

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 18, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Theme: Always Give Thanks: Chosen

[prayer]

We're entering the season of Thanksgiving a little early as the lectionary invites us to spend time in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. This is a letter that begins and resounds with gratitude. In fact, these first ten verses we just heard read are only a single sentence in the original Greek – one long paean of praise and thanksgiving to God.

The Thessalonian Christians were some of the first Gentiles to convert to the gospel of Jesus. It was carried to them by the missionary team of Paul, Silas (also called Silvanus), and Timothy. For forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus the gospel was carried by missionaries like Paul around the Mediterranean through letters and word of mouth. Today we put great stock in the words of God that are recorded in the Bible, but we should also consider the words of God that Paul brought to the Thessalonians – words that are not recorded in the Bible. It was these words, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that turned the pagan Thessalonians to faith in Jesus (1 Thess 1:5-6).

Paul wrote this letter several months after being forced to leave the fledgling church in Thessalonica. He and his missionary companions were driven out by the Jewish community there. The conversion of Gentiles away from Rome's pantheon made the Jewish followers of Jesus suspect in the eyes of Rome. This suspicion put the whole Jewish community at risk, whether you were a Jew who followed Jesus or not. Persecution of Christians was not just a matter of difference of belief about the Messiah, but a matter of survival and avoiding Roman punishment. The sad consequence of this instinct for survival was the alienation of the Thessalonian Christians from both their Jewish and pagan neighbors.

Because Paul was unable to visit the Thessalonian church himself, he sent Timothy to check on it for him. Timothy returned with a positive report, which then prompted Paul to write this letter. Paul gives thanks to God for the exemplary faith of the Thessalonians in three specific ways:

- Their public witness. Paul is clear that being a Christian is not a private matter. Followers of Jesus are obligated to make a public witness of their faith. This is not a megaphone on a street corner kind of witness. The kind of witness that Paul celebrates is the humble witness of the gospel expressed in our daily lives. Specifically, Paul praises the Thessalonians for turning away from pagan idols and making God and Christ the center of their lives. The transformation of their daily routines was so radical that word of their conversion spread beyond their immediate neighbors to the surrounding region. Holiness is attractive! Like a moth attracted to a porchlight, the Thessalonians' transformed lives shown so brightly that their pagan neighbors had to take notice.
- Their imitation of their mentors in faith. The Thessalonians imitated Paul and his missionary companions, as well as the first Christians in Judea, by living set-apart and holy lives. They also imitated them in their faithful response to adversity. Like holiness, faithfulness is also attractive! The Thessalonians' profound joy in Jesus despite the opposition they experienced was an encouragement to their fellow Christians and a compelling witness to their pagan neighbors. Paul says that their confession of faith echoed "in every place" (v. 9), so that they moved from being imitators of the faith to examples of the faith.
- Their endurance. John Wesley commented: "*Faith works, love labors, hope patiently suffers all things.*"¹ Christian endurance is remaining steadfast in our faith in Jesus despite the challenges and opposition we face. Both Paul and Wesley remind us that faith takes hard work! Like a muscle, faith requires regular resistance training to grow stronger. The Thessalonians' strength came from their conviction that their future was held securely in God's hands. This conviction fueled their zeal for leading lives worthy of the saving word they had received.

¹ *Notes on the New Testament*, 1 Thess 1:3.

The Greek word for the church, *ekklesia*, means “assembly” or, more precisely, “called out ones.” Paul tells the Thessalonian church that they are beloved and chosen – called out – by God (v. 5). The language of chosenness, or election, or dare I say “predestination,” can make us a little twitchy as Wesleyan Christians. We prize God’s gift of free will and the gospel’s message of inclusion too much to believe that God predestines some for salvation and not others.

But that is not what Paul is arguing. He is not saying that those who *hear* the Word of God are chosen. He is saying that those who *do* the Word of God are chosen. They demonstrate they have been called and set apart by God by continuing the ministry of Christ in the world. “Chosenness,” writes Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, “is about ripples. Like any gift of the Spirit, it isn’t primarily for you, for the one receiving it. You are chosen to be an influence, to be an example. Many wonder what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in today’s crazy world. They figure it out by looking to you, to your community, to the witness that you give in word and deed, in mission and service...Being chosen is not an award or a medal that you can wear with pride. It is a call to follow Christ, to put on the yoke, to live outwardly and openly in a way that increasingly stands out in the culture around us.”²

The basis of that call is gratitude. Simply put, our witness for Christ is an expression of gratitude for what Christ has done for us – which is to say, everything. Jesus has given us our very lives. When the Pharisees tried to entrap Jesus, they handed him a coin with Caesar’s face on it and asked if it was lawful for the people of God to pay taxes to Rome. Jesus responded, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21). In other words, the currency belongs to the government so pay your taxes, but your body is stamped with the image of God. You have been chosen by God, so give your whole life to God.

Paul wants the Thessalonians – these former pagans who once worshiped Caesar as a god – to understand whose they truly are. They are God’s. They have been blessed by the living God so that they may be a blessing to others and lead them to the one, true God. Paul’s language of chosenness is drawn directly from the Old Testament, where Israel is described as both beloved and chosen (cf. Deut 4:37;

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/always-give-thanks/week-1-twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a/week-1-twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-always-give-thanks-preaching-notes>

7:6-8; 10:14-15; 14:2; 33:12). The Israelites were the chosen people of God not because of anything they did or could do, but because of who *God* is and what *God* did. God called them His own and set them apart to be a blessing to the world. And now the Church, grafted onto God's family tree through Jesus Christ, carries the same debt of gratitude.

When we gather at the communion table, we give thanks for the death and resurrection of Jesus, and we are renewed as the living body of Christ in the world. We are bonded to Christ and to each other through the Eucharist – this ritual of *eucharistéo*, which means 'thanksgiving.' We are bonded to each other in Christ by a spirit of thanksgiving for one another.

What are the gifts of this spirit? When we are thankful for each other, we are more intentional and thoughtful about how we communicate with one another. When we are thankful for each other, we are more vulnerable and honest with each other. When we are thankful for each other, we are more likely to forgive and seek forgiveness, to offer and receive grace. When we are thankful for each other, we are motivated toward deeper and authentic relationships.

Today, like Paul, I am giving thanks for the parts of our communion that matter the most. Not the number of people in worship or the amount of money in the church bank account. I am giving thanks for laughter around the table of fellowship. I am giving thanks for the sound of voices raised in harmonious praise. I am giving thanks for the warmth of a hug and grace offered on a hard day. I am giving thanks for the ways you show me and our community what the good news of Jesus truly looks like – food in empty bellies, shelter for those who have none, an encouraging word and a helping hand up, an emphasis on hospitality and inclusion over ideological or theological purity.

God knows the world needs more kindness and compassion, and I can preach about that until I am blue in the face, but it makes no difference unless the words are dwelling richly in you. Unless, like Paul says, the message of the gospel comes to you "not in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (v. 5). Unless "the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you" not only on the corner of Ramsey and Hanley, but in every place your faith takes you after you walk out of these doors. You have been chosen, church; chosen by God

to be imitators of His love. That is a joyful calling! So go out in joy, singing the blessings of the Lord to all who will listen.

Thanks be to God! Amen.