

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13  
“Conversations With Paul”  
First Sunday In Advent C

May the words of my mouth and mediation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and Redeemer. Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text for this First Sunday in Advent is the Epistle Lesson, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13. I'll be referring to that text throughout the sermon this morning.

It was nearing Christmas at the county court house, and the judge was in a happy and giving mood. He decided he would have a nice conversation with the next defendant who was called before him. The next case came up, and the judge made small talk with the defendant for a while. They had a nice conversation but, eventually, the judge had to get down to business. “What are you charged with?” the judge asked. “Doing my Christmas shopping early,” replied the defendant. Confused, the judge said, “There’s nothing wrong with that. I like you. We’ve had a good conversation. You seem like a nice guy. I don’t understand these charges.” The judge thought for a moment, and then asked, “How early were you doing this shopping?” And the defendant replied, “Before the store opened.” Conversations in Advent is our topic today.

Go back in time. Before cell phones and texting. Before social media and GPS tracking. Even before landlines and snail mail, which brought you a letter in a couple days. Go back to the days of the apostle Paul. There were no mailboxes or telephones or telegrams or even the Pony Express. If you wanted to find out about someone living in a different town, you had to travel there yourself or send someone to find out for you. It could take days, weeks, or even months before you heard back. You just had to wait and wait—and go on with life while you waited.

Paul had waited for Timothy to come back. Paul, himself, wasn’t able to visit the church he’d started in Thessalonica. But he knew the people in that church were suffering persecution. They were being pressured to give up the faith. And Paul longed to know what was happening to them. So he sent Timothy to find out. And then, he went back to work, and waited.

Then one day, Paul catches sight of Timothy. You can just picture him dropping whatever he was doing and hurrying down the street to hear the news. He’s so happy to see Timothy is safe and gives him a hug. Then, “What’s the news? What’s happening to the believers at Thessalonica? Are they still together?” Timothy would have a big smile on his face and say, “Yes, they’re standing strong in the faith. They haven’t given up on Jesus. They still long to see you and learn more from you. It’s good, Paul. Lots of good news in Thessalonica.”

And Paul is so thankful. Can’t you see him offering up a prayer of thanksgiving? “Yes, Lord, thank you for what you have done. Thank you for keeping these believers in

faith. Thank you for this joyous news. Thank you, Lord!” He simply can’t thank God enough for the great good news Timothy has brought about the Church in Thessalonica.

But then, Timothy fills him in on what else is going on in that church. Not all is good. Something is lacking in their faith, in the way they’re living out their lives. And so Paul gets busy writing a letter back to them. Right in the middle of the letter, he breaks out in prayer. He prays that he can come see them soon. He prays that these believers will abound and increase in love. He prays that they’ll be found holy and blameless on the Last Day when Jesus comes back.

God answered part of that prayer: Paul did get to see them again. He’ll answer another part of that prayer on the Last Day, when Jesus returns and those faithful to Jesus will be blameless and holy before God. But what about the part of the prayer where Paul asks that the Thessalonians increase and abound in love? What was lacking in this congregation that Paul would offer up that prayer to God? We’re not sure of every detail, but right after this prayer, Paul encourages the people there to please God more and more by not falling into sexual immorality. He encourages them to please God by keeping this gift honorable and pure. Then he urges them to love more and more by the way they do their work so others will respect them. Finally, he teaches them about what will happen to those who die before Jesus comes back.

Now, imagine what report Timothy would bring back about Christ the Life. Picture Paul saying, “Now, Timothy, this time go to that congregation in western Waukesha, and find out about the believers there.” Time passes. Timothy visits. He comes back to Paul. The greeting is warm, and again there’s a big hug between the two of them. Then: “What did you find out?”

And Timothy reports, “Oh, Paul, there’s so much to be thankful for. Jesus is at work in this congregation. I was at a worship service, and I heard them confess that they believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You should have heard it, Paul. Everyone there heard what wonderful things Jesus has done for them. The day I was there, they heard about Jesus riding triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey. They heard about the praises shouted to Jesus, the King who comes in the name of the Lord. So many there knew what happened after that palm-waving parade in that final week of Jesus’ life. They confessed he was beaten and crucified for them. Jesus on the cross was proclaimed. They trust that Jesus was resurrected from the dead so that they, too, will rise from the dead when he returns, and they will be presented blameless before God. It was glorious, Paul. Jesus is present in that congregation and people believe.

“Paul,” Timothy would say, “you know about good times and bad, tragedy and joy. About six weeks before I got there, the congregation celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. On that day, they remembered all the highs and lows they’d been through together. They praised Jesus for carrying them through it all. They came together, through the years, in Jesus’ name, trusting in Him, working together, grateful for the first 30 years, and praying for many, many more, as they continue to worship, minister, serve, and grow. You would be so proud of them, Paul.

“What’s more, on the walls of their church building you can see crosses and symbols of the faith. There are banners with God’s Word on them and beautiful stained glass with pictures of God’s faithfulness through the ages and generations. Their sanctuary was filled with decorations of thanksgiving and others looking forward to the celebration of Jesus’ birth.

