

November 29, 2020

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

“So Much To Be Thankful For!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Ave.
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Before cell phones and text messages. Before land lines and mail that would bring you a letter in a couple of days. If you wanted to find out about something or someone in a different location you had to either travel there or send someone to find out for you. It could take days, weeks, or even months before your heard back. You just had to wait and wait and wait - and go on with life the best you could.

The apostle Paul wanted to visit the church in Thessalonica. However, he was kept from doing so. Paul and his companions were “torn away” from them for a short time “in person [but] not in heart.” The apostle writes, “we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you - I, Paul, again and again - but Satan hindered us (1 Thess. 2:17-18).” One thing that we do know was that the church was suffering persecution. They were being pressured to give up their faith in Jesus. There isn’t anything worse than knowing that the ones you love are being threatened and you are unable to be with them and don’t know what’s going on. Paul longed to know what was happening to them since he was instrumental in establishing this flock, so he sent Timothy to find out. And then he went back to work and waited.

Your Pastors feel a little bit like the apostle Paul. Somewhere from March to someday in June, with a few exceptions, we didn’t see any of you because we were all locked down. In-person services started at the end of June, and while we have had contact with people through phone and radio and internet and snail mail, there are still many people that we haven’t seen face to face for now nine whole months. We are bothered, as many of you are bothered, as to how Satan will use this to potentially destroy the faith of God’s people and block the gospel from reaching others. Like Paul, we find ourselves going back to work and waiting. We long for the day when all of this is over and we will be able to see one another and move on with life, and yet we keep hearing from some corners that things will never be the same. We feel torn away from each other, but not in heart.

So, how are you really doing? Strange that I am asking of those I see and those that I have not seen for a very long time. Paul’s concern was simply for the spiritual well being of the church that he couldn’t reach. He wondered with all of the things that were going on in their lives if they were remaining steadfast in their faith in Jesus their Savior. Your Pastors wonder the same things. Are you okay? Because the only thing that really matters in the end is that our faith is preserved and we reach the destination of heaven. Like Paul, we all have to be patient, but we all have to be careful that we do not allow this time to grow weak in the faith. The Komodo dragon bites his prey with an infected mouth and follows it until it finally keels over. That is often how all the devils work.

It is so vital that we continue to use the means of grace, for the gospel and sacraments are where we find Jesus, where Jesus by his Spirit strengthens and preserves our faith so that we may overcome every adversity in life. In the gospel and sacraments we receive the forgiveness of sins. We remain in Jesus and he in us. May we never forget how important it is to meditate on the instruction of law and gospel that comes to us in Scripture so that the voice of our Shepherd may continue to do his work in us. May we not be like many who forget their Baptisms and deprive themselves of much comfort and strength in the death

and resurrection of Christ. To be baptized is to daily die to sin, and to live in the washing away of its filth. We need the peace of the cross to soothe the conscience. We confess that sin in us is utterly abhorrent and we seek the cleansing that comes from all that Jesus has done for us. And in the Sacrament of the Altar, Edward W. A. Koehler reminds us in *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*:

God reveals His unchanging love toward us. Despite our gross offenses and repeated lapses, He again and again assures us of His pardoning grace. We often forget the loving-kindness of our God, so our faith grows weak and our love grows cold. In the Sacrament, God opens His loving heart to us ... [also in the Lord's Supper] we find comfort in tribulation ... Our possession of God's blessings will not go uncontested in this world. There are enemies at work that would undermine our faith and deprive us of all the blessings we hold ... Our drooping spirit is revived and our faith is strengthened to counteract the insidious poison coming from the flesh and to resist the allurements and to overcome the seductions of the world and the devil.

For those who have not received the Lord's Supper for over nine months, this is not designed to create guilt, for the giving of the body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine was never to be a law. But if your conscience is in need of the reassurance of God's love, you can always schedule a private communion with either of your pastors. We want you to be spiritually okay and we do not want anyone to think for a minute that the gifts of God in Christ are unavailable. They are always available.

Despite so many things that may make us feel otherwise, God has blessed us with so much. We really do have **So Much To Be Thankful For!** We have his gospel and sacraments that are designed to sustain us in every trial and tribulation. We have one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. None of us should ever think that we are alone. And none of us should ever think that God is far from us, for he will never leave us nor forsake us. Whenever we need one another we should be unafraid to reach out and not just to the pastors, but to all those who are fellow heirs of heaven. We should be able to know and believe that when things are not well down here that all is well in Jesus who gave up everything for us so that we may have all things. And we have every reason to be thankful that God takes care of our physical needs.

Well, the day came when Paul saw Timothy right in front of him. No doubt he was overjoyed to see him and hear the good news. I imagine that the apostle Paul greeted Timothy and immediately said, "So what's the news?" I imagine that Timothy had a big smile on his face while saying, "Yes! They are standing strong in the faith and they haven't given up on Jesus!" And for Timothy and Paul there was **So Much To Be Thankful For!** We pastors pray for the day when things get back to normal. In the meantime, we remind you of what's important, and deep down inside we know and believe that the Lord is using everything for the good of his remnant. We know and believe that he is still growing his word to those who do not have it.

So, are you okay? This isn't so that you have to contact us, but it is a reminder that we are here if you are not doing okay both physically and spiritually. Yes, pastors get real busy, but they are not so busy that they have no time for their flock. Don't forget that you also have one another and are bid to love one

another as you have been loved. As I already said, the only thing that really matters in the end is that our faith is preserved and we reach the destination of heaven. To the church in Thessalonica, Paul wrote at the end of our epistle lesson: “Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

We say something similar to you, whether in person or on the net or through the radio. If you are in need may he direct our way to you. May he direct all of us to one another. May we increase in love for each other and for all. Most importantly, may he establish our hearts that they may be blameless as we look forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his saints. Don't kid yourself! We should live as if our departure could be any day. Many of us may be struggling just to keep Jesus in their everyday lives. Many of us may be getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birth and can't find much joy in that. So, let us reflect on what our Lord came to do when he was born in Bethlehem. In the meantime, may we use the gospel and sacraments. And in Christ, may we remember that we have **So Much To Be Thankful For!**

As for your pastors, we thank our heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, that he has entrusted us with this Pilgrim congregation. We thank God for the faith he has given to you and your endurance in holding on to the pure Word, even though it is out of season. We are thankful that God will use all things for our salvation. We are thankful that he has put us together and grows our love for one another that our hearts may be established and blameless to be with him and one another in forever glory!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott