

25

Oct

Tested

Always Give Thanks

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

People who have been in the church a long time may hear the same words and assume they know what they mean, when in fact, we could all use a refresher on what Paul is and is not doing in this passage (see Preaching Notes). So, as worship planners, how do we keep everyone engaged?

REFERENCES

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

We are chosen: that's where we start in this exploration of I Thessalonians. But now we take another step and discover that we are also *tested*, a tricky word, to say the least. What comes to mind when you hear that we as Christians are tested? Or our faith is tested? Or that God tests us? Consider what you think, and then consider what many in your congregation might think. How does that sound? How is God portrayed in those understandings? How does God come across to those who think about being tested? Arbitrary? Capricious? Maybe even cruel?

We need to reflect on what Paul means by “God tests our hearts” (1 Thess. 2:4 NRSV). One thing that is clear from the whole text assigned this week is that he includes himself in that testing. This text is primarily about Paul as an example of what it means to live the life of faith. We can be upset about that and see Paul as a braggart, or self-centered, or whatever terms have been used to describe him by people throughout history. But in the end, what do we have to give witness to our faith other than the text of our own lives? That is what communicates; that is what is persuasive and potentially transformative. Our own stories, our own efforts to live out the demands and the grace of the gospel are the means by which every Christian is called to bear witness to the world. Paul is a part of the tradition. He doesn’t raise himself above either the Thessalonians or above us thousands of years later. Instead, he joins us in the struggle. He, too, is tested. “God tests *our* hearts.” (Emphasis mine!) Paul stands in solidarity with any Christian who faces hard times. That’s his consistent theme: “I have suffered for this faith.”

In that context, then, and in that solidarity, he lays out a pattern for gospel sharing or witness giving. Gospel sharing is not about flattery, says Paul, nor about greed – about feathering one’s own nest. It is not about gaining notoriety or receiving awards. It is about the gospel itself, or rather, it is about the God behind the gospel, within the gospel. It is about the one who embodied the gospel, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. It is only by setting ourselves aside that we can approach sharing this gospel as Paul describes.

Paul may have been responding to accusations that he was in it for himself or for the notoriety that comes from gathering folks together and leading them. There is a suspicion that everyone is notoriously self-centered and that personal enrichment – in many forms – is the primary motivator of our actions. Certainly, the well-publicized cases of religious leaders and their lavish lifestyles don’t help with this perception, this suspicion.

Paul’s response to these accusations is interesting. It begins with denial, as we have seen— I did not come for myself or to please people. I came to give glory to God. That’s where he starts. But from there, he adds a deeper dimension. I could have come in, says Paul, and flashed my credentials. I could have put pressure on you to follow, to obey, because I am an apostle. That’s an interesting flex. What kind of pressure would that have put on a new bunch of believers? Regardless, he declares that isn’t what he did. Instead, he says,

But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.

(1 Thess. 2:7 NRSV)

There is some debate in biblical scholarship circles about the word that the NRSV translates as “gentle.” There are authoritative manuscripts of the letter that render the word as “infants.” Many scholars lean toward this word in the context of the letter. (See Prof. David Carr’s argument in Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-1-thessalonians-21-8-6>.) By switching the infant for gentle in verse 7, we have a sense of mutuality in the relationship between Paul and the church. We came to you as infants, needing care. We put ourselves in your hands, perhaps. Or we relied on you, even as you relied on us. Do you hear the implication in this switch? Keeping the word *gentle* can get you there, but it is more likely to be interpreted as holding back, as still holding all the power but choosing not to use it. Coming as infants and as a nurse implies a sharing of power or agency. This is emphasized in the following verse where Paul says that their intent, or their process, was to share the gospel, and also to share themselves. In other words, he argues that the gospel is not something that is separate from the life of the disciple. It is not a thing out there but is woven into the life of the person following Christ.

That brings us back to the idea of testing mentioned at the beginning of the text. Testing in this sense is not an arbitrary or extraneous challenge or burden laid upon those who decide to be believers. Rather, it is living out of one’s faith day by day. Our faith is tested because we use it. The testing is in acting as people of faith. It is not a hoop to jump through or even a job evaluation exercise. Our faith is tested whenever we step out in faith, whenever we stand up against injustice, whenever we act out of love for God or neighbor, whenever we swim against the cultural current and put ourselves at risk.

We are chosen because we responded to the call of the gospel, and we are tested because we live our faith. Surrounding all of this is a profound gratitude to the God who called us and walks with us, and to the community with whom we are woven into relationships of love, respect, and service.

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