

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 (NRSV)

[1] You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, [2] but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.

[3] For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, [4] but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.

[5] As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; [6] nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, [7] though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. [8] So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

THE WAY A MOTHER CARES FOR HER CHILDREN?

Eugene Peterson's translation of the second half of verse seven in *The Message* reads, "... we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children." The Apostle Paul is describing his relationship with the Christians at Thessalonica.

I often think of Paul as a man who was strong and even "bull headed" in his approach to things. Quite often he is very blunt in his letters and is quick to dress down a congregation if they have strayed from the straight and narrow.

His images of leadership are often drawn from sports. Paul said things like, "I have fought the good fight. I have run the race." Don't look to the Apostle Paul if you want that warm fuzzy feeling. He's a man's man.

And yet, in this passage, Paul said that he and those who were with him cared for the young Christians at Thessalonica as a mother cares for her children.

Actually, the word translated "mother" by Peterson and "nurse" by the NRSV is really the word for "wet nurse." The Apostle cared for this congregation like a nursing mother. That's an astounding and beautiful picture of what it means to be a leader in the Christian church.

Do you want to lead in the name of Christ? One example of leadership, according to Paul, is the tender love of a young mother in the nursery. She would do anything to care for her child.

This image of God's love is scattered throughout the Bible. For example, Jesus as he lamented the fate of Jerusalem once compared his love for his people to that of a mother hen. Jesus said,

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Luke 13:34 (NRSV)

The mark of a good leader, according to Jesus was not the desire to be in charge, to (as he put it) “lord it over” those who follow. That was the way the world.

In contrast, a Christian leader, following the example of Christ must be willing to sacrifice for the one he or she loves. The Christian ministry is a ministry of compassion marked by a gentle spirit and a desire for reconciliation. (Mark 10:42-45)

LOVING GOD AND NEIGHBOR, A DIFFICULT TASK

Paul said in our lesson for today that he wanted to share his life as well as the gospel with the young Christians at Thessalonica.

For Paul, Christian leadership was all about a personal relationship, a personal relationship with the God who is revealed in Christ and a personal relationship with fellow human beings.

You cannot separate the two.

Jesus was once asked which commandment was the most important. Jesus refused to give just one commandment. Jesus said that there were two “most important” commands.

Jesus said that we should love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and there was a second command similar to the first one. We should love our neighbor as ourselves. According to our Lord, everything in the Bible is based upon these two commands. (Matthew 22:34-46)

That all sounds good ... in theory. Yes, we should love God, and our neighbor as ourselves. We should have compassion for others as a mother has compassion for her children.

But, what sounds so easy in theory often proves to be difficult in practice.

Sometimes the ones we are called to love are those who stone the prophets and reject God. Sometimes the ones we are called to love stone us, leaving us feeling broken and empty.

Did you hear the pain in Paul's voice at the beginning of our lesson for today?

He wrote about how he was "shamefully mistreated" at Philippi when he preached the gospel there, and how the troublemakers have apparently followed him. Now they slandered his name at Thessalonica.

They suggested that Paul was "in it for the money," that he had tricked the people for his own gain.

It was a plausible claim given the track record of preachers in that area. According to the commentators, there were quite a few traveling preachers in that part of the world who used religion as a way to get money from the people. That shouldn't be all that hard to understand since there are still quite a few of those preachers "for hire" even today.

But, Paul said, "I'm not like that." He defended himself by asking the Thessalonians to remember what he actually did while he was with them. Did he ask for money? Never.

In fact, Paul worked night and day so that he might not be a "burden" to the congregation. Paul didn't ask for a salary even though he was within his rights to do so.

The only thing Paul did was to preach the gospel and encourage people to live a life worthy of their calling in Christ Jesus.
(1 Thessalonians 2:9-12)

THE PASSION OF PAUL

I've come to believe that my view of Paul has been a bit too one dimensional. I used to see him as an evangelist who just said what he had to say and let the chips fall where they may. I thought that he didn't care what others thought of him.

Certainly Paul cared about the spread of the gospel so much that he was willing to give up everything, including his own personal needs and his reputation. Paul once said that he had learned to be content in all circumstances. Serving his Lord was all that mattered. (Philippians 4:12-13)

And yet, as you read through the letters of Paul, you'll see that in almost every letter he spends some time defending himself from those who slandered his reputation. I think it hurt Paul to know that some of the people he loved the most were trying to destroy him and the work he had accomplished in ministry.

It's almost as if Paul is trying to remind himself as well as his congregations to trust in God's Word and God's Providential power instead of their own abilities to get things done. In the final analysis, success would not be measured in number of people he could please but in his faithfulness to the gospel message.

One of the most poignant passages from Paul's letters comes from one of his last letters, his second letter to Timothy. An imprisoned Paul wrote that most everyone had abandoned him. It looked like all of his hard work for the gospel would finally be destroyed by these enemies who had pursued him throughout his ministry.

And yet, despite his disappointment with the actions of those he loved, Paul saw the hand of God at work. Paul saw how God even used his imprisonment as an opportunity to powerfully preach the Gospel to the Gentiles who guarded him. (2 Timothy 4:16-18)

Paul said, “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” (2 Timothy 1:12b)

In other words, Paul believed that in the end, God’s divine purposes would be accomplished, and that’s all that mattered.

