

“We Know God Has Chosen You”

I Thessalonians 1:1-10, Proper 24-A

October 19, 2014

In the first century A.D., Thessalonica was the capital city of the province of Macedonia, which was located in what we now know as the **northern part of Greece**. Still thriving very much as a city today some 2300 years after it was founded, the Biblical city of Thessalonica is now known as the city of **“Thessaloniki”**; and it still boasts of being the **second largest city in Greece**; second only to Athens. The city of Thessalonica remains a very important seaport as it was in St. Paul day; but a city with a great many pagan temples, replete with idols to worship on every corner!

During the days of the Roman Empire it was located on the **Via Egnatia**; the great Roman highway that extended from Rome into the eastern world; a highway that’s significance could be compared to the significance among us of Interstate 20 in the southeastern United States today; or even Interstate 95 along our eastern seaboard.

To this city of **Thessalonica** St. Paul came on his **second missionary journey, accompanied by his two dear friends, Silvanus and Timothy**. **Silvanus** is the **Latin name** of a man sometimes referred to also as Silas in the New Testament that was his Greek name. These three men who had previously preached the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the city of Philippi from which they were thrown out of town following their imprisonment (Acts 16), next came to Thessalonica, where Paul followed his usual practice of going into the synagogue; somehow managing to have himself appointed as a guest preacher there. We read in ACTS 17:2-4, *“And Paul went into the synagogue, as was his custom, on three Sabbath days where he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead and saying: ‘This Jesus whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ. And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”*

From a historical standpoint, it is highly significant that there were a great many Greek men and women there who had originally been attracted to Judaism because they were greatly dissatisfied with THE LOW STANDARDS OF PAGAN MORALITY AND WITH THE IDOL WORSHIP THAT FOSTERED THEM. And yet for all they found attractive about Judaism, it’s emphasis on monotheism (that there really is only One True God) and its lofty moralism—they were also repelled by its narrow nationalism and ritual requirements, (above all, circumcision).

IN CHRISTIANITY THEY GREATLY REJOICED TO FIND A FAITH THAT DEEPLY SATISFIED THEM, BECAUSE OF THE LIVING SAVIOR; THE ONE CRUCIFIED ON A CROSS FOR THEIR TRANSGRESSIONS AND RAISED AGAIN FOR THEIR JUSTIFICATION. THIS LORD AND SAVIOR NOW RISEN FROM THE DEAD WHO HAD NOW ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN, GREATLY SATISFIED ALL OF THEIR DEEP SPIRITUAL HUNGER AND THIRST.

In this new community of faith, they were **no longer regarded as second-class citizens as they were among their Jewish friends** because St. Paul was offering this Gospel to all people indiscriminately. Of course, the Jewish community there did not take kindly to losing a considerable section of their adherents over to what they viewed as a brand new faith. Therefore they resorted to violence, making their attack on the house of one convert to the Christian faith named Jason, because he had personally provided lodging to Paul, Silvanus and Timothy in his own home during their stay there; these men who were now accused by their Jewish adversaries of *“having turned their world upside down”* (Acts 17:7).

Nevertheless, God the Holy Spirit had empowered Paul, Timothy and Silvanus to establish a Christian congregation there even though Paul and his companions, once again, were run out of town on a rail. And now sometime later, after their leaving Thessalonica, Paul wrote this beautiful letter back to them, known as I Thessalonians, because everything Paul had heard about the church there did so very much to encourage him. Now he in turn wanted to write a letter to them to express his great thanks to God for them, and hopefully also encourage them.

Someone once said, **“If you ever find the perfect church, please don’t join it, because if you do, it won’t be perfect anymore!”** Since millions of Christian congregations, as they are found all throughout the world, are made up of human beings, saved by the grace of God, no church is perfect! But some churches certainly seem, even today, to come much closer to the New Testament ideal than do others. **The church at Thessalonica was in this kind of category. At least four times in this letter, Paul gave thanks for the church and the way it responded to his ministry (1:2; 2:13; 3:9; 5:18).**

Paul felt about this church the same way that he obviously felt about the church at Philippi; which like Philippi may well have been regarded as the “apple of his eye.” Of course Paul greatly loved all the churches that God by his grace had helped him as an apostle to establish, but there were those congregations like in Corinth and Galatia where there were so many problems **OF INTERNAL STRIFE AND DISCORD AND CONFLICT, THAT THESE CHURCHES WERE NOT HEALTHY ENOUGH**, spiritually speaking, to turn outward from constantly focusing on themselves, to offer real ministry to lost sinners still living in the outside world.

