

## In the Greatest of Hope

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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Several months ago, I looked ahead to the lectionary passages for today knowing it would be the week before we turn in our pledge cards. I saw the part about giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God, and I felt confident I'd find plenty there to work with. However, this week, upon reading the verses from the Letter to the Thessalonians, I knew the sermon would be grounded there. Writing on behalf of himself and two of his apprentices, Paul writes, "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Unlike other communities where Paul spent many months and sometimes years establishing churches, in Thessalonica he spent only three weeks presenting Christ and training people in the way of Christ. He had assumed he would have to return to this town to encourage and teach the church members about how to be Christian in attitude and in behavior. But through the grapevine, Paul has heard that the church in Thessalonica has taken off like a prairie fire! They are loving each other as Christ loved; stepping out on faith as Christ stepped out; and thriving on hope as Christ thrived on hope. He is astounded! And he is moved in his letter to thank God for these turned-on believers.

It is one thing to thank someone for what they have done. It is quite another thing to thank God for that person who has demonstrated the power of faith or the illumination of hope or the miracle of love. It is not often that someone looks you in the eye and says, "I thank God for you!"

In a way, it's easy to say 'thanks.' We do it all the time. It's second nature. Hey thanks! Thanks a lot. It doesn't cost much to say thank you to another human being. But to say, "I thank God for you," that's different. That bumps it up a notch, takes a bit of a risk, invites or acknowledges a spiritual intimacy.

I was thinking this sermon was going to be about the joy of giving or about money for the church's ministry. But reading the Thessalonians Letter, I see what I have always known, that the motivation for surrendering money is gratitude. If I am not grateful, you won't get a nickel out of me! But when I am in touch with my gratitude, you may need to visit me with a wheelbarrow rather than an offering plate!

When I read how Paul gives thanks to God for the people in the church at Thessalonica, I begin to get in touch with people for whom I thank God. Please indulge me for I wish to share with you some of these people.

Today, I thank God for Brodie and Piper and Giana, three church school students, who in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, set up a lemonade stand in their neighborhood. Having seen the televised images of homes destroyed and people left homeless, they responded in the most loving way they could imagine. Lemonade! They left a manila envelope on my desk two Sundays ago. Sixty two dollars in folding money. Thirty seven quarters. Five dimes. Five nickels. Five pennies. Seventy two dollars and five cents in all. I looked at that money, pictured the lemonade stand, and tasted the generosity of those children. At about the same time, I started a cell phone conversation with Frank Manchester in Hancock County Mississippi. Having lost his home, and now tasting some of the agony of being homeless, he feels called to rebuild the Hancock County food pantry, a building that was washed away by the wind and the rain. The seventy two dollars and five cents is the seed money for that project!

My prayer is that our church, in dollars and in sweat, will be able to partner with Frank to re-establish that vital mission among Mississippi's poorest residents. So, today, I thank God for Brodie and Piper and Giana.

This morning, I thank God for Karoline and Tracy, two confirmation students who each invited a friend to be a guest in our class last Wednesday. Neither of them thought to ask permission to bring a guest, they just felt it would be okay. To me, this spoke volumes about the way those two young women feel about their church. This rarely happens! Teenagers inviting their peers to church! But there they were, Olivia and Michelle, guests in the confirmation class! It turns out that they both contributed richly to the discussion about Truth. Afterwards, I recalled that it is by that personal invitation, one to one, that a church family grows. I want those two on the hospitality committee! They are not afraid to issue an invitation to come and see what God is doing at my church. So, today, I thank God for you, Karoline, and for you, Tracy.

It's been well over a year now since the surgeon opened up my knee and reattached the quadriceps tendon to the knee bone. When I woke up in the recovery room, there was an aide asking if I wanted some crackers and juice. I thought for just a moment and then I requested a chaplain instead! And a chaplain came by. Her name badge said Edwina. I asked her if she would say a prayer for me. And she prayed a prayer, and she held my hand. I know that in some way she was part of my healing. I went to track her down this summer to thank her for being the first one to participate in my recovery, but I learned that she had died of a sudden heart attack while waiting for a city bus. So, today, Edwina, wherever you are, I thank God for you!

This summer our community was saddened by the death of Marine Sgt. David Coulard, a graduate of Glastonbury High School, killed in action in Iraq. In preparing for his funeral, I made a number of phone calls to his high school friends, and was bowled over by the quantity of friends and also by the quality of those friendships. I asked Karl Butzgy, a South Church alum, if he could find the courage to speak at his friend's funeral. Karl spoke for about three minutes. But in those three minutes, we heard testimony on the value of a true friend. It gave me a great feeling of hopefulness to see how friendship still matters. Today, Karl Butzgy, I thank God for you!

A week ago Friday, we celebrated here in the church the wedding of Oscar and Lori. They live in Farmington but they have been attending church here in South Glastonbury. Oscar's parents are from Puerto Rico. I could tell when I met them at the rehearsal that their facility with English was limited. But they were here and were very present. When it came to the reading of the Bible, the bride and groom had asked the lay readers to offer the texts in English and also in Spanish. I couldn't understand a single word of the Spanish, but I could understand every ounce of the respect that was being demonstrated to Oscar's parents. It was one of those experiences of hospitality in which for a few moments it seemed that all was right with the world. Oscar and Lori, I thank God for you!

I see that this could turn into the longest sermon ever preached! My purpose in sharing these several vignettes is simply to prime your pump, to put you in touch with your own gratitude, with the names of people who have helped you, with the faces of people who have cared about you, with the memory of people who have shown you what it means to live by faith, to walk by hope, or to speak in love.

My intent is to help you name those people you can look in the eye and say “I thank God for you.” Somehow, in a way I can’t really explain, this just feels like a faithful way of approaching the task of filling out a pledge card. Next Sunday, the offering plates will be here, but I plan to bring my wheelbarrow, just in case!

And I share this with you all in the greatest of hope. Amen!