“Raising their children in the faith is important to them. You should see it, Paul. They have a preschool and daycare so they can reach out to families in their community, teaching their children about Jesus’ love. Young adults come to the church to receive instruction so they can commune with the rest of the congregation. On Sunday, after worship, some parents bring their children to what they call Sunday School and Youth Group, and many adults even attend Adult Bible Class. And the teachers of these classes are committed to showing the children and adults the love of Jesus and teaching them how to be his disciples. You’d be so pleased, Paul.

“They also have people who show the love that comes from faith in Jesus. Some give food and serve those who are hungry. Some give money and collect mites for the support of missionaries and men studying to be pastors. They have people so generous to those in need. They host this wonderful thing called a Craft Fair every year that keeps growing, where they can meet people in their community. When someone dies, so much support and comfort is given to those in mourning. They love one another and shows. It’s just wonderful to see the care they have for each other and the community in which they live. It’s good, Paul, at Christ the Life.”

And Paul would give thanks. Can’t you see him offering up a prayer of thanksgiving? “Yes, Lord, thank you for what you have done. Thank you for keeping these believers in the true faith. Thank you, Lord, for this joyous news. Thank you, Lord!” He simply can’t thank God enough for the good news he’s received about the church in western Waukesha.

But then Timothy would tell him that not all is good at Christ the Life. “Paul, you need to know that the people there are still lacking some in their faith and living out their faith. During the worship service, I saw empty seats. Many of the members don’t attend the services and some come only some of the time. People are missing out on worshipping Jesus because they believe there are other things more important than receiving Jesus’ gifts. Some just don’t find worshipping their Savior that important. Like so many, they struggle with offerings, paying bills, and meeting budgets. Though they are joyous and want to serve, they have trouble finding new people to volunteer to serve. The older folks say they’ve done enough over the years and shouldn’t have to anymore. And the younger folks say that they just don’t have time, and aren’t willing to make time. And, as is the case everywhere, people get sick, some pass away, and everyone, understandably, is afraid of pain and death. The continuing pandemic has many confused, some isolated, and a few just downright angry. The people are afraid of what the future holds for them. The country they live in is struggling, too. So much has gone wrong when it comes to God’s Word. Their leaders have redefined marriage, allow for killing the unborn, confuse God’s gift of gender, and taken Jesus completely out of the public eye and life.

“But many, Paul, are just struggling to keep Jesus in their everyday lives. They’re getting ready to celebrate Jesus’ birth in the season they call Advent. It’s supposed to be a time to reflect on what our Lord came to do when he was born in Bethlehem. But, at the same time, the community cranks up its activity level. There are concerts and programs and parties. Families try to figure out how to gather together and how to fit everything in their schedules. And people try to figure a gift to get practically everyone they know. What happens is that the people are so busy with shopping, parties, decorations, and traveling, in addition to the usual errands, work, sports, clubs, activities, TV, and cell phone addiction, that they lose sight of Jesus. It gets hard for them to catch their breath and spend time with Jesus. They need support, Paul.”

And then Paul would sit down and write us a letter. And in that letter would be a prayer. He would pray that our love would increase and abound more and more. And how would that prayer be answered? Just like it was with the Thessalonians. It’s answered when we resist this world’s mutilation of God’s Word. When we keep teaching and preaching that the only true God says that some things are wrong, no matter how much the world wants them to be right.

It’s answered when we work honestly and in such a way that people will respect us for the jobs we do, when we do our work in the calling God has given us to do. If a teacher, to teach well. If a police officer, to enforce the law fairly. If a sales clerk, to treat people with respect. If an office worker, to work diligently. If a farmer, to work the ground faithfully. If retired, to share wisdom freely. If a painter, to make sure you didn’t miss any spots. If a business owner, to care for your workers and customers. And, as a Christian, to support, give, volunteer, and serve joyfully. Paul’s prayer is answered when we honor God with our work so that others may see what we do as being done in Jesus’ name, to God’s glory, and in service to our neighbor.

And that prayer about abounding in love is answered when we hold fast to the one true faith until Jesus returns. We are holy in Jesus. We are blameless in his forgiveness. The prayer is answered when we’re looking forward to that day of his return, when we’ll join all the saints, including those at Thessalonica, in the new creation he’s prepared for us.

I can imagine Paul putting down his pen and offering up a prayer for Christ the Life. “I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son and my Savior. Thank you, Lord, for the people of Christ the Life. Thank you for the faith you have given them. Thank you that they are holding on to Jesus when so many pressures are trying to pull them away. How can I ever thank you enough for this congregation? I pray that you send your Holy Spirit into their lives that their love abounds all the more.” Then Paul would go back to work, and so do we. We go back to work and to our lives, seeking to abound and increase more and more in our love for one another and for the people who are struggling in this world. For the day is coming when we will appear holy and blameless before God because of Jesus and his dying love for us. Amen.

And now may the peace which passes all understanding guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.