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“In the End Is Our Beginning” - Reflections on A Time of Transition 1. “Together Here”

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Adapted from The Message I, Paul, together here with Silas and Timothy, send greetings to the church at Thessalonica, Christians assembled by God and by the Master, Jesus Christ. God's amazing grace be with you! God's robust peace! Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you're in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following our Master, Jesus Christ, before God. It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions. You paid careful attention to the way we lived among you, and determined to live that way yourselves. In imitating us, you imitated the Master. Although great trouble accompanied the Word, you were able to take great joy from the Holy Spirit!-taking the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble. Do you know that all over the provinces of both Macedonia and Achaia believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master's Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore-you're the message! People come up and tell us how you received us with open arms, how you deserted the dead idols of your old life so you could embrace and serve God, the true God. They marvel at how expectantly you await the arrival of his Son, whom he raised from the dead-Jesus, who rescued us from certain doom.

As the title of my new sermon series indicates, it is time to talk about transition. When I announced my retirement in mid-May, the end of November seemed far away. But now it is careening toward us! So much has happened in the space of those months – our search committee did amazing work in identifying Jonathan Hall as our next Senior Pastor, Jonathan inspired us with his sermon in September, and then we called him unanimously to be our next Senior Pastor. And so much has happened in our world during that time, too much of it tragic: hurricanes have pummeled and pounded in too many places leaving too many still without adequate food, water, and electricity. Horrific fires have stirred the memories of our own Waldo Canyon and Black Forest fires as they have destroyed thousands of homes and wrecked thousands of lives. Celebrities have committed terrible crimes leading to hundreds of thousands of

women reminding us of the daily degradations they face. The scourge of gun- and knife-fueled violence has touched both our community and our country again and again.

As an old Chinese word suggests, transition is both a time of opportunity and danger. The *danger* is that we shall harden our hearts in the face of too much tragedy, the *danger* is that we shall heed the scariest of those voices that play to our fears of those whose race or religion or orientation is “different.” The *danger* is that we shall huddle up and see the world and its ways as a place simply to be shunned. The *opportunity*, though, is also before us: to find continued and new ways to witness to a God of goodness and grace and love for each and all, the *opportunity* to remind ourselves that despite what our culture too often says it is possible for people to come together to do go things even when they disagree theologically or politically, the *opportunity* to demonstrate that hope is stronger than hate and fear.

Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonian church is an apt and appropriate source for us to use for our reflections in a time of transition. It isn’t obvious from the way the books in our New Testament are ordered but virtually all scholars believe that what we now call First Thessalonians is the earliest New Testament writing that we have. Paul probably wrote it around the year 50 – just 17 years after the time of Jesus – as near to him as those who are writing now of the year 2000 are to us. And it too was also a time of transition, a time of danger and opportunity. You see, whenever a movement passes to a new generation of leadership there is a danger that it will dissipate. But that did not happen here, for as Paul more and more takes over the work of Peter and the original disciples he seizes the opportunity to share the story of what God has done through Jesus not just with the people of Israel but with the whole world. And the city of Thessalonika itself was in a time of transition too. With the refurbishment of a new Roman road called the Via Egnatia, Thessalonika was rapidly moving from a small

isolated town to a commercial center, in the same way that two generations ago in the U.S. certain small towns suddenly became commercial hubs when the interstate highway went through them. In Thessalonkia, such change brought with it new people with their new customs and their new religions and their new ways of life. And such things, throughout history, have always meant both opportunity and danger.

So, what does Paul's letter have to teach us, a letter that was written in a time of transition to a people in a time of transition, as we begin our own transition of life and leadership? Two important things I believe. First, look for a moment at what your eyes might usually tend to pass quickly over – the very first line of Paul's letter. It looks like simply a polite salutation. But it is actually revolutionary, it is actually subversive in the sense that I preached about last week. Why? Well, hear the words again: *"I, Paul, together here with Silas and Timothy, send greetings to the church at Thessalonica, Christians assembled by God and by the Master, Jesus Christ. God's amazing grace be with you! God's robust peace!"* What's so radical, so subversive about that innocent-sounding greeting? Just this: at that time, there was a law proclaimed by Caesar that all documents intended for public reading must begin with an ascription of praise to Caesar as the only ruler, as the highest god, as the only one who was the guarantor of peace. But you will look in vain for a reference to Caesar in Paul's lines, for his message is that it is **God** who has brought the people together, not Caesar, that it is **God** who is the one who is the source of grace and meaning, not Caesar, and that it is **God** who is the only true peace.

