

## **Encourage One Another**

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Center Church, Hartford

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The apostle Paul established the church in Thessaloniki, teaching them all he could about Jesus, and what living as Jesus' disciples would mean. When he left them to go on to other places to plant churches, they continued to discuss what they had learned, and, unsurprisingly, they were filled with questions. They wrote letters to Paul with their questions. For some reason that is not fully explained, Paul was unable to return to answer them in person, so he sent his protégé Timothy back to them with this letter.

As we read, we can discern some of the questions they asked. Paul had taught them that times of persecution and struggle would one day end, and Jesus would return to usher in fully the Kingdom of God. As time dragged on, the question that leapt from all their hearts was, "When?" "How long?" "When will it all be over?" "What's taking so long?"

Paul heard not just their words, but the deep yearning in their hearts for the fulfillment of God's promises and their opportunity to become truly one with Christ Jesus. He responded by reminding them that they already knew he could not tell them when, that God's time moved differently than human time. He reminded them that they needed to live now as God called them to, not waiting for the future and obsessing about it, but attending to their faithful lives as disciples in the present time. To be alert to God's work in their midst and be clothed with faith, love and hope. He gets even more specific in the verses that follow, urging them to "admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all. Don't repay evil for evil but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks. Don't quench the Spirit and hold fast to good but reject what is obviously evil, continuously testing to discern which is which." Above all, to continue to encourage one another and build one another up.

We, too, are in a waiting time. We are waiting for a vaccine for COVID to be developed and widely distributed. We are waiting for the time when we can gather together again safely in person. We are waiting for the ill to get well, those struggling mentally, emotionally or financially to

get back on firm footing. We are waiting for new leadership in government, and in our congregation. We are waiting for the kind of world Jesus and the prophets described for us, where “justice flows down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream,” where we all love one another as we are loved by God. Like the Thessalonians, we are a waiting people.

In the meantime, Paul’s advice to those Thessalonians seems like a good plan for us. Be faithful disciples in the now. Stay sober and alert to God’s activity in our midst. Hold on to faith, hope and love. Don’t repay evil for evil but work really hard at discerning the good and then doing it. Discern carefully what is true out there and don’t panic at mis-information; test always for what is true! Pray without ceasing.

I think especially as a church we can heed Paul’s words to “encourage the fainthearted.” What a lovely old-fashioned word that is. Fainthearted. Those who may cry, “I believe; help my unbelief!” Those who are just tired, tired and tired. Those who can’t see the other side of this all. Those who are made fearful by “doom-scrolling” and conspiracy theories. The English word we use to describe Paul’s instruction here is to “encourage” each other. Where we are weak or fearful or timid, create a flow of courage from yourself to another. If you are feeling a bit weak in courage yourself, send out what you have to another and it just may be that both of you will be “en-couraged.” Both of you will be, as Paul writes, “built up,” when your foundations are feeling a little shaky.

I know that as we move toward a Thanksgiving and Christmas that will likely look very different for all of us in some ways, we will especially need to be encouraging one another. We still don’t know when any of this will be over, which makes it so much harder on all. Here’s what I’d like us each to do today. Today, so we don’t forget it. Step away from the news or social media, and take time to write a note, (on paper would be lovely but if you have no stamps and getting out is a problem for you, then do it by email), to someone you know who might need a little encouragement. It doesn’t have to be long and complicated, a simple “God be with you in these days” would do. Let us take our role as disciples of Jesus, and students of Paul, seriously today and, as an old song says, “Give love and people will find a way, people will find a way, I do believe.” Will you do that with me? And beloved, God be with you in these days. Courage.

I want to close with the words of encouragement to all of us written by Bruce Bidwell not long before his death. "To paraphrase Gov. Andrew Cuomo, as we react to the pandemic, we must be strong individually and also Center Church strong. We must be loving and Center Church loving more than ever. Strength will come as we cope with isolation and the loss of face to face worship. When I think of Center Church, I draw strength from the love of others. I draw strength from the Church which is the bedrock in my life. This foundation will outlast the pandemic." Thank you, Bruce.

Amen.