

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 Strongheart
November 28, 2021

As Advent begins today, and the church completes another year's cycle of worship observances and celebrations, let us be reminded that what we observe and celebrate in this season, represents everyday realities all year long. For instance, the sequence; hope, peace, joy, and love are not meant only for Advent and Christmas, but for every time, all the time.

The text we have read from the first of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians is not particularly directed towards Advent even though it has ideas that fit the sentiments of the season. The text itself mentions joy, and love, and courage (in the sense of the strengthening of the heart). Even though it does not mention hope which is the word for the day, hopefulness pervades the reading.

First there is the hopefulness that comes along with the fact of their faith, that is, the report that Timothy sent to Paul proclaiming the faithfulness of the people in the Thessalonian church. Next there is the hopefulness of Paul's prayers. Hopeless people do not pray, and praying people are expressing their hope that their prayers are heard and are effective.

And there is the hopefulness not only in the fact of Paul's prayers, but in the substance; that Paul and his companions anticipate being able to come for another visit, and supply what is lacking in their faith, that they will be blameless and upon the coming of the Lord

Jesus. And there is this prayer, "may the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other, and for (get this) *everyone else*, just as our does for you."

"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow . . ." That is the substance of what we hope for, at least it is one way of saying it. And, finally, that Paul and his companions might encourage the Thessalonians, that is, strengthen their hearts.

The words we use at this season, like faith, hope, love, joy, peace, clearly refer to the inner life. While they have strong implications for group dynamics, there seems to a presumption that the inner life of the individual is a leading factor in determining the characteristics of the group they make up. I am not sure that it is a good assumption, but it is at least true as far as it goes.

These prayers are among the best for the season. They acknowledge that there is a "lack" in our faith, as Paul has called it, and that lack has resulted in a shortage of love, that most difficult of aspirations, to be more concerned for others than for the self, to be able to sacrifice for the greater good even if it results in some personal injury or hardship, or just inconvenience.

The kind of love Paul is writing about here is not the gushy, sentimental kind. Of all the holidays, Christmas can devolve into the gushy sentimental kind of expressions.

Rather, it is the kind of love we see on the cross, with Jesus offering his life for others, or the kind of love when someone gives without expecting anything in return, not even from God. It is the kind of love that is only possible for the hopeful, who have cast off despair as a matter of principle and as a way of life.

In the tradition about the origins of the Christian faith, the story, found both in the Acts of the Apostles *and* in the letters of Paul, the church at Thessalonica was among both the poorest and the most generous. As a matter of fact, when Paul is making a plea to the believers in Corinth to raise funds for an offering he was taking back to the believers in Jerusalem, he makes an example of the churches in Berea and Macedonia; be like them in their faithfulness and generosity. Be like them in their hope. It is no surprise then, that when writing in a letter directly to them, he offers them these prayers.

There was much going on in their world; the disintegration of the Jewish homeland, the tearing down of the world they knew in favor of a new, Roman one. Droughts, epidemics, wars.

Down the centuries, the letters of Paul to the various churches have become letters to all the churches, including all of the ones that have come along since, churches like ours here in Ohio, a place Paul couldn't possibly have conceived, all these years later. And they bear the same message.

With everything that is happening in the present world, (it is hard to make a list and know what to put at the top); issues related to race relations, climate change, polarization, Covid, economic struggles; it is interesting that the Christmas season is oriented toward personal religion, the attitudes of the heart, the disposition of the soul. The fact is that set next to all these issues and the general demands of life, we are all pretty weak and quite frankly, helpless.

I think of the marketing campaigns for cancer patients and for communities suffering some tragedy, like several years ago when there was a bombing at the Boston Marathon, and it spawned the expression, Boston Strong, as a way of wishing well the people involved, that their hearts would be strengthened, which is another way of saying, to be encouraged; it is the same prayer Paul made for the people at Thessalonica - Thessalonica strong. And it is the prayer also for us.

And there is no better way to strengthen the heart than to observe again, and to celebrate again, the birth of Jesus, which reminds us of God's presence, to see our faith increased and our love overflow not only for each other, but for everyone else as well. We are stronger together, and also strengthened in coming of Christ, who is our hope, now and forever. Amen.

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