Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
October 25, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Theme: Give Thanks: Tested

[prayer]

Paul was Apostle to the Gentiles because of his passionate belief in inclusive salvation. Anyone who has faith in Jesus and puts on Christ in baptism can call themselves a child of God (Gal 3:26-27). This radical message united the early church across geographical and cultural and sociopolitical divides. People of all sorts would gather around the eucharistic table to break bread together, sing psalms, pray, and study the Scriptures. Their fellowship was a foretaste of the beautiful diversity of the kingdom of God.

But this unique and radical fellowship was also a flashpoint for controversy, opposition, and persecution. As I mentioned last week, Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonian Christians several months after being forced to leave the fledgling church. He and his missionary companions were driven out of Thessalonica by the Jewish community there. Paul's missionary efforts led to the conversion of pagans away from the imperial cult to worshiping Jesus Christ. The Roman authorities did not initially distinguish between Christianity and Judaism; to them, the Christians were just a Jewish sect. Because of this the Thessalonian Jews were afraid Rome would collectively punish the entire Jewish community to deter Paul's missionary efforts among the pagan populace. The Jews feared guilt by association, and so they drove Paul out.

This was not the first time Paul had encountered opposition to proclaiming the gospel. He mentions in his letter a previous experience in Philippi, where he was imprisoned because of his missionary work. And yet, despite this opposition, Paul praises God as the source of his courage and perseverance. He writes, "We have been examined and approved by God to be trusted with the good news, and that's

exactly how we speak. We aren't trying to please people, but we are trying to please God, who continues to examine our hearts" (v. 4 CEB).

Another word for "examined" is "tested." Paul says that when we face opposition or obstacles to our faith, God is testing our hearts. This theological statement is probably familiar to many of us. It may also trouble us spiritually. Because a test is something you either pass or fail. And no one wants to fail a test, especially a divine test. No one wants to fail God. No one wants to feel that pressure or shame.

If the Church has taught you that faith is a test you either pass or fail, then listen closely to my words: I am sorry. I am sorry that is what you were taught. I am sorry if that belief has caused you pain. Because it is not true. Faith is not a test. Faith is an invitation – an invitation to believe and receive and be transformed by grace. And grace does not have conditions, otherwise it is not grace.

Last week Paul told us that all those who strive to do the will of God are chosen by God. And if we believe we are chosen by God, then we can also believe that God's grace is enough to cover the multitude of our sins, enough to shore up our weaknesses, enough to fill in the gaps behind our failings.

Paul wants the Thessalonians – wants us – to understand what it means to live the life of faith. If God has chosen us, then we can be assured that God will empower us, encourage us, and support us in growing our faith. That is what the testing is *really* about. Faith is not an exam you can pass or fail, because God is not grading us. God is *molding* us, *forming* us in the image of Christ. Opposition and obstacles to our faith are a kind of resistance training – they strengthen our spiritual muscles by providing a force to push against, like a leg press at the gym.

This is why we can rejoice in our suffering, because we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God (Rom 8:28), even the times when our faith is being tested. The early Christians viewed opposition to their faith as evidence that the eschaton – the end times – were near. The Greek word that Paul uses, *thlipsis*, refers to a particular upheaval that will come with the eschaton. Paul writes of the "coming wrath" (1 Thess 1:10) – God's righteous anger that will pour out on those who oppose His kingdom. God is serious about the universal nature of the gospel, and He will hold accountable anyone who prevents the

gospel from being heard and received. But for Paul and the early Christians, their suffering (*thlipsis*) was not a reason to fear, but a reason to hope! The greater the suffering, the closer the *parousia* – the Second Coming of Christ – when God will raise the righteous dead to eternal life and permanently dwell with His people.

Obviously, the *parousia* was not as close as Paul and the Thessalonian church hoped. Two thousand years later, we are still waiting. The expectation of the *parousia* gave the early Christians the strength to rejoice even when they suffered. What reason do we have to rejoice when our faith is being tested? How are we to live in our own seasons of discomfort and discord?

Paul is clear that a life of faith is grounded in gratitude – gratitude for what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do. And because of that gratitude, we are compelled to share what God has done, is doing, and will do. More critically, we are compelled to share this good news by sharing *ourselves* with one another. There is no greater testament to the work of God than the text of our own lives. It is our lives that communicate and persuade the truth and beauty of the gospel.

This is what Paul has been doing with the Thessalonians – sharing his life with them. Not a self-centered witness focused on personal enrichment, but a vulnerable, trusting, self-giving witness. "I could have come in," he says, "and flashed my credentials. I could have put pressure on you to follow and obey because I am an apostle." Instead, Paul did the opposite. "We were gentle with you like a nursing mother," he says, "caring for her own children. We were glad to share not only God's good news with you but also <u>our very lives</u> because we cared for you so much" (vv. 7-8).

That word "gentle" can also be translated "infants," which means we can read Paul's words two ways. The conventional reading is that Paul treated the Thessalonians like a nursing mother who cares for her infant. But another reading is that Paul allowed the *Thessalonians* to care for *him* like a nursing infant.

And really, both interpretations are true. Because in a healthy community of believers, caring flows both ways. We are all called to care for one another. And we are all called to receive care from one another. This mutual caring is the

definition of communion – a common union of giving and sharing and receiving. We share the gospel by sharing our very selves with one another.

Sharing selves is what God did in Jesus Christ. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus uses the word *agapaō*, which is the verbal form of *agapē*. *Agapē* is typically defined as "selfless" or "self-giving" love. Scripture uses *agapē* to describe the love of God. When we think of selfless love, we think specifically of the self-giving love of God made known to us in Jesus the Christ. We think of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son" (NIV). And the crucial word in that verse is not "loved" but "that." God was so filled with love for us that he chose to send us His son, Jesus the Christ. God was so filled with love for us that He chose to act. God's love is not sentimental feeling. God's love is commitment and action. The Old Testament word for this kind of love is *hesed* – covenant love, steadfast love, love that goes the distance.

So, when Jesus uses that word *agapē*, he is commanding a kind of love that takes action – love that is committed, love that is steadfast, love that goes the distance, that makes a difference, that transforms the way we relate to each other. Because this is what God's love has done for us. God's love has transformed the relationship between God and human beings by living and dying and then rising among us.

The testing of our hearts, then, is not an external challenge God places upon us as believers. The testing of our hearts is, instead, living out our faith day by day in loving community with believers and nonbelievers alike. "As iron sharpens iron, / so one person sharpens another" (Prov 27:17 NIV). Our faith is tested because we use it. Our faith is tested because we *act* as people of faith. Our faith is tested whenever we live into our baptismal vows, whenever we act out of love for God or neighbor, whenever we share ourselves in relationship and community. God uses all these circumstances to grow our faith and transform us in the image of Christ. Because of this we can rejoice in the Lord always, and again rejoice (Phil 4:4).

Thanks be to God! Amen.