

17 Paul and Silas journeyed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, then came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was Paul's custom, he entered the synagogue and for three Sabbaths interacted with them on the basis of the scriptures. 3 Through his interpretation of the scriptures, he demonstrated that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. He declared, "This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ." 4 Some were convinced and joined Paul and Silas, including a larger number of Greek God-worshippers and quite a few prominent women.

5 But the Jews became jealous and brought along some thugs who were hanging out in the marketplace. They formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They attacked Jason's house, intending to bring Paul and Silas before the people. 6 When they didn't find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city officials. They were shouting, "These people who have been disturbing the peace throughout the empire have also come here. 7 What is more, Jason has welcomed them into his home. Every one of them does what is contrary to Caesar's decrees by naming someone else as king: Jesus." 8 This provoked the crowd and the city officials even more. 9 After Jason and the others posted bail, they released them. (**Acts 17:1-9, Common English Bible**)

1 From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

To the Thessalonians' church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to all of you.

2 We always thank God for all of you when we mention you constantly in our prayers. 3 This is because we remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father. 4 Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God, and we know that God has chosen you. 5 We know this because our good news didn't come to you just in speech but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know as well as we do what kind of people we were when we were with you, which was for your sake. 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. 7 As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 The message about the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so that we don't even need to mention it. 9 People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a result, you are serving the living and true God, 10 and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. His Son is Jesus, who is the one he raised from the dead and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath. (**1 Thess 1:1-10, Common English Bible**)

Every week I tell you I love you or at least tell you something I love about you. Do you hear it? Do you believe it? Last week I said that something that never changes becomes invisible after a time, perhaps it becomes inaudible too. After 7 years of weekly reminders, I wonder.

A colleague once shared that she often finds Paul's expression of appreciation and love to the churches he founded to be a bit over the top, but that in the midst of crisis she gets it. I do too, during the pandemic, the break in, the ice storm... the intensity of emotions substantially increases. Paul's opening words to the church in Thessalonica that might seem saccharine and over the top in ordinary times absolutely sing in times of crisis.

Today, we see the origins of the church in Thessalonica, and catch sight of Paul encouraging that church after he's moved on to spread the gospel elsewhere. These snapshots look quite different. There is great conflict in the reading from Acts, and effusive love and appreciation in the letter to the Thessalonians. Let's look in on these scenes again.

In Acts, we see Paul and Silas arrive in Thessalonica. This is in Macedonia, now northern Greece. It persists as a city today with the name Thessaloniki. Perhaps some of you have been there. We should note that the Gospel has now traveled far from Jerusalem and Judea... it is deep in Gentile territory, approaching the heart of the Roman Empire. But even here there are Jewish believers who gather in a synagogue every sabbath to contemplate the Torah together and seek to be faithful to the God of Israel. Among these Jews are Gentile God worshippers, these were people who are attracted to the Jewish faith and ethical teachings, but not full converts to Judaism. It is not surprising that in Gentile territory the synagogue has both Jews and Gentiles within it. Paul and Silas go to the synagogue first thing, as was their custom. Just as we saw Peter and John going to the temple for evening prayer as was their custom, so Paul and Silas, faithful Jews themselves, make a point to find the local synagogue first thing.

But while at synagogue they aren't quiet observers. They are vocal. They are arguing with the other believers in the room on the basis of the Hebrew scriptures, the shared

text between them— making a case for the necessary suffering, death, and resurrection of the long-awaited Messiah, which is translated into Greek as “the Christ”, and arguing that Jesus is, in fact, that long-awaited Messiah. They do this for three straight weeks. And some are convinced, both Jews and Gentile God worshipers. But others are not at all convinced and are probably quite annoyed.

For one thing, most of the clearly Messianic material in the Hebrew Scriptures does NOT suggest that the Messiah will suffer and die. In the light of the experience of Jesus, Paul is looking back over the Hebrew Scriptures and finding other passages, likely the suffering servant passages in Isaiah, for example, to make his case. They had a different understanding of these scriptures and probably think he is abusing the text and the faith. Can you imagine if someone showed up at St. A's for three straight Sundays arguing that the second coming of Jesus has already happened and we missed it, and if they used our scriptures to make their point? I think this would be immensely distressing to many of us. I don't know that we'd round up thugs to drive them out, but I suspect that at least some of us would want to drive them out.

