

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, January 21, 2024
10am

Text: 1 Thessalonians 3-4:12

Theme: People of the Light: Living a Life Pleasing to God

[prayer]

One of my favorite television shows is *Call the Midwife*. I was rewatching an older episode and something one of the characters said really caught my attention. He said, “Nobody’s perfect. Love makes us that way.”¹

This is a profound truth to keep in mind as we continue to study Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. In chapters three and four, Paul emphasizes both the role of love and the role of holiness in living a life that pleases God. He sends this prayer to the church in Thessalonica: “May the Lord cause you to increase and enrich your love for each other and for everyone in the same way as we also love you. May the love cause your hearts to be strengthened, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his people” (1 Thess 3:12-13 CEB).

Holiness can feel like such a heavy word. God commanded the Israelites, “You must keep yourselves holy and be holy, *because I am holy*” (Lev 19:44). *God’s* holiness is the standard for our holiness. It is an impossible standard to reach. This is why we have the blood of Jesus to make us clean and righteous before God (2 Cor 5:21).

Still, we continue to attempt to reach those lofty heights of holiness through our own willpower. Our efforts at being holy usually focus on behavior. We think that the purer (or cleaner) our behavior, the holier we are. Unfortunately, our personal sense of holiness often becomes the standard against which we judge the holiness of others. Holiness morphs into *holier than thou*.

¹ *Call the Midwife*, S4E8.

Jesus called the Pharisees out on this “holier than thou” behavior in Matthew 23 when he said, “Hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs. They look beautiful on the outside. But inside they are full of dead bones and all kinds of filth. In the same way you look righteous to people. But inside you are full of pretense and rebellion” (Matt 23:27-28).

Holiness that springs from judgment is no holiness at all. It is hypocrisy and legalism.

But holiness that springs from love is another matter. God commands us to be holy as He is holy. And God’s holiness is defined by God’s love. We see this in the way that Jesus ministered to people on this earth. Jesus put into action through his ministry the two greatest commandments in the Torah (Hebrew Scriptures). These two commandments set the standard of holiness for ancient Israel: Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself (Matt 22:36-40; cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). This is why Jesus said that he came not to abolish the law, but to *fulfill* it (Matt 5:17). He fulfilled the law of holiness by loving his neighbor as himself. And by loving his neighbor, he loved God.

Paul desired to see this same kind of holiness in love shine in the lives of the Thessalonian Christians. After being forced to leave this brand-new church before his ministry among them was complete, Paul feared they would be tempted to slide backwards into their former pagan lifestyles. So, he dispatched Timothy to check on them. Timothy returned with a good report – the Thessalonians had continued in faithfulness to the Gospel despite persecution from their neighbors.

But the Thessalonian church was still very young in the faith and by no means perfect. Timothy also brought Paul word of several issues that were troubling the church. For the remainder of his letter, Paul addresses these issues.

One of the specific areas that Paul counsels the Thessalonians is the problem of sexual sin (4:3-6). The specifics of their sexual immorality are unclear, but the underlying concern was they were still living by Greco-Roman sexual standards rather than God’s standards as laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures (remember, the Bible that we have today did not yet exist). The issue seems to be that the Thessalonian Christians were taking sexual advantage of each other in one way or another, perhaps having sexual relations outside of marriage (4:6). Paul viewed

this behavior as backsliding into their former pagan lifestyle, where sex was about self-gratification and not committed love. He challenged the Thessalonians to exercise control over their bodies and desires, and not mistreat or take advantage of each other (4:5-6). By honoring their bodies and demonstrating self-control (one of the fruits of the Spirit), they would show greater love for each other. They would also be a holy and loving example to their non-Christian neighbors. Paul's command to practice sexual holiness is about setting aside selfishness and centering the wellbeing of others.

Paul was also concerned that the Thessalonian Christians should not be a burden to each other or their pagan neighbors. It was important to him that the church and its members be self-sufficient. He urges them to live quiet and humble lives, to not insert themselves into the business of others, and to earn their own living so they can support one another (v. 11). Paul is concerned that the Thessalonians be good neighbors and contributing members of their community. Again, his commands to practice civic and economic holiness are about centering the wellbeing of others. Something to keep in mind when we are casting our votes this year!

Paul writes, "So then, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus to keep living the way you already are and *even do better* in how you live and please God" (4:1). To "live" (*peripateo* in Greek) literally means to "walk." It is a translation of the Hebrew word *halak*, which means to put your devotion or commitment to God into action. Paul viewed sanctification (holiness) as an ongoing process of learning to live in a way that reflects God's will for creation. God continuously calls us to lead sanctified lives and grow in spiritual maturity. We do this not only for our own benefit but for the wellbeing of our neighbors, too. God equips us to lead sanctified lives by giving us the Holy Spirit. The Spirit helps us by convicting us of our sin, assuring us of God's love, and being our guide in walking out the will of God.

This should sound familiar to us as Methodists. One of the doctrines that sets our theology apart is John Wesley's teaching of Christian Perfection – also known as the doctrine of Sanctification. Wesley liked to call this doctrine Perfect Love. Like Paul, he understood holiness as the love of God transforming us from the inside out so that we are perfected in love, meaning we understand God's love better and better and become more effective in sharing it with our neighbors.

The trouble with the use of the word perfect is that it implies completeness. We tend to think and act as if holiness is a destination that we will one day arrive at. When I took my ordination vows, I was asked whether I believe that I will one day be made perfect in love. I answered ‘yes’ because I believe that the broken parts of the image of God inside me will one day be restored to wholeness. This is the final result of salvation – our minds, bodies, and spirits redeemed, healed, and made whole as God intended before sin had its way with us.

But before the Bishop asked me if I believe I will be *made* perfect, she asked me a related but slightly different question. She said: “Do you believe you are *going onto* perfection?” – the emphasis was *going onto*. The complete restoration of the image of God inside me is a future event in which I put my hope. Like the unveiling of a stained-glass window, it will be beautiful to behold. But before the unveiling comes the piecing together of the glass – a slow, deliberate process that takes skill and time – even an entire lifetime.

Salvation is not a singular event. It is not static. We are justified once and for all through the atoning death of Jesus on the cross. But our salvation continues long beyond that event as God’s sanctifying grace works upon us, transforming and perfecting us in love.

This process of sanctification does not always move in a straight line. Our life stories are not linear; neither is our salvation. Growing in holiness and being made perfect in love is a journey with fits and starts that winds about and sometimes turns back on itself. But if we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and are attentive to her leadership then we can be confident that the Spirit will keep us moving in the right direction.

As people of the light, we are called to lead holy lives that please God. Holy means dedicated or set apart. We are set apart by the way we show love for each other. “They will know we are Christians by our love.”² Moral behavior is one of the ways we show that love. But holiness is not simply following rules of behavior. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians (The Message translation): “For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion nor disregard of religion amounts to anything. What matters is something far more interior: faith expressed in love” (5:6).

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/They%27ll_Know_We_Are_Christians

On the day that Jesus comes again, what will make us “blameless in holiness” before God? The answer is love. Did we allow the love of God to disciple us toward greater love for God, our neighbors, and ourselves? If so, then we will know we have lived a life that was pleasing to Him.

Amen.