

After the Sermon Hymn: *Stepping down to the congregation:*

1 Thess 1, 1-10 **“What is God’s Vision for us?”** (10/16/2011)

- An interactive sermon by Rev. Peter Dennebaum -

God’s peace with you!

1. There was the sermon behind the sermon ... expect the unexpected
2. Open page 203 of your pew bible – what do you see? We will talk today about the first 10 verses of the 1. Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.
3. Why? Because we want to start the main process of our Interim Time together: “What is God’s vision for us?” It is not about what I think about the text, what how you read the bible together, which understanding YOU get out of our scriptures.
4. If you like: Now please put your open bible up-side-down on your legs. You are now the congregation of Thessaloniki.

THE FIRST LETTER OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONIANS

(1 Thess 1: 1-10 – page 203 in the pew bible, NT-section)

Narrator (lay leader):

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

[David, Bob & I] **Grace to you and peace.**

² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your **work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our **message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction**; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you **became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia**. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.

⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols,

to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

AMEN.

>>>> (1) What did you hear? What are the writers saying to the congregation in Thessalonica?

The Text:

1. This is the earliest letter we have from Paul, and it may be the oldest writing we have from the early church – around 50 A.C. ; the oldest gospel is Mark, written around 70 A.C.
2. With his co-workers Timothy and Silvanus, Paul writes this letter to a church he started in Thessalonica, a city located in what now is Northern Greece (today good 300.000 people)
3. At the time, Thessalonica was a trade center and the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia.
4. The believers in Thessalonica experienced some form of persecution for their faith. The city worshipped the emperor and other gods

(2) In a city that is worshipping a worldly Emperor as God/Son of God (Julius Caesar/Emperor Octavian), **what has God chosen this young congregation to do?**

(3) Why may it be important that Paul's message has not only come "in the word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1:5)? See below 2.

... see below 3. & 4

FOR US TODAY

(4) The congregation of Thessalonica turned away from idols "to serve a living and true God" (1:9).

Can you think of some idols we may have to turn away from in order to serve "a living and true God"? ... see below 5.

(5) What may God be calling the congregation United Church of Rockville Centre to do?

[(6) What do the following attributes mentioned by Paul mean to you today?

- Work of faith / labor of love / steadfastness of hope]

Themes in the text:

1. Evangelism forms mutual relationships (V. 1-10)

The evangelizing that went on in that ancient city was a two-way street, as it should be in every age: Evangelism involves a mutual exchange,"

2. The Holy Spirit guides (V. 5 & 6)

However eloquent, that eloquence can't be equated with the power of the Holy Spirit, who is really at work: "The gospel is seen more as divine power than persuasive word," – Preacher and listener change. >>>> Is this possible? (by intensive listening!)

3. Affirmation – “You are healthy!” (V. 2 & 3)

Paul begins his letter with affirmation of the deep faith and exemplary spirit – it not about intellectual statements or. He affirms the "work" that they do because they embrace the gospel, their everyday living out of its message. And he affirms their endurance and steadfast hope in the face of opposition and persecution by a surrounding culture that has no use for fringe movements that undermine the program of the Empire.

Thessalonica, after all, was a Roman city, and there were many benefits to being one of those: security, prosperity, enjoyment of "the good things of life." **The important thing, though, was to go along**

with the imperial program, to accept Caesar as lord, not some Jewish teacher who had been executed by that same Empire.

>>> 2000 years later: Don't we live in very different circumstances? **(In the midst of consumerism, materialism, nationalism, rampant greed and self-centeredness, we too struggle with just who is "lord" in our own lives.)**

4. Subversive messages / anti-empire expressions

V 1: "church" / Greek: ekklesia, meant originally the citizens of a free Greek city officially assembled for self-government decisions. ... Maybe that was perfectly innocent, but also maybe not."

V1: "peace" has hidden meaning, as "anyone familiar with Judaism would have heard in his 'peace' the content of the Jewish shalom of justice and not that of the Latin pax of victory" (pax romana)

Whenever we in the church succumb [c^e-cam] to the temptation of peace through victory instead of proclaiming, and living, a peace of justice, wholeness, and healing, we have fallen off our center. Worse, we have left behind us the gospel of Jesus Christ.

V 1: "**grace and peace,**" which Paul uses so often in his letters that we may think they are simply conventions, like our use of "warm regards" or "sincerely." On the contrary, in these two words we find "the core of Paul's message and mission, faith and theology.

“grace”: The usual salutation in a Greek letter was *chaire* or 'greetings,' but Paul switches that to the similar-sounding but theologically more significant term *charis*, 'grace' or 'free gift.'" While Paul affirms the call of the people of Thessalonica and all Christians, it's a call to share this free gift with the world that God loves, for it "is a free gift that God offers peace to everyone, everywhere"

V 2: "love": quote "To love meant to share, a love assembly was a share-assembly, a love meal was a share-meal," but "the sharing was from want to want rather than from plenty to plenty. And do not think of it as humanly extensive charity, a free giving of our stuff, but as divinely distributive justice, a necessary sharing of God's stuff. For Paul, a Christian assembly of sisters and brothers was one that had committed itself to sharing together just as in an ordinary human family because it actually was a divine family, the family of God. This commonality was basic to Pauline Christianity..."

5. Counter-cultural Christian message?

>>>Question: **Could this be the truly counter-cultural message of a post-modern Christianity?**

The phrase "redistribution of wealth" in our very affluent nation is anathema, even to many Christians, and no politician, even one claiming the name Christian, would dare speak, let alone support, it. This is the tension, then, for Christians today who want to grow into

more faithful disciples of Jesus, in spite of the pressures of the surrounding culture and what it calls "normal" and "right" and even "just." As Paul and all Christians look forward to the day of Jesus' return and a "new creation," we might miss the new creation already happening in our midst because of Jesus Christ.

>>>> John Dominik Crossan (scholar) asks: "What better deserves the title of a new creation than the abnormalcy of a share-world replacing the normalcy of a greed-world?"

We need nurturing, stability, **aiding spiritual growth, and helping people to develop endurance to deal with life under pressure.**
We may be surrounded by pressures to conform to very anti-gospel values, pressures that tempt us to barricade ourselves figuratively from the world. And yet, can we in communities of faith assume that we are *always* "better" or "ahead of" culture in every way? When the culture preaches consumption, excess, and prestige, it's easy to contrast it with the gospel message of generosity, humility, justice and love. But honesty requires us to admit that culture is sometimes ahead of the church: for two thousand years, the church has often been the tail light rather than the headlight in social progress. ...How do we discern when the Stillspeaking God is speaking *through* culture, and when we are called to preach a *counter-cultural* word?