

Worship Series: “This We Believe”

“We Believe in the Church”—Sermon Text: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

26th Sunday after Pentecost: 13 November 2016

“If Jesus Christ were to come today, people would not even crucify him.
They would ask him to dinner, and hear what he had to say, and make fun of it”
(--Thomas Carlyle [1795 – 1881]).

Years ago *The Galveston Press* (known by other names as well) published an amusing story about a parakeet named Chippy. Chippy sat calmly in his cage one day when his owner decided the best way to clean the bird cage was with a canister vacuum cleaner. She took the attachment off the end of the hose and began to clean the bottom of the cage. Chippy sat nervously on his perch with growing concern about what was going on below him. Suddenly, the telephone rang and the owner turned to answer it. No sooner had she said ‘hello’ than she heard Chippy screech and disappear from his perch. She dropped the phone, turned off the vacuum cleaner, and opened the canister as quickly as possible. There was Chippy—alive—stunned, mind you, but alive. Dust and soot covered the bird. She grabbed Chippy and dashed to the bathroom and ran hot and then cold water over him. She saw that Chippy was cold and shivering. The hair dryer was at hand, so she took Chippy by his feet, held him upside down and blow-dried him with hot air.

A few days later, the reporter who originally wrote the newspaper story called to ask how Chippy was doing. The owner said: “Well, Chippy looks okay, but he doesn’t sing much anymore. He just sort of sits and stares.”

The image of Chippy has crossed my mind this last week. Between the election, the crazy rhetoric, and all the protests around the country over a duly constituted election all I can think is: “Hello, Chippy! Make room for us on your perch.”

I am certain that Chippy believed he was in the end times and so did many in Paul’s community of Thessalonica. Hear our day’s lesson:

6 Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away

from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, 8 and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. 9 This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. 11 For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. 13 Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13).

Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica that although the coming Day of the Lord or the “Parousia” is near, it is not as near at hand as some believers think. Parousia is an ancient Greek word meaning “presence, arrival, or official visit.” People in the first century used the term “Parousia” as a technical expression to signify the arrival of a sovereign and that publicly. Regarding reports in the church community that this “day of the Lord” had already come, Paul writes to the Thessalonians that no one should mislead them on this matter. Paul’s message is that the Day of the Lord will not arrive until certain events have taken place. These occasions have not yet occurred. The letter concludes by cautioning the Thessalonians to work and not to wait in idleness for the return of Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 4:9–12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–16 each directly speak to the issue of work. Many debate what led to the problem. What was the problem in the first place? There are three main guesses—for we can never know for certain.

*Thessalonians had stopped working because they thought the end times were at hand.

*People had given up their day jobs in order to preach the gospel.

*Perhaps some manual laborers were unemployed (whether through laziness, persecution, or general economic malaise) and had become dependent on the charity of church folk.

Whatever the cause of the idleness, Paul’s message is clear. Not only that, but Paul also provided a good example to imitate. Accountable Christians embrace work—even the hard work

of a first-century manual laborer. It is likewise clear-cut that it annoys Paul that some people presume upon church folks' generosity. Thus, if people can work, they should work. Bottom line, it is possible that the idleness of Christians may have given the church a bad name in the pagan community.

Under the false "chicken little" theology that "the sky is falling" or "the end is near," some of the Christian believers in Thessalonica have simply given up. There are many ways to surrender, I suppose. Yet to have others care for you because you slip into despondence is not how we are a Christian community. Paul writes about all this in terms of relations within—not outside—the bonds of the community of faith.

A fine lesson life can teach us is how to tie a knot and hang on when we get to the end of our rope. None of us gets very far down the road without being misunderstood and discouraged. Sometimes we get inundated by our own guilt when we realize that we misunderstood or failed to encourage some person in our constellation of relationships who was very important to us. Some unforeseen misfortune slips up from behind and dashes our cherished hopes and plans. Someone we love and depend on for strength and encouragement leaves us, in one of the many ways in which someone can go away; or we let someone down who depended on us. A sudden downturn in the economy wipes out our life savings. Someone betrays us that we trusted, or we betray someone who trusted us. There are so many ways in which we can suddenly find ourselves in the zone of desperation and at the end of our rope. Perhaps you have already had this experience. If you have not, if you live long enough, you will.

To be unwilling to work for our daily bread is just another way we give up or surrender to the temptation to let others care for us—when we are fully capable. Certainly we all will eventually get to the point of life that we need care. This is not what Paul is writing about. He writes about those whose thinking has created a vacuum in the community that others may have to unfairly fill. A man named Dr Edward Teller once observed that "life improves slowly, goes wrong fast, and only catastrophe is clearly visible." How can we prepare for the unexpected misfortunes

and catastrophic events that inevitable happen in our lives? It is possible, but not easy.

Perhaps Paul wrote, 2 Thessalonians, to argue against the notion that the end time or the 2nd coming of Jesus (Parousia/eschaton) had already come. Some believers in Thessalonica misunderstood Paul's earlier message from 1 Thessalonians, evidently thinking that Christ's return was looming. In this false belief a segment of the Thessalonian community acted contrary to the group's self-interest and Paul has guidance for the church.

When Paul tells the church to imitate him he writes "you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us." Why?—because Paul has "give[n] you an example to imitate." When Jesus says, "follow me," it is similar. Paul's example is that he is not idle among them, so then, they should not be idle either—for whatever reason. Reason itself helps sort this out. What is reasonable—to work or not to work? Paul puts it clearly: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." Talk about a motivational speaker!

I close with a story from my friend Buzz Stevens, former Senior Minister at FUMC, Phoenix, AZ:

A duke and duchess owned a large country estate with many servants who maintained the premises in their absence. One day the duchess decided to bring the servant staff together to get an accounting of how well they had performed their duties. She called them into a room one-by-one and asked them how things were going. In the midst of a lengthy interview the duchess said to one of the older servants, "Let me see, you have been with us twenty years?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Your job is to walk the dog?"

"Yes ma'am."

"But the dog has been dead for eighteen years?"

"Is there anything else you would like me to do, ma'am?"

If this is where we are with our Lord and God, then perhaps, it is time to re-evaluate our work for the Kingdom. How do we deal with the labor God has entrusted to us?