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Colorado Springs, Colorado  
October 29, 2017  
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## “In the End Is Our Beginning” - Reflections on A Time of Transition 2. On Giving Your Heart and Not Wasting Time

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 The Message So, friends, it's obvious that our visit to you was no waste of time. We had just been given rough treatment in Philippi, as you know, but that didn't slow us down. We were sure of ourselves in God, and went right ahead and said our piece, presenting God's Message to you, defiant of the opposition. God tested us thoroughly to make sure we were qualified to be trusted with this Message. Be assured that when we speak to you we're not after crowd approval-only God approval. Since we've been put through that battery of tests, you're guaranteed that both we and the Message are free of error, mixed motives, or hidden agendas. We never used words to butter you up. No one knows that better than you. And God knows we never used words as a smoke screen to take advantage of you. Even though we had some standing as Christ's apostles, we never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important, with you or anyone else. We weren't aloof with you. We took you just as you were. We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children. We loved you dearly. Not content to just pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did.

One day when I came home from work, one of our children greeted me in this way: *“Hi Dad. I didn't do it. It's not my fault. Someone else must have done it.”*

Welcome home! Of course, I immediately became skeptical and suspicious, knowing both that that tender and heart-warming greeting from my child meant that indeed something that I wasn't going to like had happened and that there was some probability that that greeting was a sort of preemptive strike to hopefully deflect suspicion from that child for whatever “it” was that I was about to find.

I remembered that experience when I was re-reading our scripture for this morning, the second in my final sermon series to you on what Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church might have to teach us about times of transition. You see, Paul sounds almost as defensive and pre-emptive as my child did. Did you notice his words: He was opposed, he said, but he kept on anyway; God had tested him and he loudly says he isn't doing what he is doing as some sort of trick or for any sort of personal gain. He says he doesn't have any mixed motives or hidden agendas. He doesn't

intend to use glib words as a smokescreen to take advantage of anyone. He's says he wasn't going to patronize or condescend. That's quite a list. It seems an odd place to open a letter; it too, like our child, seems defensive, as if he is wanting to preempt any criticism of his actions or his motives. But you can't help thinking to yourself, why does he protest so much? For, you know, where there is all this smoke, perhaps there has to be some fire?

Well, yes there is. But that was not Paul's doing. You see, Thessalonika, as a growing port city, an urban commercial center, seemed to be something of a magnet for con men and charlatans. As one commentator on this passage puts it,

Charlatans and false preachers were quite common.... Under the guise of philosophers, they would often berate people and then extract funds from them, much the same as [some] modern TV evangelist[s] might put on a great show and pass the hat amongst the faithful.... [These] ancient preachers were seen by most people as hypocrites and "in it for the money."<sup>1</sup>

So Paul was worried that, as another commentator says, that people would think that Behind his efforts to build up the Body of Christ was his own desire to make himself rich by the collections. [That] His preaching of God's grace was a mask behind which he hid his greed.... [That] He was going to ask for a big offering... and keep the purse for himself. [That] He was being kind to the widows so that he could ask them for big gifts.<sup>2</sup>

That was the attitude he was facing in Thessalonika and that is why he was so preemptive in his greeting, so defensive-sounding: he needed to assert from the very start that he was not like those whom they'd encountered before who used religion as a guise for extortion or piety as a cloak for greed.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=151](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=151)

<sup>2</sup><https://www.sermonsuite.com/free-access/cloak>

But what does that have to do with us? Well, we too have a message to bear, but our culture is increasingly skeptical of anything having to do with “church.” Study after study show that folks are leaving the church in record numbers. 60% of Millennials, according to once well-respected study associate the word “church” with judgmentalism, and 64% of them believe that the Church is anti-gay.<sup>3</sup> Thirty-five percent of Millennials believe the Church does more harm than good.<sup>4</sup> Of course, it’s not just Millennials. Seventy-two percent of Americans in one poll agreed with the statement “The church is full of hypocrites,” and seventy-nine percent “think that Christianity today is more about organized religion than about loving God and loving people.”<sup>5</sup>

You see, if what Paul was defensive and preemptive about with the Thessalonians was the assumption that preachers and their followers were a con game, only out to fleece people for the money that they could make, the assumption of more and more in **our** culture is that church folks may be good at loving each other, those inside the doors, those who look like them, but they’re not good at all about loving the world outside of their, in Gay Hatler’s phrase, “holy huddles.” **Paul** was facing the situation of a culture that presumed Christians were charlatans and con artists; **we** face the situation that our culture increasingly presumes that Christians are hypocrites, more interested in each other than those Jesus came to serve. As one writer puts it,

...while the gospels instruct followers of Christ to help the poor, oppressed, maligned, mistreated, sick, and those most in need of help, [too many] Christians in America have largely... rejected refugees, refused aid to immigrants, cut social

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2017/04/30/ten-reasons-millennials-are-backing-away-from-god-and-christianity.html>

<sup>4</sup><https://faithit.com/12-reasons-millennials-over-church-sam-eaton/>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.christianpost.com/news/how-do-unchurched-americans-view-christianity-30793/>

services to the poor, diminished help for the sick, fueled xenophobia, reinforced misogyny, ignored racism, stoked hatred, reinforced corruption, and largely increased inequality, prejudice, and fear.<sup>6</sup>

The always thoughtful Christian blogger John Pavlovitz, says that Americans increasingly are skeptical of churches who claim to be loving; he says many folks experience things otherwise; they think to themselves: “your brand of love seems incredibly selective and decidedly narrow; filtering out all the spiritual riff-raff, which sadly includes far too many of us.”<sup>7</sup>

In the midst of such a context, we need to remember that Jesus left us with two essential imperatives: To love another and to find those who are lost and hurting with the Good News. Part of what Pavlovitz is saying is that too many churches are indeed very, very good about loving one another. And that, all by itself, is not a bad thing; no, it’s a very good thing, a wondrous thing, a God-thing indeed. We’ve experienced such love in this congregation as we have gathered ranks around those who were hurting, as we have helped folks walk through the valley of the shadow of death, as we remember and pray for and visit the sick among us, as we greet those whom we care for with delight and find our days brightened simply by coming to this place, to be among this people, Sunday by Sunday. Those are wondrous things indeed. “Love one another.” These are the folks to whom, in Paul’s phrase, “we want to give our hearts.” And we have and we do.

