

Sermon—4th Sunday before Advent
November 5, 2017
Receiving the Word
I Thessalonians 2:9-13

Today's Epistle is a powerful testimony to the presence and power of God's word as it operates in the life of a Christian believer. Have you considered how God's word affects your life? Let's look at Paul's experience and draw some parallels with our own lives.

Paul is writing a thank you letter to the Thessalonian Church for their warm reception of his evangelistic team's preaching. We were told in the previous chapter to today's Epistle selection that the people of Thessalonica "received the word in much affliction with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit." (I Thessalonians 1:6) What was the affliction of which Paul was speaking?

Initially, Paul received much opposition from Jews who were jealous of Paul's success with Gentiles in the city. They caused Paul "much affliction" and he was forced to leave Thessalonica and go on to Berea.

Yet in spite of his hasty exit, the gospel took root in Thessalonica as a committed group of people "received the word with joy...inspired by the Holy Spirit" (I Thessalonians 1:6—edited)

How did the word of God get planted in such a precarious situation? As we answer this question, we can get some idea as to how we can plant the word of God in the secularized environment which surrounds us in Largo and the world beyond.

The first step is to gain the trust of people among whom we live.

As he opens today's Epistle, Paul cites his team's "labor and toil" as they "worked night and day, that (they) might not be a burden to any of (the Thessalonians) while (they) proclaimed the gospel of God." The Pauline Evangelistic Team did not come to town to make what they could off the people. They earned their own way and thus established their integrity. The word they preached would mean little to the Thessalonians without the preacher's integrity. They had to reveal the "holiness, righteousness, and blamelessness" of themselves as messengers in order for the message to carry any weight. That same truth applies to us as members of the Church. We need to be reliable contributing citizens of this community in order to win people's trust.

Thus, we of St. Dunstan's Church need to consistently contribute to our neighborhood and city (as we have been doing through helping neighbors and participating in other outreaches for community betterment).

Building trust takes time and patience, but it is an essential step if we are to be successful in spreading the gospel in our part of the world.

Paul describes his behavior toward the Thessalonians as being "like a father with his children." Along with the establishment of trust, it follows that the sharing of God's word enables us to become a welcoming family to one another as well as to those who come to be among us. We should note that along with the masculine imagery Paul uses to express a fatherly family relationship, he also employs a feminine picture in a previous verse of I Thessalonians (2:7) as he describes a nurse taking care of her children. It reinforces this family emphasis.

Paul feels a family bond with these Thessalonians. Thus he shares his feelings in the verse which immediately precedes today's Epistle with these words. "We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves because you had become very dear to us."

(I Thessalonians 2:8)

Thus the gospel word can be planted in the lives of people around us in an atmosphere of familial trust. Paul reveals a tender side of himself both as a nurse and as a father sharing not only the gospel, but also his very self. This kind of caring is good soil for the gospel message to flourish. St. Dunstan's can truly become a welcoming and powerful church when family love and trust prevails among us.

Have you ever wondered how you can share your faith with another person—particularly your family or people you have known for a long time?

It's not primarily a matter of technique or giftedness in communication which makes you an effective witness. Presenting the gospel to another person involves trustworthiness and a caring spirit. When both of these qualities are present, we can plant an abundant harvest as God's word takes root in the lives of others.

Assuming that the soil of trust and caring has been cultivated, what can we do next to plant God's word in someone else's life? Paul told the Thessalonians what he did next.

“Like a father with his children, we EXHORTED each one of you and ENCOURAGED you and CHARGED you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into His Kingdom and glory.”

(I Thessalonians 2:11-12)

Presenting the word of God always involves exhorting. Exhorting is challenging someone to become the best they can be. The word of the gospel always does that.

Jesus exhorted the rich young man who had obeyed the commandments since he was a child to sell everything and follow Him. He lived an admirable ethical life, but he lacked faith to entrust his earthly resources to the Kingdom's ministry. Sadly, the man clung to his earthly wealth, but lost out on his eternal blessings. (Mark 10:17-22)

Like with this man, Jesus challenges us to be stretched beyond where we are. The gospel demands nothing less than the laying down of our lives and resources for God and other people.

However, exhortation alone would eventually produce discouragement. Failure is already a part of the Christian life. There is no such person as a perfect Christian. Therefore we need encouragement along with exhortation. The Greek word Paul uses for encouragement means to “stand beneath and support.”

The Christian gospel not only reveals the God who challenges us to move higher in our spiritual commitment, but also the God who humbled Himself to become our supportive servant. This was symbolized by Jesus washing His disciples' feet. The 15th chapter of John reminds us that God comes to us as Jesus our friend, encouraging us when we are discouraged or sorrowful.

The presentation of the gospel always culminates in a specific charge.

The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, ends with the charge, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Then comes the encouraging words.) "Lo, I am with you always to the close of the age."

A charge is a specific directive for action. Exhortations and encouragements would go for naught in our lives without action.

If we receive the gospel through exhortation and persevere through encouragement, it follows that each of us will do specific things we wouldn't have done without receiving the gospel. It means a different way of relating to people, a different way of doing business, a different way of spending our time. Someone has said that receiving the word of God enables Christian bonds among people. While we have many friendships and relationships based on things such as business connections, common interest, or blood ties, the relationships growing out of our common acceptance of the Bible's authority and the lordship of Jesus are like no others. We find ourselves linked with people we would be very unlikely to meet any other way. These relationships will transcend this temporal world and stay with us for eternity. For this reason alone, they are precious.

Receiving the word and sharing it with others will also mean a different way of doing business as we live out these heaven-based relationships. Those who have been permeated by the gospel are impelled to live according to an ethical standard outlined by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

The implications of doing business by applying the Sermon on the Mount would need many sermons to spell it out. Let me simply say that the Sermon charges us to live a wholly new and radical way in doing business with people. Business as usual will no longer suffice.

Finally, obeying the charges springing out of the Word of God will mean a whole new way of spending our time. There is an orientation toward time in the gospel message which impels us to give more urgent attention to the affairs of the Kingdom and reduce our anxiety about worldly affairs such as food, clothing, and shelter.

Jesus said, “Seek ye first His Kingdom and His righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well.”(Matthew 6:33)

As we spend more time on the matters of the Kingdom, we discover what I call anticipatory patience. In His gospel, Jesus speaks of His Kingdom as something which grows within us—beginning as a tiny mustard seed, but becoming a great and mighty tree. (Matthew 13:31-32)

When the Word of God becomes implanted within us, we learn this anticipatory patience. This orientation influences how we spend our time as we become less anxious about day to day matters and more focused on permanent concerns.

Paul speaks of the Word of God being at work in us believers. That word was planted within us by someone who gained our trust by caring for us. As that person became significant in our lives, we listened to his or her exhortations which urged us to be stretched to our greatest potential.

We were encouraged when they gave us positive affirmation when we succeeded—or support when we failed. We responded to their charges to become active proclaimers of the word ourselves by sharing the gifts God gave us.

Thus I end this sermon with a charge. Continue to receive the gospel Word of God. Learn to share this word with those whom you meet by being trustworthy,—exhorting and encouraging them to offer their best with the help of God. Have the courage to charge these people to act in ways appropriate to their gifts and temperaments.

In obeying this charge, we shall be the Church of Jesus Christ in Pinellas County—a vital agent of God--transforming today's world into the Kingdom He intends.