It’s still true today that Christian churches marked by a lot of strife, discord and disagreement can hardly provide a healthy witness to Christ and his Gospel to the world. Organizations experience different degrees of health from time to time just as each of us do in our own persons as living organisms. When you are laid up in the hospital with a severe case of pneumonia, it’s difficult to minister to others, because you are presently immobilized by your own poor state of health. Christian congregations can be this way too! Healthy churches are churches where the members are so filled with the love of God that is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord that their love, their enthusiasm, their joy, their peace and their kindness spill out from that local church into the lives of people who are surrounding them in the world.

And isn’t this why, on the night before our Savior dies on the cross to save us from our sins, he prays that we may all be one? Jesus is also praying for you and me and our witness to his Gospel in that prayer. Listen to what he said, *“Father, I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their Word, that they may all be one, just as you Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe you have sent me!”* Jesus here is reiterating what he had said earlier that same evening, when he does the unthinkable thing of girding a towel around his waist, taking up that basin of water and going around and washing the disciples’ feet. Do you remember what he said? **“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another!” (John 13:24-35)**

Four different times throughout this epistle, St. Paul expresses his own deep personal thanks to God for the believers in Thessalonica. And in these opening ten verses of the letter, he expresses his profound thanks to God for three important reasons:

1. First, for their work of faith.

In some of St. Paul’s writings, most notably in his letters to the churches in Rome and Galatian, St. Paul sets the whole concept of “faith” and the whole concept of “works” in great opposition to each other.

Paul draws a sharp contrast between faith and works in these instances, to emphasize a great spiritual truth that **our salvation comes to us through our faith; faith which is God's own creation** in our hearts and minds, given to us there by the Holy Spirit who alone works this faith within us (2 Corinthians 12:3b) This is why Paul says so clearly in Romans 3:20, *"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin!"* But while St. Paul insists that God's salvation is given to us 100% by God as a gift of his grace, he also insists that true faith, true trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for our souls' salvation, will manifest itself in a life of good deeds; of concrete acts of love done by us which give as evidence of the saving faith that now indwells us. Listen to what St. Paul says in Galatians 5:6, *"For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor un-circumcision counts for anything; the only thing that matters is faith working itself through love!"*

So when St. Paul says here, *"We give thanks to God for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith;"* he is expressing very much that same idea here. Here is Paul echoing what St. James says in chapter two of his epistle: *"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body; what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead!"* (James 2:14-17)

2. Secondly, for their labor of love.

Furthermore, St. Paul goes on to thank God for the Thessalonians great labor of love, and yet St. Paul is probably not thinking merely here of some specific deed of kindness done by one person in that church for another without the hope of any reward, the way we sometimes may use this phrase in our everyday speech today: "Thanks for your labor of love!" The Greek word here for **"labor"** is *kopos* which denotes some type of laborious toil, and signifies some type of unceasing hardship borne for the sake of love. These Christians in Thessalonica were under severe persecution from the Jews for continuing to gather together in the name of the Triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Greek word for love here is "agape;" a word that was seldom ever used by Greek speaking people in that Roman world before Christians took up this word and made it their own characteristic word for love. This kind of love is shown by one person to another not because of anything which the receiver in this case has done to earn, or merit, or to deserve this love; the way that we sometimes say: **"ONE GOOD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER!"**

This kind of Christian love finds its ultimate expression in Romans 5:8 (6-9) where Paul writes: *"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly! For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—through perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!"*

When this kind of love comes to us human beings we are faced with a challenge we cannot ignore. Once we come to see that God is like that, that God loves us as part of his very nature, of whom John tells us pointblank: **"God is love" (I John 4:8), that God loves us in a way that was given to us above all through the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, in his sacrificial death on the cross in Calvary, he must respond to it—either in the power of God's Holy Spirit with faith, so that his whole life can be totally transformed over time by it;** or we must respond in the weakness of our own mortal flesh in totally rejecting any such notion as nothing more than mere superstition and child's play; nothing more than one of the greatest expression of human deception ever perpetrated upon the human race throughout the history of the world! -- **Nevertheless, those of us who do yield ourselves over to God are so transformed by his power of divine agape (God's own love), that they eventually grow to that point where they are actually willing to give over their whole lives in the service of others too.**

This past week with the scare of a worldwide epidemic associated with THE EBOLA VIRUS, I wonder what kind of persons are those health professional; those doctors, nurses and medical technicians and the like, who even

after suiting up in all of that protective profession garb, with every part of them completely covered from head to toe, is still willing to take that risk to help treat and save the lives of others infected with that virus?

If I were asked to do that, I think I would at least be tempted to quit my job. Would you?