But Jesus’ other imperative, where He says “Go into all the world” is indeed about finding those who don’t know these things, who indeed are among those folks who think that the Christian religion has turned its back on the poor, the hurting, the

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<sup>6</sup><https://sojo.net/articles/american-christianity-has-failed>

<sup>7</sup><https://churchplants.com/articles/8774-dear-church-heres-why-people-are-really-leaving-you-john-pavlovitz.html/2>

immigrant, those who are gay or lesbian. And make no mistake, just as a dog who is abused will flinch and shy away even from expressions of care, it can sometimes be hard to reach out to folks who also flinch because they have repeatedly been told by certain preachers and certain churches that they are less than worthy, that they are sinners, that God doesn't approve of them. As one of my favorite Christian bloggers, Carey Nieuwhof puts it, "Jesus said Christians should be known for how deeply we love. Yet studies show that in the eyes of many non-Christians, we're known for how deeply we judge, not for how deeply we love." And then he says, bluntly, "You can't judge someone and love them at the same time."<sup>8</sup>

In my 30+ years of ministry, I have seen and known too many congregations who over time have essentially given up on Jesus' second imperative, the Great Commission, to find the lost. I have seen them make decisions, explicitly or implicitly, that more and more said that they valued and cared more about the people already in the church than those whom God was trying to send them to with the Good News. I have seen them more and more act as if the church was a "membership organization," a club even, where being an insider got you perks that weren't to be shared with "outsiders." And then, inevitably, what happens is that the club shrinks, the sense of mission shrivels, and new ideas come to be rejected simply because they're new and new people are merely tolerated until they likely leave so as to not upset the comfortableness, and then, finally, as the old phrase goes, the last one turns out the lights. And that is such a sad, sad thing, such a loss for God and the world.

So what did Paul counsel to that church in Thessalonika, what did Paul do to show them that he was not like that cultural stereotype of the charlatan preacher but in fact had true Good News to share? I love the simple way he says it: "we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did." What does it mean to "give one's heart?" Two things,

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<sup>8</sup><https://careynieuwhof.com/5-ways-judgmental-christians-are-killing-your-church/>

I suggest: First, it means to be authentic. The folks who are seeking a relationship with God but who have been burned or judged or bashed on by other experiences of religion are not looking for us to have all the answers, they are not looking for us to be their moral superiors. They are looking for a people who are genuine, a people who are honest about their doubts and their fears, a people who know that life is hard even when held in the arms of God, a people who don't pelt them with over-simplistic slogans reeking of bad theology. And secondly, to give these folks our hearts means that we indeed love them and value them just as much – or more, even! – than the folks who already know of God's grace for each and all. After all, longtime church consultant Bill Easum says "The church is the only institution that exists for the sake of those who are not part of the institution."

I love the way my wife Barbara puts what it means to love those folks outside the walls as she put it in her sermon last Sunday; hear her powerful words:

...we are good at acute care, not so much at chronic compassion. [But] Paul reminds us... of what genuine love looks like... - we share with people in need, *and we keep doing it*. We practice hospitality - love that is inclusive, welcoming, affirming, embracing, *and we keep doing it*. Let love be genuine. Let it be so genuine that it draws other people in. Let it be without limits. Let it be relentless.... Don't be superior. Don't be smug. Don't be self-righteous.

Authentically and truly – relentlessly! – loving those both “inside” and “outside” is Paul's plea so that we won't, as he says, “waste our time.”

In this time of transition at First Christian, I am heartened this morning by the example of our children and youth being a part of our worship leadership. I am heartened by who they are and who they will yet become. I am heartened that they are indeed growing in the faith in a church that truly wants to continue to reach out, to not simply huddle up, a church that is more interested in loving than judging – even when

that comes hard, even when we may bite our tongues because, as the old saw goes, “we’ve never done it that way before.” I’m heartened that in new ways, through new people, through new music, through new opportunities for mission, that God will, I am convinced, continue to use this congregation well and mightily.

The Apostle Paul told the Thessalonians that he was *“Not content to just pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did.”* My friends, during my tenure as your pastor, it has been a privilege to see that you have been like Paul, not content to just pass on the gospel to those already on the inside, already a part of the huddle. No, you have exhibited -- in more ways than you know -- that you wanted to give your hearts as well, that you wanted to risk being radically hospitable knowing that new people would bring change, that you would not let differences of theology or ideology keep you from coming together as one body at Christ’s Table. You too, indeed, wanted to give your hearts. And you have. It has been a marvelous thing to behold, and I thank you for allowing me to witness it and be a small part of it.

And so my prayer this morning is this: may the valediction for our lives, wherever those lives may take us, continue to embody and measure up to Paul's mandate: *“...we wanted to give ... our hearts. And we did.”* Thanks be to God, we did – and by God’s amazing grace we will continue to do so. Amen.