LEADERSHIP TODAY AND THEOLOGY

One of the reasons the letters of Paul are a part of our Bible is that the problems faced by the early church are problems that are still faced today. This passage is especially relevant to a difficulty that we encounter again and again, a lack of credible Christian leadership.

We’re thinking about Christian ministry and Christian leadership in the wrong way. What matters most is not what people think about us or how successful we are. What matters most is that the truth of the Gospel is preached fully in word and deed; what matters most is theology.

And yet a survey in that evangelical publication, *Christianity Today* suggested that theology is not all that important to those in the pulpit or those in the pews.

When asked to prioritize pastoral activities, both ministers and parishioners listed theology last in a given list. Instead both groups listed spirituality, relational skills, character, and communication skills as top priorities.

Indeed, these are important skills. But, the priority is wrong.

How can there be a true spirituality if it is divorced from a right knowledge of God? What is the point of good communication if what we communicate is not the Truth? How can good character be built upon anything other than the righteousness of God as revealed in His Son, Jesus?

I can understand why people are often turned off when we use the “T” word, theology. Theology is often experienced and taught in a very boring, theoretical way. We are taught to memorize a certain message, but it seems to have no relevance to our lives.

PASSIONATE THEOLOGY

In order for us to get excited about God’s message it cannot be delivered in a dispassionate way. It must be delivered with the passion and love of a mother. It must be practiced as well as preached.

That’s what Paul did. Paul told the Thessalonians, “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”

1 Thessalonians 2:8 (NRSV)

I have a friend who has a motto about ministry, something like, “bringing in the Kingdom of God one cup of coffee at a time.” There’s something right about that motto. The Kingdom of God always comes in human form, sharing love and life with another person.

God was in Christ and Christ is in us. We are called to personally bring the Message, the Good News to others. We bring the Gospel, and we bring ourselves.

This is not an easy thing to do. Christian love is always painful and costly. Having a relationship with anyone invites the possibility of misunderstanding and conflict.

And if you’re going to lead people by caring for them as a nursing mother cares for her children, you’re going to be in a very vulnerable position.

And yet, this is what I think we are called to do. This is our model for Christian ministry.

Bruce Metzger wrote,

“The presence of Christ departs when well-intentioned people, zealous to find the right way, depart from the ultimate way which is love.”

In order to preach the gospel with power and integrity, we must not forget that the ultimate way is the way of love. This is the key to authentic Christian leadership and an authentic Christian life.

We maintain the truth of the gospel, but we always do it in love.

If we preach the love of Christ in an unloving way, we’re not going to convince anyone of its truth. So we must be gentle in our dealings with others. We must care for others “as a mother cares for her children.”

That’s a costly love, but it’s a love that changes things.

BESSIE PARKER

Bessie Parker was ordained in 1950, well before the time women were accepted as ministers. She spent her years ministering in places with names like Twitty, Brown Swamp, and Indian Field.

But, over the years she built a reputation as one of the most effective preachers in her conference. When the bishop let a congregation know that they were getting a “lady preacher,” he would have a fight on his hands, and four years later he had a fight on his hands again when he dared to move “our dear Reverend Parker” somewhere else.

Bessie Parker was not your typical pastor. She had snow white hair and a soothing southern voice. She was the stereotype of what a grandmother is supposed to be, and she used that image to great effect.

Preachers used to stand in line to sign up Bessie to lead their annual mission funds appeal. When she got to preaching, telling you how much you were going to enjoy sending breeder pigs down to Haiti, pigs started packing. She used to say, “They will go down there and make more little piggies in the name of the Lord.” (And then giggle.)

In one church the board was reluctant to fix a leaky roof. And so the next Monday, the members were aghast at the sight of their pastor, white hair, blue jeans and all, atop the church roof on a Monday morning hammering away.

The roof was quickly repaired with the assistance of everyone. As one officer put it,
“It just didn’t look right to have your grandmother up fixing your roof!”

But, the biggest challenge came toward the end of Bessie’s ministry. It was a very difficult church, one that had a reputation for feuding and racism. They consistently refused to send any money to support the programs of the denomination. Before Bessie arrived, the church had literally run off two preachers in six months. (Some sort of record I’m sure.)

Most folks felt like it was a cruel thing for the bishop to do ... to send her to that place before her retirement. Everyone predicted disaster.

A few months passed with no word from Bessie. Finally a friend saw her at a church meeting and asked rather hesitantly how things were going.

She replied, “The sweetest people I have ever seen! Our first work team will leave for Brazil next month. I’ve got to get back there early because this is our music weekend with the neighboring black congregation!”

The friend was shocked. Was this really the same church? What about their racism? Hadn’t she encountered any problems?

Bessie replied, “Not really ... except for one little misunderstanding when we voted on this year’s budget.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“Yes, we got to the apportionment for the Black College Fund.

When we were asked to vote on acceptance, the chairman of our board said, “We don’t give no money because we’re not going to pay for no (racist phrase deleted) to go to college.”

“Oh no. What did you do?”

“I stood up and said, ‘John, that’s not nice. You sit down and act like a Christian.’ Everything else passed without a single problem.”

Who’s going to misbehave in front of his grandmother?

In my mind this is an example of the kind of leadership that is required in the church. It is leadership born out of relationship. It is true to the Gospel that hates the sin but loves the sinner.

I think that all of us should seek to lead others in a similar way. We should “mother” people toward the kingdom.

In a world filled with bluster and bravado, let’s have the courage to lead in a gentle way ... as a mother cares for her children.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN