

August 27, 2006

Our scripture this morning comes from First Thessalonians, the 2nd chapter, beginning with verse 1, reading through verse 10. Inside your worship bulletins should be a white piece of paper. The text is contained there with our order of worship. An outline is available for you on the back side, as well, if you would like to take notes. Here's what Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica:

“You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know, and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed, nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

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 to 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 ends our scripture for today. Would you pray with me? “Gracious God, we ask in this moment, as we gather around Your Word, that it might unfold in our lives. We pray that today we might hear from You a message - a word that will encourage us, that will prompt us to move forward in our Christian life, to be different people in this world. For, as revolutionaries, we are seeking to make a difference in this community and beyond. So, please be with us in Spirit today. Speak to us, and empower us to be Your church. Through Christ our Lord, we pray, Amen.

I know that a number of you measure your lives in decades. You talk about when you were in your 20s or 30s, maybe your 40s, or perhaps your 60s, 70s, or 80s, but you refer to those periods in your life in that manner. Usually when I describe my life, I talk about my careers - my first career in the military, my second career in the business world, and my third career in the ministry - because that seems to be more definitive for me, personally. During my second career, when I was in the business world, I worked in what was called the Call Center Management industry. Is anyone familiar with that term? It's basically a 1-(800) inbound customer service number which, when dialed (say for your credit card, or perhaps your computer or cell phone) routes you to a large group of people who sit in an open forum area with a phone bank which routes calls to customer service representatives. The rep who takes your call answers your questions for you. I managed those people, working in that kind of environment, in what was called “operations management”. I did administrative work - all kinds of different things, really, such as quality assurance - in a variety of industries. (For instance, I was in the computer industry and in the wireless industry for awhile, but please don't call me about your computer or your cell phone! I took enough of those calls, thank you.)

I also worked in environmental health services for a period of time, but the last company that I worked for was a vendor. They had a contract with the United States Postal Service. Do you remember when the Post Office had their 1 (800) number, 1-800-ASK-USPS? We had the contract for that, and worked out of a large center over at the old Indian Springs Shopping Center, if you know where that is. (We were in the old Dillard's store, which we had converted into a center.) We had about 700 people working in that center. I had always wanted to work for an organization where I was valued and had input, where if I thought of a new process or a procedure that would improve efficiency, it would be appreciated. Or, if I came up with a way that we could improve employee morale, or with an idea as to how to better our relations with our vendor, I hoped my thoughts would be valued. In other words, I desired to be part of a team where I could come together with other team members, make suggestions, and have my input be respected. Unfortunately, what I came to realize was that, over the three years that I was there, they wasted a lot of my time. I *was* part of a team of directors who came together for two hours every single week for three years, for a staff meeting, which was a complete waste of time. (If you do the math, that's 312 hours – or 13 days - we spent in meetings, wasting time.) Why do I say that they *wasted* 13 days of my life? Because we never accomplished *anything* during our directors' meetings. As a matter of fact, our center director led with an autocratic style; he basically told you what you needed to go do, how to do it, and when to do it. There was no value given to the input from those of us on his leadership team and, as such, many of us felt as though we were not contributing to the organization. We really did not make any kind of difference in the jobs or functions we performed, and thus felt insignificant. We were simply the “yes people” who delivered his message down the ranks.

I'm quite certain that none of you has experienced that in your life (spoken facetiously). You've had a life that has been full and significant, both in your role(s) in the work world and at home, right? . . .

- Maybe you've been one of those mid-level managers who had a process, procedure, or idea that you wanted to present, thinking it was a great way to improve things around the office, and nobody wanted to listen to you.
- Perhaps you're a professional woman who's been trying to climb the ladder of success and gain the opportunities that should be afforded to you, and yet you keep beating your head on the “glass ceiling”, because we have yet to figure out how to be equal in our employment by giving jobs to the best person.
- Or maybe you're a well-educated woman who was in the working world for a while, but then decided to stay home to raise your children. Now that they're school-aged, you've thought about going back to the working world, but you question your abilities and wonder if the world has passed you by too quickly. Are your skills up-to-date? Can you make a difference? And you wonder and question, did you make the right decision in staying home?
- Maybe you're a young person just starting out on your career, and you are technologically savvy. You understand how the world works and the quickness and the pace at which things are changing. Perhaps you have a great idea that would help your company, but they look at you and tell you, essentially, to “come back when you have some more experience.” Just wait.
- Or, possibly you're in the twilight years of your life. You may be perceived as having way too *much* experience and, as such, your ability to be quick, to change, to adapt, is questioned. What we fail too often to realize is that you've seen more change and have adapted to more than most of the rest of us put together during your life.

