

Our Work Among You

I Thessalonians 2: 1-13

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**May 18, 2014
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The popular conception of Paul the Apostle is that of a towering intellect with strict morals and very definite views. Those characteristics are, of course, quite true. Besides our Lord himself, no person has demonstrated the sheer intellectual power and creativity to match Paul. He reset the entire Hebrew Scriptures in the key of Jesus. He recast the best of Greek culture in light of the gospel. He composed his letters on his feet, dictating them to a scribe, often while in a prison and recovering from wounds. He communicates succinctly, clearly and yet with a depth that can be studied for a lifetime. The mind of St. Paul is unsurpassed ever since. The sheer power of his thought enabled him to persist even as people lashed out because his ideas were reworking all they had ever thought about the way God and the world work. They recoiled against him because the truth of Jesus that Paul explained demanded a total, radical reorientation of life and behavior. It cost everything, a price Paul showed again and again he was willing to pay. So, yes, Paul can look to be a bit of an inflexible hardhead. His words polarized and ignited passion on both sides. In fact, people who don't want to follow where Paul leads often shake their heads and mutter, "Yes, yes, well you know how Paul was, a little much for ordinary people."

But if you leave it there, you don't know Paul at all. Paul was not just a brainiac for Jesus. He was absolutely gobsmacked with his Savior. Totally in love with Christ. His passion was to see others come to know the saving, redeeming, and enlivening love of Jesus in their deepest souls. And he was actually quite tenderhearted towards the believers who received his gospel. He worried over them, prayed for them, and visited them whenever he could. Paul's heart overflowed with affection toward his brothers and sisters in Christ. This is all the more remarkable when you realize that just a few years before he would have disdained any contact with Gentiles, spurning them in their uncleanness. Now he counts Gentile Christians as precious and dear to his soul.

Nowhere do we see Paul's affection overflow as in I Thessalonians. Today's chapter is a window on the heart of the great apostle. Even more, today's passage is a window into how church leadership is supposed to work. Let's look at three phrases:

1) So we speak. Paul notes how his team had been treated in Philippi. He and Silas had been arrested and accused of disturbing the peace and the economy by their strange teaching. The magistrates had them stripped, beaten with rods, then placed, without treatment for their wounds, into the inner prison with their feet fastened into the stocks (See Acts 16: 16-24). In this condition, Paul and Silas sang hymns to God, so that the other prisoners marveled at such faith. False accusation, beatings and indefinite imprisonment seemed no barrier to experiencing the joy of Jesus.

About midnight, God sent a great earthquake, which shook the prison to its foundation. The doors flew open and their bonds released. But Paul and Silas did not immediately flee the jail. They waited to meet the jailer. He was terrified at what would happen to him if his prisoners escaped. Paul shared with him the gospel, and the jailer became a believer. That night the very essence of the church of Jesus Christ was revealed. Two washings occurred. In love and gratitude for his newfound salvation, the jailer washed the wounds of Paul and Silas. And Paul washed the jailer and his whole family by baptizing them, symbolically joining them to Jesus and his cleansing of our sins.

With that as what happened very recently, Paul, Timothy and Silas came to Thessalonica and shared the gospel. They did not arrive in a luxury bus with a retinue of advance man and personal attendants. They did not come to manipulate their audience with clever rhetoric in order to make money. They did not come telling tall tales for entertainment purposes. In fact, they knew the stakes. Conflict always erupted where the gospel was preached. And it happened in Thessalonica as well. Amidst much dispute, Paul, Timothy and Silas preached. Paul declares that he had been entrusted with the gospel news of Jesus. Paul knew the gospel led some to joyous acceptance and others to angry, even violent rejection. Still, “entrusted with the gospel, so we speak...For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor as a pretext for greed.”

We share the gospel because it is the truth and we want others to know it. We share the gospel because Jesus saves us and changes us and sends us to invite others to participate. There is much joy when others come to believe and know Christ. Wound washing love occurs. The washing of broken bodies in all kinds of ways. The washing of dirty souls. Life change follows. So does conflict. The gospel is not safe. It is dynamite grace, and therefore creates strong reactions.

Church leaders, pastors and elders, are called to realize this. We are not Elmer Gantry seeking a fast dollar from gullible people. We are not religious

peddlers seeking to make a sale by flattery and false promises. We are not running a business. We have received the gospel in truth and power, and so we speak. We are a truth sharing community. We are a wound washing community. We are a family seeking first of all to please the God who was pleased to save us.

2) **To share our own selves.** We might think that anyone who could write as forcefully as Paul would blow into town and just overwhelm people. But that was not his way. He writes, “We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”

This is not a professional model of ministry. It is a personal model. A family model. A costly model. Now I think it's very important that pastors and church leaders be trained with all the skills they can get. Presbyterians have from the beginning rigorously demanded learned pastors. And certainly church leaders need to be trained how not to project their internal needs and problems onto church members. They need to learn how not to take all the weight of their members' lives back into their families, never resting and never separating. To a point.

I fear that in seminary we were counselled so strongly in this professional model that we missed the Biblical reality of how relational, and therefore costly, church leadership is supposed to be. Sometimes, it seemed like the message between the lines was that the congregation is the enemy, trying to crush your life and you need to protect yourself from them. I know there are some bad congregations out there, congregations that eat ministers for lunch. In fact, just a few determined, hostile people can set a church ablaze in conflict. But church leaders cannot separate their lives from their people.

