

Examples

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

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Center Church, Hartford

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Did you all hear about what happened to Rep. Jahana Hayes this past week? She is a US Rep for the 5th District in CT, territory just south of Hartford. Rep. Hayes is black, and during a Zoom constituent meeting last week, more than one “Zoom bomber” came on the meeting shouting the “n” word and telling her to go pick cotton.

Did you hear what happened to Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the U.S. Rep. for greater New Haven? A picture was posted showing the statue of Christopher Columbus, which was recently removed from New Haven, with a picture of her head superimposed on his hand and blood dripping down from it, along with a verbal threat.

Are you still listening to or reading political news or have you given up because you are so tired of the vitriol, the insults, the angry words, the outright lies? And if you think this sort of thing will pass after the election, I think you will be disappointed.

In this context, we read the beginning of Paul's first letter to the Christians in Thessaloniki. Those believers lived in the midst of persecutions, insults, lies, harassment and murder. We need to be careful about creating a fantasy that the early churches were all sweetness and light; many of them existed in the midst of an openly hostile society surrounding them. In our context, in their context, we read: “We always give thanks to God for all of you...remembering...your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” We read: “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy...so that you became an example to all the believers” in the region.” We read: “in every place your faith in

God has become known so that we have no need to speak about it.”

The church of the Thessalonians, despite persecution, had the incredible blessing of having heard the gospel from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. They had astounding examples of faith in the midst of struggle in those three people. They, then, could themselves become examples of faith to others because of what they had seen of works of faith, labors of love and steadfastness of hope.

For the past two weeks I have asked you in various communications to send me names of people you think are good examples of character for us to follow in these times, the way the Thessalonians followed Paul, Timothy and Silvanus. You know how many responses I have received? None. Now it may be that some of you thought of someone but forgot to send me a note as life took over. Or maybe you are just, as I often am, tired. I get it. But I also wonder if we don't struggle these days to **find** examples of people engaged in exemplary works of faith, labors of love and who hold visible hope in the future. Between COVID, the racial tensions and the election, many people who are more qualified than I am to make this diagnosis are writing that people in this country are, as a group, descending into depression and worse. Faith, hope and love are in short supply these days.

All the more reason for us to seek out those who are holding on to one or all of those central qualities of the person of faith to which Paul refers over and over in his letters (remember I Corinthians 13 ends, “So faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love”). All the more reason for us to support one another in whatever way we can these days. All the more reason for us to remember that faith involves the work of prayer and adjusting our eyesight to be in line with how God sees the world. To remember that love is not a feeling but, as Paul says, a labor, a labor which has the capacity to bring forth new life. To remember that hope is not a wish list for Santa but, as Bishop Michael Curry put it recently “believing in a God who is bigger than time and history” as his

enslaved and suffering ancestors did. You may remember Bishop Curry as the preacher at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

The writer Kate Bowler says that “life is a chronic condition.” These days more than ever. In these chronic days, I am often bombarded with emails and FB ads exhorting me to get to work for one candidate or one cause or another. I can't do it all or even a small part of what seems to need to happen. I can, however, heed the words of Paul at the end of this short letter to the church he loved in Thessaloniki: “Put on the armor of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation.” Like putting on our masks, only better! In doing so, I rely on the examples of my ancestors in the faith, the men and women in ancient Thessaloniki, on the examples of Bishop Curry's enslaved ancestors, on the example of people like Bishop Curry today who are steadfast in hope and take the labor of love seriously, believing in its power to change lives, including his own. Let's help each other on with that armor in whatever way we can. I pray this church can continue to commit to the work of faith, the labor of love and the steadfastness of hope so that someone out there, tired of all the hate and in search of examples of people to imitate, thinks of us. Amen.