Revolutionaries are people who have a strong desire for their lives to make a difference, to be significant, to have meaning. They want to be involved in something that allows them to express fully their gifts; whether in the church or the world beyond - it really doesn't matter.

Paul took his second missionary journey to the harbor city of Thessalonica, on the northeastern seaboard of modern-day Greece. Have any of you ever had an opportunity to go to the Aegean Sea? It's a beautiful place to be. I have actually had the privilege of visiting this town, because I was stationed on Crete, Greece for my first duty station. My grandparents came to see us, and took us on a tour of Athens and Thessalonica, a neat little town that overlooks the sea. The old fortress walls and ancient ruins from early Greek civilization can still be seen, and it is not difficult to picture Paul walking through this community with his little band of missionaries. They came to this town, bringing the gospel of God with them, and essentially settled in for a time. The scripture gives us a portrait of this when Paul says, in effect, that they came to the community, and labored and worked so as not to be a burden on the people there. And, even though they might have made a couple of demands, as apostles, they basically came and tried to be relational in sharing the gospel with the community. Paul further said that he wanted to share with the people some basic characteristics of his team and their purpose, in that hopefully they would empower the population to become revolutionaries - the community of God. Their mission was to create a society of people who lived their lives for God, and who would pass along that same passion and fervor to their neighbors, taking the town over for Christ. Paul and his team thought they had made a difference in the town, but word later got to them that there was a little bit of struggling; that the people were being persecuted and feeling pressure from the community at large to come back to the norm and live like everybody else, rather than as this little segregated community of Christians who were different. They were essentially being persuaded to come back over and be like any other "normal" Greek person in Thessalonica in that day and age.

So, Paul took a moment to pen a letter to them; to encourage them, exhort them, lift them up, appeal to them. He told them he and his team they had come and presented to the people in hopes that they would emulate their teaching, through the gospel they had heard; in hopes that they might become new people, who chose to live different lives. He told them, essentially, that they were at a defining moment in their lives, and he wanted to help them "get over the hump", in order that they might live into the will of God.

I'd like to share with you those five characteristics which I believe best describe what Paul shared about himself and his team; those characteristics that define what that new person was which he was describing in trying to help them understand. It is my hope that Paul's lesson will help us understand today how we are to be new people who live into God's will; people who will find significance in our lives by making a difference as revolutionaries.

Paul referred to his team first as people of character. Someone once said that your ideal is what you wish you are, your reputation is what people say you are, and your character is what you truly are. There is a story about a businessman who was approaching the doors of his office building, arriving there at about the same time as a lovely young woman. They got to the doors simultaneously, and he grabbed the handle of the door and opened it for her. She was apparently a young feminist - he could tell by her tone of voice, and the fact that she chided him and said, "You're not opening that door for me just because I'm a lady, are you?" He looked at her quickly and responded, "No, I'm opening the door for you because I'm a gentleman." How he responded in that moment - both by opening the door and by what he said - was a sign of his character, and spoke volumes about that which he valued and understood. It has also been said that, "Fame is a vapor; popularity is an accident; money takes

wing. The only thing that endures is character.” (By the way, that quote was attributed to O.J. Simpson. He obviously did not listen to his own words . . .)

