let the Spirit uplift us. It is a way where we become who Christ wants us to be. In this passage and in Thessalonians in general, you can't miss the fact that Paul gives thanks first that they saw the good news in Paul's ministry. But more than that, that they became the good news themselves.

Paul is almost out of work in this area, did you hear? And do you know why? Because everywhere he goes, the people are like, "Oh yeah, I ran into Ronnie on the street the other day. I know what you're all about. She showed me with the way she lives." "Oh yeah, I saw Shirley the

other day. She was so filled with love and joy, I know exactly what Jesus is about.” “Oh year, Jim was out on the golf course the other day, and after he hit a hole in one he yelled ‘Praise God!’”

What Paul is saying is that yes, we come together to learn how to be together. We come to study and to serve, to sing and to eat, in ways that bring us together as a family, so that we can then be that family out there on days other than Sunday. Sundays are set apart so that we can come together and be, and eat, and remember. Sundays are set apart specifically so that we can bridge with the world. So that we can, as Paul said in this passage, realign our lives on the model of the Risen One. Because Paul wants us to know that the impossible work, the ultimate connection, the connection itself between heaven and earth has already been made, has already happened in the resurrection of Jesus. And our only job is to live into the beauty of it.

As I think about today, and I think about the celebration for the Capital Campaign, and I think about all the work we’re doing on this building, what comes to mind for me is what happened here yesterday. What comes to mind for me is how do we open our hearts and minds, not just to be a church for ourselves, but a church for all of the Berkshires, a church for all of the world. So that whoever needs a place to come and find love and peace can. Whoever needs to celebrate a life beautifully lived can. Whoever needs to hear some gorgeous music knows exactly where to go. And then having come here into our beautifully restored and refinished and refurbished place, we become realigned to become Christ in the world.

Friends, Paul claims that in that vision, in that moment, in that encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, among the many things that Jesus taught Paul was the importance of this communion table. In his letters, he says I hand on to you what was given to me by Jesus. Paul was not at the Last Supper. But Paul came to know the importance of this meal in his encounter with Jesus.

As we worship today, as we eat today, as we share today, may all we do not simply be words channeling down our ears. But instead may we encounter the Spirit that doesn’t just help us come to church, but that makes us church. Yes, right here. Yes, daringly down there at the Golf Club for our Capital Campaign Kick Off celebration. But can you try, as you leave that party today, to at least for today, and maybe tomorrow, try to put me out of work. Would you try to be so visible in your love and your faith and your forgiveness and your love of church, that next time I’m walking downtown, somebody says “Oh, I know all about your church. I know all about Jesus. Because I ran into Don and Holland. And I saw it in the way they walked, the way they acted, and the way they treated others.”

Friends, Paul loves church. I love church. I know you love church. Let us spend this day and every day being church. Amen.