3. Thirdly, for their steadfastness of hope.

Thirdly, St. Paul gives thanks to God for these Thessalonians because of their steadfastness of hope. And here we should be reminded that the word “hope” in a Christian context always has an air of certainty about it. It is a confident expectation, and not simply the unfounded optimism that unbelievers have in mind when they use this word “hope;” like I hope it doesn’t rain on Saturday, I am hoping to get a lot of yard work done at my place!

Also in addition to this the “HOPE” that we have in Christ is always directed towards the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ for his Church in glory; who will bring along with himself the angels of heaven with him!”

Well, in brothers and sisters, in light of all this overwhelming evidence **St. Paul feels compelled to draw a very important personal conclusion** about the saints in Thessalonica and he speaks to them about it very clearly here when he says: *“For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction!”* Furthermore, “we know that God has chosen you—because you became imitators of us and of the Lord Jesus himself, for even though you received the Word in much affliction, you did so with the kind of joy that only the Holy Spirit of God can bring to a human being! We know that God has chosen you because you yourselves have become examples to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, and your faith has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

Brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ, I have had the deep personal joy of serving you as your pastor here at Mount Olive Lutheran Church for almost 17 years now; that is if God permits me to do so, I will begin my 18th year of work among you in January. But over the course of these many years, **I also have seen the faith that was primarily resident here in January of 1998, mostly in Irmo, Columbia and Lexington**, also go out from you too—to such faraway as places as Blythewood, Orangeburg, Swansea and Hopkins, Red Bank, Prosperity and Chapin too. And I can only draw one conclusion as to the reason for all of this, because I believe also that **GOD HAS CHOSEN YOU** not only to be members of the **one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, or the UNA SANCTA**, Latin words for the **ONE HOLY** as theologians sometimes refer to it, but also God has chosen you to be a part of this wonderful congregation that many of us know and love as Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Irmo, SC.

St. Paul here is touching once again upon the doctrine of “election,” or as it is also sometimes called “the doctrine of predestination,” a doctrine which all Christians Roman Catholic and Protestants, Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox fully embrace; though there are various interpretations of this doctrine of election in different wings and branches of the Christian Church.

Lutheran Christians affirm it as God’s way of not only comforting us, but also assuring us and reassuring us, that his choice of us, as Paul says in Ephesians 1, to one day become believers was **all the result of his grace**, so that we might have all the more assurance that we have not been saved by works of the law, but solely by his grace. Listen to what Paul writes in **Ephesians 1:3-5**, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.”*

In **Romans 8:29-30**, *“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified!”*

In **I Peter 2:9**, Peter writes: *“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his*

marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people, once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy!"

Jesus also talked about the doctrine of election. He said that in the last days of this world as we presently know it, false prophets would arise, and if possible they would lead astray the elect (Matthew 24:24). And you heard him tell us at the conclusion of our Gospel lesson last Sunday, *"Many are called but few are chosen"* (Matthew 22:14).

The Lutheran Church teaches that the "elect" are predestined to salvation, because this is what the Bible clearly says. Lutherans Christians believe that we can have assurance of our salvation, in part, because they have been predestined by God to receive it. But the Lutheran Church strongly disagrees with those Christians who would make **predestination the source of our salvation, rather than the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ and his glorious resurrection!** Unlike some of the followers of that other great reformer in the history of the Christian Church named John Calvin, **Lutherans do not believe in a double-predestination**, that just as God has predestined some people to salvation, he has thereby predestined others to hell and damnation. How can that be true when it the best known verse of the whole Bible, St. John writes to us: *"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life!"* (John 3:16)?

How can this be true when St. Paul says to Timothy in **1 Timothy 2:4**, *"Our God desires for everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of his truth!"*

Or listen once again to what St. Peter says in **2 Peter 3:9**, *"Our Lord is not slow as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not willing that any should perish!"*

Jesus himself says on the night before he dies, *"I when I am lifted up will draw all people to myself!"* (John 12:32)

In 1525, Dr. Martin Luther wrote a great treatise on this doctrine of election entitled **"The Bondage of the Will" in 1525**, and here he clearly bases his total view of salvation on **Ephesians 2:8-10**, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not because of works, lest anyone should boast! For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for a life of good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them!"*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, when I look out upon you and the many members of this growing Christian congregation, I too, believe that you are not here primarily because of a conscious decision you have made to make you a vital part of this congregation, as I am convinced that God has chosen you—chosen you to be part, yes, of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and quite possibly also, God has chosen you, and worked through a number of circumstances in your life, sometimes painful and sometimes pleasant, to make you a vital part also of our local fellowship here! To God be the glory, great things he has done! Amen