That's an essential message for us too! You see, you and I are often tempted to put our ultimate faith in something other than God. Or we want to hedge our bets. The Bible has a word for that: it's called "idolatry." And let's face it: You and I sometimes do have a tendency to give certain things in our lives far more authority, far more of our time and attention and energy than is warranted. Seen that way, every one of us

probably has an idol that sometimes sneaks into our lives every so often: for some folks, their implicit idols are sports, evoking from them far more energy and attention and time than their families, their jobs, their church, their God, giving credence to comedian Dave Barry's observation that it is puzzling how some grown men who can't remember which one of their children has asthma can nonetheless become deeply agonized for seventeen weeks each year over a complete stranger's hamstring problems. For others, the idol that sometimes overwhelms them is the idol of "self-care" – that sometimes insidious shibboleth of our age, an idea that in its most extreme form is neither Biblical nor ethical, the idea that you always ought to "look out for number one" first and foremost and that credit card-fueled purchases of the newest electronics or those essential oils or those season tickets need no justification because you're simply "taking care of yourself." It is indeed true that each of us is prone to making idols that we sometimes give more attention – even ultimate attention - than is warranted; each of us is indeed prone to fitting the definition of idolatry that one preacher gives: "Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth."¹ And so Paul's reminder to the Thessalonians and us is that none of these things are of ultimate worth, none of these things can or should ever replace, even inadvertently, the God who alone is the one, as it says in Acts, "in whom we live and move and have our very being."

There's a second point in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians that is also instructive for us, and it is also to be found in the very first verse, two little words that are easily overlooked: "together here." *"I, Paul, together here with Silas and Timothy, send greetings to the church at Thessalonica, Christians assembled by God and by the Master, Jesus Christ."* Because so much of the idolatrous and even sometimes evil forces at work around us push us to proclaim just the opposite: not "together here," but

¹http://www.westminsterdayton.org/pdf_sermons/2012/ser012212.pdf

“apart and scattered.” Have you seen the funny Facebook cartoon that shows a bunch of folks sitting in a large house, each one of them alone in their own rooms, with the caption “Introverts Unite! Separately in Your Own Rooms.” That’s too much of our world these days, except the folks in those rooms are not sitting quietly but are shouting slogans, playing to people’s fears, telling them that the only way to safety and security is to wall themselves off from each other, to only associate with “their kind of people,” to erect barriers instead of building bridges. And lest you think I am moving close to a one-sided partisan point of view, I’m not: You see

- I rue the fact that urban folks know less and less about rural life and vice versa
- I deplore the fact that too many city dwellers and those with the privilege of more formal education diss and dismiss and devalue those in small towns whose lives are hurting in ways that often get too little attention
- But I also grieve that too many of those small town folks listen to the voices that would tell them that those city folks are their enemies.
- I am saddened by the fact that too many folks tell others that people who don’t share their politics, their skin color, their religion, are to be shunned.
- I am angered that too many voices who label themselves Christian proclaim the exact opposite of what Paul proclaimed when they tell their followers that those whose orientation is “different” are forever to have a theological scarlet letter branded on them as ones whom God is more interested in judging than loving.

But Paul will have none of it. “Together here” is his mantra throughout his ministry. In his churches he gathered the rich and the poor at one table and one sanctuary, he forcefully argued that the Gospel was not just for the Hebrew people even though he was always grateful for his Jewish identity, and he never lost sight of the fact that, as he puts it elsewhere, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, but all are one in Jesus Christ.” Or more succinctly “together here, together here.”

Now that fact of God's radically inclusive and including love isn't always easy to live out sometimes, is it? We have folks in this congregation who span the political spectrum and the theological spectrum. We've been known to squabble. But, much more important than those things is the fact that we have committed ourselves to being "together here," of proclaiming a God of love and grace for each and all, of being a witness to the truth that it is not God's will that we each sit in our silos fearfully screaming at one another but that we join hands and together do what we can do to feed the hungry, comfort the hurting, and reach out to the lost.

It is a story that has been told before but it bears telling again: Bible scholar William Barclay relates how a group of World War I soldiers lost one of their friends in battle and wanted to give their fallen comrade a decent burial. While they probably should have waited on the Army's graves registration folks to deal with this, they didn't. They wanted to honor their friend themselves. They found a church with a graveyard behind it, surrounded by a white fence. They sought out the priest and asked if their friend could be buried there in the church graveyard. "Was he Catholic?" the priest asked. "No he was not," answered the soldiers. "I'm sorry, then," said the priest, "our graveyard is reserved for the members of the Roman Catholic Church. But you can bury your friend outside the fence, outside the gate. And I will see that the gravesite is cared for." "Thank you, Father," said the soldiers, and they proceeded to bury their friend just outside the graveyard, on the other side of the fence, just beyond the gate. When the war ended, but before those soldiers returned home, they decided to visit the grave of their friend. They returned to the church, but they couldn't find their friend's grave. Finally they questioned the priest: "Sir, we cannot find our friend's grave," they said. "Well," answered the priest. "After you buried your fallen friend, it just didn't seem right to me that he should be buried there, outside the fence." "So you moved his

grave?” asked the soldiers. “No,” said the priest. “ I moved the fence.”²

Or to put it another way, the way that Paul might put it, God put us in this world not to be separated by the fences of suspicion or enmity or even theology, but rather insists that we have been created to be “together here, together here.” In our time of transition and into the future, may we continue to commit ourselves to making Paul’s vision, God’s vision, ever more so. Amen.

²Adapted from Rev. Russell Peterman’s telling of this story in his article “Inside the Fence,” Crossroads, the newsletter of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Concord, California, March 27, 2008, page 2. www.concordfcc.net/newsletters/