

November 12, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

Working Among Us, Now 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

<https://secondpresby.org/pledge/>

A little background is necessary before I share this morning's New Testament lesson, on this Stewardship Dedication Sunday. Context is crucial for understanding- and understanding leads to faithful action.

This brief portion of Paul's first letter to Christians in Thessalonica is more significant than you know. It was a first, in many ways. Written just twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, around 50 A.D., this is the first of Paul's letters. As such, this is also the earliest 'book' of the writings known to us as the New Testament.

So, if the 27 'books' of the New Testament were arranged chronologically, you would not open to the first words of Matthew's Gospel, (the genealogy of Jesus) but rather at the opening salutation, "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians."

And why did they write in the first place? Two reasons stand out. The more complicated reason is that these new believers weren't so sure when it was that Jesus would return, and, honestly, Paul didn't know, either. So his 'fallback response', the primary motivation for putting pen to parchment - was 'encouragement,' to share conviction that Christ's Spirit was with them; confidence that the course they were on was the right way, and to reinforce a deep-seated surety that no suffering, catastrophe, disaster or misstep of any kind could or would ever separate them from God's love in Christ. In short, the 'upbuilding' of the church is why this letter was written.



So, hear this portion of Paul's letter, and God's word, to you:

You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers.

As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

This is the Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God.

If you don't think it's an uphill struggle to be the church, you haven't been paying attention. It may not look like it, but like a duck in water, underneath the surface, lots of us are paddling as strong and steady as we can, and yet above the waterline we may well appear as cool as cucumbers. The work we are about, together, is not easy. But God gives us the grace to do it faithfully, consistently, and very well.

Living faithfully against the tide of current culture is a struggle, as it always has been- from Paul's time onward, but it is worth every ounce of effort given.

So, what is the work of God that we're called to do? Each of us can answer that for ourselves, measuring the challenges we face over against the gifts we've received and that we can give in return.

Giving gifts can make a difference in more ways that we ever really know. A Pastor friend of mine, Toby Nelson, who bills himself as the "Disaster Pastor" has written a book about his exploits with the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance teams, from 9-11 to Katrina & beyond, recently told me a story about giving worth retelling. (It's in the November Tower- but you may not have read it yet.)

Before catching a flight to a national conference, he wandered into an airport store near the departure gate. He was drawn to the newspaper rack whose headlines scandalized an airline crew for forcibly removing a passenger. (You may remember this news story, not too long ago!)

In a few minutes, he would be boarding a plane on that same airline. He was fairly sure that this would not be the same crew who was demonized in the press, but this airline team likely still felt the public wrath and shame.

He decided to try an experiment. On a shelf next to the newspaper rack was a display of Harry & David's chocolates. He picked a box of his favorite: \$18. Upon boarding the plane, he spotted the Senior Flight Attendant and handed her the cellophane wrapped box of chocolates.

"This is for you and the crew" he said, and handed her the box. She was taken aback and asked why he gave her a gift. "It is just a way of saying thank you for all the hard work you do... and for taking care of us." She knew what he meant, what with all the bad publicity. She smiled and said thank you. He then walked down the aisle to find his assigned seat.

From several rows away, he spotted his seat buried between two beefy college football players whose sumo sized bodies overflowed their arm rests. The middle seat was going to be a tight fit. After squeezing into his seat, he could have cursed his fate at the prospect of suffering

several hours of sweaty discomfort. However, overpowering that notion was the good feeling that came from giving that surprise gift to the attendant and her colleagues. He had some self-satisfaction following a simple act of generosity. He felt more than rewarded.

Eventually, they reached cruising altitude and the same attendant was pushing a food cart loaded with breakfast trays to serve the passengers. The two football players sitting on either side of him were handed a cellophane wrapped crescent roll, a slice of cheese and ham, condiments and a small carton of milk.

Then she handed Toby the breakfast served to first-class passengers. Wow. Displayed before him was a tray of gourmet food: a large sausage, sliced steak, fruit, eggs benedict, two pancakes, a Danish, bacon, coffee, milk, and orange juice. Hmm, first class does eat better than peasants. The meal was soon followed by a steamy hot towel to wipe his hands and face. What a luxury!

A few days later he flew home and repeated the experiment. After being airborne for two hours he still had the joyful feeling that followed the simple act of generosity.

A few minutes later the attendant was joined by three other crew members and presented him with a choice bottle of wine. The next day he googled the price: \$42.

On both trips, he sought to thank the crew with a gift of quality candy without expecting anything in return. However, he learned again that there is a universal and mysterious law taught by Jesus that says, “When we give... we receive.”

One of the best guides to Stewardship I’ve ever read was written by Henri Nouwen, which is slightly surprising, perhaps- that he’d be an author of something in this topic in the first place. But that itself is part of the point.

While Henri Nouwen is popularly known as a Spiritual leader who focuses on topics like grace and forgiveness, when it comes right down to it, as he writes in his little booklet entitled [A Spirituality of Fundraising](#), prayer is the spiritual discipline through which our mind and heart are converted from selfishness to generosity. Gratitude is the sign that this conversion is spreading into all aspects of our life.

What God wants us to know is that before we think or do or accomplish anything, before we decide to give anything of ourselves to anyone, we need to call to mind and heart the deepest truth of our human identity; which is this: “You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased.” When we can claim this truth as true for us, then we also see that it is true for all other people.

As our prayer deepens into an awareness of God's goodness, the spirit of gratitude grows within us. Gratitude flows from the recognition that who we are and what we have are gifts to be received and shared. Gratitude releases us from the bonds of obligation and prepares us to offer ourselves freely and fully for the work of God in this world.

When we approach giving in a spirit of gratitude, we do so knowing that God has already given us what we most need for life in fullness.

Today we have the opportunity to say 'Thank You' to God through our gifts to this church to which God has called us.

We are given an opportunity to continue experiencing the blessing that comes from generosity, to share in a gift that has legs, and results in more momentum in our giving.

In this church of which you are an integral part, where you have made your promise to be a faithful member, this blessing comes through you; each of you and all of you, individually and all together. Without you, we are not the same body of Christ that God intends for us to be... without your gift, we cannot do all that God intends for us; the teaching and the caring, the music, the mission and the outreach, and so much more. God's work is made real here, in your prayers, your efforts and your contributions, in so many ways.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to live in the tension of grace and giving, sharing the fruits of our labor freely and generously. As disciples, we define success in terms of faithfulness. As disciples, we trust that when we do our best, God will add blessings that our work and gifts will meet the needs at hand, and more, according to the promises given to us by our risen and reigning Lord. Sharing our gifts is part of the work God gives us to do. Let us each and all make a faithful response. The reward we receive in return will be found in our giving. In Jesus' name. Amen.