In the end, the thing that will last - the thing that will speak the most about each one of us - is our character. And from that, I would offer that the next four things are really what begins to build that character. Paul outlines these as the foundations which undergird that which is produced in us as people of character. The first of these he notes is that there is an attitude which motivates us to tell the truth about things. I recently received an e-mail from my sister-in-law, which contained the top 10 noteworthy comments made by caddies. Those of you who ever get the privilege of golfing where there is a caddy should pray that you don't get one of these guys! Allow me to share a few of my favorites:

- The golfer says, “I think I'm going to drown myself in the lake.” The caddy responds, “Think you can keep your head down that long?”
- Here's another: The golfer says, “Do you think I can get there with a 5 iron?” The caddy says, “Eventually.”
- The golfer says, “Please stop checking your watch all the time. It's too much of a distraction.” The caddy says, “It's not a watch, sir, it's a compass.”
- Number three on the list was this one. The golfer says, “Do you think it's a sin to play on Sunday?” And the caddy said, “The way you play, sir, it's a sin on any day.”
- And this is my favorite - I love this one! The golfer says, “That can't be my ball. It's too old.” And the caddy says, “It's been a *really* long time since we teed off, sir.”

You know, people will tell you the truth if you really want to know it and if you ask for it.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” When we study how He responded and acted with the people around Him, we see that He expressed the truth of God's love in each and everything He did and in who He was with people. The words He spoke are irrefutable. In each and every instance, He spoke the truth and from that, gained credibility. If we, as the people - the community of faith - speak in the truth of God's love, and speak what we know to be the truth from His Word, we gain a sense of credibility that then bolsters and supports our character as people of truth.

Paul also said that his team had come to Thessalonica to be relational in sharing the Gospel. Now, when I was growing up, I went to a very conservative Baptist church, and we had a visitation program every Thursday night. Now when I think of visitation in the Methodist tradition, I think of going and visiting people who are in nursing homes, who are homebound, who are in the hospital, or are in need of love and care. That to me is visitation now. But that's not the way I was taught growing up. Visitation in the Baptist tradition involved taking cards out of the church rolls on which were written the names of people who had visited the church, or were members who hadn't been there for a while. We would go to their doors, knock, and essentially ask what was going on. It was a strong-arm form of proselytizing. We basically sat (or stood) there for a while and tried to scare people out of hell, and hopefully into heaven. But it wasn't very relational.

When we look to the model of Christ, we note that when He came, He was relational with people; He met them where they were - at their moment of need or crisis, at their moment of longing for understanding - and through that, built relationships with them. Paul said, we came to emulate that by working hard within your community, not trying to be a burden but to be relational with you, and to then share the gospel. It's the same for us. We go out into the community where people live -

whether in the gutters, on the streets, or maybe in a million dollar home. We go to meet people where they are to build a relationship with them, in order that they might see the gospel in our lives.

Paul further said that they lived right before God: that they modeled the behavior of Christ, in that they lived right, not as super pious people. Have you ever met any super pious Christians? They sit on their little thrones on high and judge you, whether you might smoke, drink, cuss, or chew, or maybe even date the girls that do? You know the type - they judge based upon very moralistic strict standards. Compare this to a consistent model of faith that plays out in all the roles of your life. Non-Christians and the unchurched look at those of us who are Christians. What they often criticize is the hypocrisy found in the inconsistency of our lives. We profess to be one thing as we gather as a community for faith in worship, only for them to experience something else as our neighbors, co-workers, friends, parents, or children. Paul said that for us to live right, we need to be people who are consistent in all of our roles; that we need to be consistent in our faith; that we need to be consistent as members of a worshipping community and as fathers, friends, mothers, husbands, wives, companions, and co-workers. Wherever we are, we need to model consistency and behave as Christ did in all situations.