Further... I want you to think about the fact that the Jewish community in Thessalonica was a minority community, and though there were likely no overt political dimensions to Paul's teaching, they rightly perceived that claiming Jesus as Messiah and Lord is a challenge to the Emperor, to the powers that be. They may fear that having such a teacher in their midst is a threat to their continued existence. How could they show loyalty to the emperor? By aggressively ousting these threatening figures from their midst. In any case, Paul's teaching had a mixed reception in Thessalonica. One of my mentors told me once that you know you're preaching the Gospel if some are rushing in while others are rushing out. I think Paul set the standard for this metric.

The charge that Paul's accusers bring against the movement he represents is that they are “disturbing the peace throughout the Empire.” Other translations render this they are “turning the world upside down.” They suggest that this movement is presenting Jesus as a rival king to Caesar. It may seem to us like this is an overblown reaction to three weeks of teaching, teaching that seems pretty obvious to us... But in fact, it sure

seemed that the Jesus we met in the Gospel of Mark was regularly turning the world upside down. And he did die with the inscription "King of the Jews" above his head. And if, indeed he has been raised from the dead as his followers claim, he has completely upended everything— death is supposed to be the end. It wasn't for Jesus.

It isn't with Jesus. And followers of Jesus can have no easy peace with empire, with the powerful subjugation of many people under the authority of a privileged few. This is not the kingdom of God that Jesus came to inaugurate. So I think the early church, with the Gospel they were preaching, was getting it right. And I think it is powerful that this is the way they were described, even if it is leveled as a charge against them.

In the letter to the Thessalonians, Paul describes the church there with different words— beloved, chosen... Of course Jewish people understand themselves to be chosen by God. I imagine that this house church, composed of people who used to be welcome at the synagogue but are no longer were regularly being told that they are NOT the chosen; they are NOT beloved. They were enduring harassment and persecution. Perhaps from many directions. Before Paul even leaves town, one of the new believers, Jason, is attacked and hauled before authorities. This early church is no stranger to suffering. But Paul sees them experiencing joy in spite of suffering. He sees the power of God at work in and through them and so he knows that they are beloved and chosen of God or else they could not do the things they are doing and persevere in the midst of all the struggles. He sees their work, their effort, their perseverance as testimonies to their faith, love, and hope. And his heart overflows with gratitude. He wants them to know that not only he sees it, but others do too, that the story of them is being told throughout the land and that others are coming to faith through the witness to what God is doing among them.

A common thread I pick up between these two passages is people talking about the church, describing the church. It is commonly shared that an early observer of the church had this to say, "Oh, how they love each other." We know that all sorts of things have been said about the church over the past two millennia, not all of it kind, not all of it flattering, not all of it true, but some of it truer than we'd like to admit. I've been

thinking a lot about what might be said of the church in the wake of the pandemic and all the turmoil of these past four years. If we find ways to continue to let faith triumph over fear and to live generously and to love our neighbors, particularly our most vulnerable neighbors, deeply, I think many good things will be said about us.

On Wednesday night we invited neighbors, both housed and formerly unhoused, into our chapel for a civic circle conversation intended to bridge the gap between us. We listened as George and Sonia shared about their harrowing and deeply frustrating experiences of being unhoused in our city. One of the housed participants in the conversation said to me afterwards, "Hopewell House exists today because of conversations that happened in that room. Powerful things happen in that room." I said "This church was born in that room." This is some of the talk about us this week.

Perhaps if we find ways to more regularly and fully welcome the poor onto our property and into our building, and therefore into the neighborhood, some will have negative things to say about us. But even this complaint would be something that could bring us joy, because it would be an indication that we are imitating faithful Christians of every time and place, and indeed our Lord who welcomed the poor, suffered with the poor, died the death of a poor man, and was raised to bring hope to all people.

Let them talk. You just keep walking the walk. And never forget that you, my friends, are deeply loved, chosen by God. I know it. Because I see what God is doing through you. That's the story I'm telling about St. A's.

Resource, in addition to scripture, that significantly influenced this sermon:
Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. "Episode 38 Acts 17:1-9 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Paul in Thessalonica" On the *BibleWorm* podcast, April 27, 2020. <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-038-acts-171-9-and-1-thessalonians-11-10-paul-in-thessalonica/>