

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

First Sunday in Advent • December 2, 2018

Jeremiah 33:14-16 • Psalm 25:1-10 • 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 • Luke 21:25-36

Since we're starting a new church year today, let's start at the very beginning: 1 Thessalonians. 1 Thessalonians is the oldest book in the New Testament, written about fifteen years after Jesus was crucified and raised.

How old is 1 Thessalonians? 1 Thessalonians is so old that no one in that church in Thessalonica would have called themselves Christians. The term hadn't been invented yet. It's so old that by the time St. Mark sat down to write the first gospel, 1 Thessalonians had been around for a full twenty years. And it's so old that St. Paul introduces himself in it not with his preferred title, the Apostle Paul, but just as plain old "Paul," as if he doesn't quite know what he's getting into.

You would think that for being the oldest literature in the New Testament, 1 Thessalonians would be well known. But it isn't. Few people have it read at their funeral, still fewer at their wedding. And no one has their favorite verse from 1 Thessalonians tattooed on their bicep. But once you know some background, the letter becomes supremely interesting. A window into what life was like for believers who were trying to figure out how to be church together for the first time. Who didn't have the luxury of saying, "Let's just do what we did last year." Because there was no last year.

Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia. It was a large port city that welcomed ships from all over the Mediterranean, and it was located just off a major Roman highway. And because it was at the center of these trade routes, Thessalonica was awash with gods. You could pick whatever god you wanted. The Greek god Dionysus. The Egyptian god Osiris. Or the local favorite Cabirus. There were gods everywhere you looked. Look out from the port and you can see Mount Olympus where the all-powerful Zeus lived. Or just look at the coins in your hand and you could see even more gods piled on top of each other.

So when Paul and his associates Timothy and Silvan show up in Thessalonica, it doesn't seem like a receptive audience. Except a group of Gentiles, people who worshipped these other gods, hear Paul preaching about the God of Israel and Jesus the messiah who was crucified and raised. And these Gentiles turn from their idols and come to form the church of Thessalonica. So Paul does some more teaching and helps them get set up as a community of believers. And then the time comes when Paul, Timothy, and Silvan have to leave. The reason for their departure is unclear, but the effect is the same.¹ The church in Thessalonica, this small church of believers in a bustling city full of other gods, gets left on its own.

So after a while Paul sends Timothy back to Thessalonica and asks him to find out what happened to the church. So think for a second about what they expect. Maybe they think the church will have reverted back to worshipping other gods. Or maybe the church will have just disappeared entirely without a trace. But Timothy comes back and says that not only does the church still exist. It's committed to its mission. It's committed to its teaching. It seems like a miracle.

So today's reading is Paul's response to that good news. And it starts off the way you would expect. "How can we thank God enough for you for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?" The fact that this church still exists and is thriving despite all the barriers seems unbelievable to Paul. It's a sign that God is truly at work there. God didn't abandon them when Paul left, but now there's a new movement of the Spirit in this place. And Paul even adds that he

¹ Acts 17 suggests that Paul was expelled from Thessalonica after a few weeks, but that is not confirmed within Paul's own writings. Acts was written decades later and can't be reconciled perfectly with Paul's description of his travels.

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can't wait to go back to Thessalonica and see them. "Night and day," he writes, "we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face."

But then look at the reason why. Paul says that he wants to visit them, at least in part, so that he may "restore whatever is lacking in your faith." Well, what's that about? Paul was just gushing over and over about how great this church is. And then he says that you're lacking in something. So what are they lacking in?

Paul never makes their shortcoming explicit, but you can piece it together. Notice that at the end of his prayer for them, Paul prays that the Thessalonians may be "blameless before our God... at the coming of our Lord Jesus." Blameless is an interesting word. What do we mean by blameless? We usually think of being blamelessness as not bearing responsibility. That you can't be faulted for a mistake. For first century believers, that probably meant that when Jesus came back, as they thought he was going to any day now, you wouldn't be caught doing something wrong. When Jesus comes back to Thessalonica and asks what all these other gods are about, they could say, "Don't ask me. I have nothing to do with it." And if that's what it means to be blameless, if blamelessness is about avoiding responsibility, the easiest thing to do is not engage the world at all. And that seems to be part of what the problem is.

A few years ago, this dilemma was captured perfectly by our nation's greatest source of moral and spiritual wisdom, "The Ethicist" advice column in the *New York Times Magazine*.² A reader wrote in and asked, "If I pick up a [piece of litter] to look at it, and then put it back where I found it, am I now the litterbug? If I pick up the trash, is it then my responsibility?" The Ethicist responded, in part, "Once you decide to pick something up off the ground... you are an active participant who will dictate what happens next. This is the risk of social involvement. If you don't want responsibility, don't get involved with society." If you don't want responsibility, don't get involved with society.

And it seems like that's what Paul is getting at. That if you are committed to following Jesus, there is no way to opt out of getting involved with and loving the world that Jesus loves. The way to be blameless is not to avoid responsibility, but to take responsibility. Notice that in the verse before that, Paul prays that God would make the Thessalonians "abound in love for one another" within the community and, here's the interesting part, "abound... in love for all." Now these Thessalonians clearly have love for one another, but it's the second part that Paul is worried about. He's worried that this church is growing in love and fellowship and care but only among its own members. That they meet for worship and see these people they know and it's great, but then they're afraid of engaging their community the rest of the week. And yet, Paul says, there is no way to be the body of Christ without getting involved in society. Which means that there is no way to be the body of Christ without taking responsibility.

Once you get involved in society, the questions that form our life together start to evolve. Usually, we think about mission in terms of questions like *How do we welcome people into our church? How do we treat other people? How do we care for people in need?* Those are all good questions. But, to quote Paul, they're all lacking something. Because they talk about faith and hope and love, but they don't talk about responsibility. But when we take responsibility seriously, when we get involved in society, those questions become deeper. They open up in new ways. Instead of asking how we welcome people into our church, we ask *How can we shape our community to make it more reflective of the kingdom of God?* Instead of asking how we treat other people, we ask *Who are the people I don't interact with every day*

² Chuck Klosterman, "Help! I've Fallen, and I Don't Want Help," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2014, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/08/magazine/help-ive-fallen-and-i-dont-want-help.html>.

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*and don't have an opportunity to treat well? Instead of asking how we care for people in need, we ask *Why are these people in need in the first place?**

Taking responsibility means moving past hospitality to invitation. Moving past charity to advocacy. And moving past generosity to accompaniment. If you don't want responsibility, don't get involved with society. And, Paul might add, don't get involved with Jesus.

Now, you could hear all this and think that it's just Paul chiding the Thessalonians for not doing enough. Like he's just asking them to set up more programs or put up a welcome sign or take on some lofty endeavor so that can pat themselves on the back. And yet that's not what he's doing at all. Look at the language in his prayer. "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all." Who will make them abound in love? It's not the Thessalonians themselves. It's not Paul or Timothy. It's God. This is not an admonition for the church to finish what God started among them. It's a prayer for God to bring to completion the good work that has been started in the unlikeliest of places.

That's what we pray for and hope for this Advent season. Not just for God to change the world, as we do here every week. Not just for God to change other people, as we do in our heads every day. But for God to change us. To give us the moral imagination to seek the welfare of the city. To give us the spiritual courage to take responsibility for our neighbors. And to give us the emotional tenacity to abound in love just as God loves us. And in Jesus, that's exactly what God has done.

St. Paul had it right. How can we thank God enough?

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