Paul finally said that they understood that their strength came through God's Word. This really is the most basic element possible. God's Word is what gives us strength and hope as people of faith. Think about it: why do we put our trust in the Word of God? When I read the descriptions of scripture contained *in* scripture, I am often amazed at the terms used internally to describe what God has encapsulated in the pages. God's Word describes itself as pure, restraining, perfect, sure, true, enduring, effectual, sanctifying, harmonious, inspired, living, and active. It's compared to a lamp, a fire, a hammer, a seed, a sword. It says that it can heal, make free, illuminate, bear witness to, produce faith, make wise, exhort, cause the heart to rejoice, create the world, regenerate the soul, and destroy the world. Therefore, when we look at God's word, we should view it with awe, trembling, and faith; searching it, speaking boldly of it, preaching it, receiving it, glorifying it, teaching it, obeying it, suffering for it, handling it accurately, and simply doing it. For God's Word is the basis of our faith. No other thing, no other document, no other book, no other set of works has the power to change the human heart and soul the way God's Word can and does. Further, it gives us strength - strength then to live right, strength to be relational, strength to speak the truth, strength to become people of character. And Paul said to that little community of faith, I have shared these things with you in hopes that you would also emulate those; I want to encourage and exhort you, for you are at a defining moment. I want you to be able to step into the will of God and prove it to be perfect, understanding that it will give you a life of significance and meaning.

I wonder if we might be at that point in our own lives. When we think about how we have become revolutionary, if God is building that same character in us, are we at that defining moment? In 1860, a man was born to a trading and farming middle class family. He was a rather rebellious young man, as he described himself. He started smoking, drinking, and stealing from other people. He visited prostitutes. He married at the age of 13. Though his family had a strict vegetarian dietary program, he started eating meat. He did all kinds of things to rebel against his parents and his family. When his father died, he was not invited to the funeral because he had been ostracized by his family. He moved to London, went to law school, and got a degree in law. He began practicing law, but was a rather ineffective lawyer, because he was nervous about speaking in front of people. So, they used him as a researcher, putting him in the back offices to support the lawyers who could actually try cases.

In 1893, he was sent to South Africa to work on a case, and there he experienced the extreme racism that was taking place in that country, at that time. He witnessed the way the separate communities treated one another and how they interacted. He wondered how racist it could possibly be, but he became a victim of racism himself. He told the story of traveling on a train across South Africa when a white passenger took great offense to the fact that he was in the same car. He was asked to move, but he refused to get out of his seat. The train was literally stopped, and he was put off of it without his baggage, without his coat, in the dead of a South African winter. He later said that in that experience of watching and experiencing racism, he found God. And that became the defining moment for Mahatma Gandhi. For those of you who have read the rest of his story, you know that he went back to his own country, India, and forever changed the landscape of that society because he came to that defining moment and crossed over.

I want to bring us to a moment of reflective prayer, a time where we share our hearts with God for a moment, where we think upon the message that has been presented. Maybe it is a message of encouragement for you, because you already know what it means to live a life of significance, because you inhabit the characteristics and the character of God in a way that is played out each and every day in your life. May I invite you, in this moment of prayer, to pray for others around you, as you also thank God. Perhaps this message is an appeal to you; perhaps you are at that defining moment. You are a person of character who knows the truth, who is relational, who lives right and whose foundation for life is in God's Word, but you're at that defining moment in that you've not yet crossed over into what God wants to do through you to make a difference in this world. May you pray that God give you the strength to make that decision. Or, it is possible that this message is designed to lift you up because you're still in that process of weaving through and becoming someone of great character for God. May you pray in this moment that God will continue to build you up so that when you come to that defining moment in your life, you'll be able to step into God's will with strength, courage, and joy.

Will you pray with me, please? Our merciful and great Creator, we come before You in this moment, seeking to be people who are revolutionaries in our lives; people who experience the depth of who You are in our souls and our beings, creating in us new people. Help us to model Your character so that we might step into the light - the will - that You have for each of us. Wherever it may be - whether in ministry, in the professional world, in service to others - in whatever You have called us to do, we desire to be people who make a difference in this world; whose lives matter for Your kingdom. We understand that we are not all in the same place. Some of us live in Your will and have experienced the blessing of being people who have made a difference and contribute still. We thank You for that. Others are at a point in our lives where we appeal to You, Lord, and ask that You give us strength to step into Your will. May this be a time in which we are encouraged and lifted up to that point of being people who inhabit Your character. May You continue to walk with us and give us the strength that it be so in our lives. Watch over us this day, Lord. We thank You for all that You do for us; for the gift of Your love and Your grace. And the people of God said, Amen.

