

1 Thessalonians 3:9-11 1 Advent 12.01.24 Bill Uetracht

I am convinced that we do not say to one another often enough how much we mean to each other. We live life. We do what we need to do. We think loving things. We feel loving things. But we often don't speak words of affirmation and love to each other. Some of us come from families where feelings of love weren't articulated often. Many of us come from ethnic backgrounds that emphasized stoicism, that were fearful of too much emotion. Expression of emotion is just out of character for many of us, a matter of too much vulnerability. Heck, if I express myself, I might cry, lose control of myself. Yes, you might. But for me, the risk is worth it.

Bev and I have been here now for 28 years. We've been doing church together for a long time. We've been through a lot together. I've cried with you on many occasions because of personal grief and communal grief. There have been times when we wondered if we were going to be able to pick up the pieces. But we did. In fact, we thrived. We laughed a lot together. We did some pretty silly things together. Years of holy hilarity have characterized our life together. "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?"

Those are Paul's words, written to the people at Thessaloniki. We receive them today as we start the season of Advent, begin a new year. What a way to welcome the new year! Just think what it would be like for you or me to start a new year, or frankly, end a year with words of affirmation and love.

Some of you are familiar with Gary Chapman's five love languages, which refer to five ways people express and experience emotional affection in relationships. Words of affirmation are one of *my* love languages. I prefer those even more than gifts of fireballs and caramels. Surprisingly, I think words of affirmation may even be one of Paul's love languages. Honestly, often he seems to come across a little rugged, a

little tough. But words like those in First Thessalonians reveal a soft heart, a need to affirm, and I suspect, a need to be affirmed.

Bill Loader says that in this reading from Thessalonians “we are in the middle of a relationship.” Paul had founded the church at Thessaloniki, feeding and watering it. Frankly, though, wherever he went, he created controversies, receiving critiques from a whole host of sources. He was too liberal. He wasn’t a fundamentalist when it came to the scriptures. He was abandoning the tradition. He had some physical problems. He wasn’t the best looking or the greatest speaker. He wasn’t there with the original twelve apostles.

The critiques and the complaints were legion, many. Yet it appears that this little church in Thessaloniki didn’t give up on Paul. They didn’t abandon his teachings. “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?”

Now I suppose that some of those critiques have been lobbed my way: I am not a fundamentalist when it comes to the Bible; some people call me liberal; and I don’t know, maybe my looks aren’t that good. And perhaps for a few, maybe my perspectives on some political matters aren’t to some people’s liking. But we’ve hung in there together. We’ve done amazing things together. We together have built a remarkable community of faith, a community of love and lament. How can I thank God enough for you? Gratitude spills from my guts . . .for you!

Paul now is at a distance from the church at Thessaloniki, and he is missing them. “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.” He wants to see them again. “Night and day . . .you are the one!” (sung) They are the people he wants to see. He prays for them every night. They are on his mind all the time.

You know, there are people I regularly pray for you: my grandson, my boys, my wife, the people in Gaza, the West Bank and Ukraine, and you all. I get to see many of you frequently, so my prayers aren’t so much for reunion. But let me assure you, I look forward to our being together. I

don't think people are aware of how much joy most of us pastors experience in seeing our people. I don't think they know how much sadness pastors incur because of the absence of some of their people. I look forward to getting together every week for worship, for study, for fellowship. I look forward to our weekly trivia gathering. Regular reunion feeds me, affirms me, empowers me. And it beckons me to something more, to something greater.

Note what Paul says to the people at Thessaloniki: "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you." Love wants more love. Love wants people to abound in love, to increase in love. The bottom-line truth of life is that God is gracious, merciful, abounding in steadfast love. There is always more love, more grace to know and to experience. More love for one another, the folks on the inside. And more love for *all*, the folks we haven't yet met, the folks on the outside, the folks forgotten, the folks pushed to the fringe, the folks who are seeking, the folks who are lost.

Our communities of love don't exist so that we can congratulate each other and feel good about our wonderful little groups. No, our communities of love exist so that love may abound. The church exists not simply for those who are a part of it, but for those who are not yet a part of it and may never be a part of it. We exist so that love may grow in us, between us, and between us and the rest of the world.

I think that this growth in love is what Paul means when he says, "May God strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." There is something out in front of us. Something is coming. Something is beckoning us to the future. The coming of our Lord Jesus. This really is the message of Advent. We haven't arrived yet. We've got some waiting that we need to do.

And let's be honest, our waiting is occurring in a world that isn't in the best shape, which is what Luke's apocalyptic gospel reading is talking about. The foundations are shaking. The world as we know it is in

a mess. Our redemption is on its way, but creation is aching. There are signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. People are fainting from fear. They are afraid. Paul's Thessalonians were afraid. Their world was shaky. Now is the time for holiness, Paul is saying, the time for a love that puts life back together, a love that takes seriously that what has been separated can be made whole again.

You and I are living in tough days. Sometimes they seem like apocalyptic days. There are signs in the heavens and on the earth. Call those signs global climate change. Lots of folks are living with fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. It's within these days that we are called to build communities of love. It is within these days that we seek holiness, the wholeness that refuses to see community and life as a bunch of disconnected dots.

Sadly, when people think of holiness they often think of goody-two-shoe-ness, never misbehaving or doing naughty things. That is a shallow definition of holiness. A community of holiness may have loads of people who have done naughty things, but that community can still be holy because it operates under a love that is doing its best to bring people and life together. Holy communities are real communities that are captured by the love of a holy God who is always putting things back together again.

May you all grow in holiness. My big hugs for you, frankly, are looking for a response—looking for love that is always growing, not simply for me, but for all of God's creation and all of God's people.

How can I thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that I feel before our God because of you? These are hard days. These are days that are crying out for communities of love in which people can build one another up through words and deeds of affirmation and love.

By the way, I love you. I am grateful for you. You bring me all kinds of joy. And God met in Jesus is in the midst of that joy.