Paul said “therefore being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” There is no professional detachment here. Paul, Timothy and Silas fell in love with the Thessalonian Christians. For the season of their stay in Thessalonica, the leaders shared life with the other believers. Their hearts bonded and those ties would bind across the miles and years.

A decade ago now, Rhonda and I came to interview in Baton Rouge. We were captivated by the people you chose to represent your church family. Such dear hearts. Such tender faith. Such thirst for the Word. Such concern for the world. Such enjoyment of each other. Such humor and honesty, passion and heart

sharing. I remember saying, “We would have come for the nine of you. That would have been enough, for we see the love of Christ and hear the call of Christ so strongly through you.”

Recently, I have been receiving some leadership coaching from Ryan Forsthoff, a church member who has enormous gifts for inspiring leaders. Ryan has had me thinking deeply about what it means to lead you. I wrote a vision statement for myself personally and for me as your pastor. I’ve sent it to our elders and look forward to talking with them about it tomorrow night. Here it is:

The vision for my ministry is:
To quest passionately and continually
To know Christ Jesus more deeply

In such a way that:

- a) My whole life is engaged and
- b) His Person is made known in clarity and depth

So that

Others may be drawn down an authentic and well-marked path
Towards him in worship and love.

The *outworking* of this vision means:

Inspiring others into Christ Jesus

In such a way that

They encounter Jesus freshly and faithfully
Through worship, study, proclamation, prayer and relationship

So that

They might receive, praise and reflect Christ Jesus
In transforming ways in their homes, businesses and community.

There are some implications that follow from such a vision:

Leadership is about:

A passion more than a project,
A culture more than a strategy,
And people more than programs.

This vision, I believe, arises from and suits the personality of our congregation. We foster a culture of quest for Christ in an atmosphere of shared life, deepening love and energized service. When the passion ignites, all kinds of projects follow. Your leaders can hardly keep up with the all ways you bring the gospel into the world. When the culture of quest becomes contagious, people come here without gimmicks or marketing and they find ways to go deep into the Word together. When we live real life in Christ among each other, authentic relationships grow and you don't need to tell people that church is important—we know in our bones that this is where the heart of life beats in love.

Out of this culture of quest, of course, all kinds of specific programs and strategies and projects will flow. But the culture comes first. Then our elder and staff leaders work out this vision in their specific areas.

Three weeks ago, we hosted the meeting of the Central South Presbytery. We had about two hundred guests here, representing the 70 EPC churches in our region. It was all hands on deck for our elders, deacons, staff and members. What I noticed was how seamlessly staff and members worked together. The reality is that there is no difference. All of the pastors have moved their families here to be fully committed to the life and work of Christ in this place. All of the full time program staff are members of the church. They are highly invested not just as a job but as a life. All of the elders and deacons feel the call to serve and dedicate great amounts of prayer and time. They could be doing other things, but feel this service as a call of Christ. All the members who are not officers find there is always a welcome and a place when they step forward to serve and participate in this culture of quest. So is it a surprise that our guests felt the joy, the peace, the welcome, the concern? Is it an accident that a pastor from Mississippi told us that he smells the aroma of Christ in this place?

We share a magnificent, precious value in leadership here: “being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” I caught that from you and I want to give it back all the time in every way I can.

3) Walk in a manner worthy. Lastly, let's note these words of Paul, “we encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” God has called each of us into a life. A life walk which reflects his kingdom values, his love and his grace.

It's a great, thankful wonder that you have given us such a life among you, blessing us so generously with bounteous provision and overflowing affection. We feel keenly the deep call, not just to conduct a professional ministry, but to have our very lives in your midst. To be Christians visibly and consistently among you. To quest for Christ with you and in front of you. To live together what it means to go through the raising of children, the loss of parents, the joy and poignancy of seeing children married, the literal storms of life in hurricanes and the storms of life in relationships and all kinds of struggles. The claim of Christ is over every facet of life. The call of church leadership is to answer that claim faithfully in the midst of a group of fellow believers doing the same thing. We love to be side by side with you in attempting to live the faith day by day. We love to be surrounded by such authentic, passionate, church leaders. I marvel that our elders show such consistent, dedicated faith and that we have such elders from their thirties to their seventies. To be in this congregation is to be surrounded and therefore inspired by authentic questers after Christ.

Paul proved his love for Christ and the church over the course of years. I know well that I am not Paul, and that my words are more aspirational than they are a consistent reality. Even to consider what it is like to imitate Paul's leadership is to become acutely aware of personal failings. To lift up this vision before the church is to nearly guarantee that we become aware of how we do not walk as worthily, speak as boldly or love as affectionately as we are called. That's just the sad reality of being sinners not yet fully sanctified.

Nevertheless, we quest on. For Paul tells us that as we receive the gospel as the very Word of God, we know that the Word is at work in us. We have been called apart from the world to be sent back to the world with news of Christ's love. We have been called to be different in order to show a better way. We have been called to create a culture of quest for Christ and love for others so that our weary, broken culture can turn and see there is a better way.