

“You’re the Message!”

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10

18th Sunday after Pentecost/A, October 16, 2011

Lynne M. Dolan

There are certain sayings that seem to come back to haunt us. When you hear someone say, “You are what you eat” how do you feel? What memories does this elicit? How about “Actions speak louder than words?” We have likely heard these statements many, many times (in fact, I suspect you can imagine some particular person saying them to you.) Some times such pearls of wisdom go in one ear and out the other. I know paying attention to what I eat is important however, it is hard to resist pulling into the Cider Mill on a brisk Sunday morning after church to get some hot apple fritters. I know people notice what I do as much as what I say and yet I can always find an excuse to stay home instead of gleaning or working on a Habitat site. Something always gets in the way of doing the right thing. Some times it takes a little gospel reminder to set me back on the right track. Other times I may need to pray and ask God to help me do the right thing. This is not a sign of weakness, as many might presume, but an opportunity to acknowledge my humanity and my dependence upon God.

Paul’s greeting and beginning of his first letter to the Thessalonians reminds me of another saying I love. It is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary, use words.” I believe these words of wisdom fit well with the portion of the letter we hear this morning. This fledgling church in Thessalonica had a special place in Paul’s heart. Paul and his friends, Silvanus and Timothy, are oozing with praise for the Thessalonians. This would lead us to believe that unlike the churches in other places like Corinth or Rome, this church was firing on all cylinders, in other words, they were doing all the right things. He is thankful for their works of faith, labors of love and steadfastness of hope in Jesus. We get the impression that this church is setting the example for the other churches. They are not just talking about Jesus and what one should believe, they are out in the community doing good things.

In addition to all the good work they are doing, Paul remarks how they remain hopeful. Being hopeful is essential to a faithful life. They were likely a small group of believers at the time that Paul and his friends wrote this letter. They would have been struggling to establish their church, fighting against misperceptions about Jesus and his followers and perhaps suffering persecution. To remain hopeful was an act of faith. To be living their faith in such a public way that Paul is hearing of their good deeds from many different sources was truly courageous.

Paul and his coworkers are deeply involved with this church. Their hearts are invested in its success. He is proud of their faithfulness. He is proud to hear the ways in which they are helping others, spreading the gospel and facing adversity with integrity and strength. Paul was probably like the Area Conference Minister who hears of the wonderful things a church in her area is doing. This church may seek her guidance, wisdom and support from time to time. Then she prays that in collaboration with the Holy Spirit this church

will go on to do amazing things. When she hears of the ministry that is taking place there, she gives thanks to God and to that church for that which is possible when we faithfully work in collaboration with our brothers and sisters and the Holy Spirit.

It is not easy to do the right thing, to discern God's call and then respond to it faithfully. Sometimes doing the right thing means people are going to be upset with you. I remember many churches in the 1980s who offered their buildings as sanctuaries for undocumented people who were frightened of being deported to places like Guatemala and El Salvador. This was a defiant, courageous act. In a peaceful way, these churches reminded the world that we do not live by the government's rules but by God's rule of love and compassion. Remember Jesus teaching his disciples, render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Even though this act of civil disobedience went against the current immigration policies, it was the faithful and right thing to do. This was not easy; however, I believe Paul would have praised those churches for their works of faith, labors of love and steadfastness of hope.

Dick and I went to a conference two weeks ago. People from churches all over Connecticut came to talk about what it means to be Open and Affirming. South Church has been an open and affirming congregation for 20 years. Half of the participants were from churches that are already ONA like South Church. The other half were from churches that are just beginning this process of discernment. For many people making this declaration is risky and fearful. Those of you who were here twenty years ago, do you remember how you felt as you engaged in this process? Even though most churches think they are welcoming to all people, it is different to publicly declare that in this church, all people are welcome and affirmed by God. It is hard to imagine the fear and persecution people in the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender community have had to endure. When I meet someone who was once shunned or banned from the body of Christ and is now welcomed home with full acceptance it is a life altering experience.

I attended a workshop that was led by a transgendered man name Aaron. Aaron transitioned from female to male just two years ago. He will be part of the panel of folks that will share their stories next Monday night. His story touched me deeply. I give thanks for his works of faith, labors of love and steadfastness of hope. Aaron is now an ordained clergy in the MCC church and serves God with a joyful heart. I invite you to hear the stories of these courageous folks as we explore how we might live more fully into our open and affirming commitment.

I imagine there are people in your lives who embody the spirit that Paul talks about in this letter. For whom would you give thanks for his or her works of faith, labors of love and steadfastness of hope? I think of the committee that worked for months to help us commemorate our 175th Anniversary. We Yankees have a hard time tooting our own horn so I'm going to toot it for them. I can imagine Paul writing every member of that committee a letter thanking you for your works of faith, labors of love and steadfastness of hope. The Holy Spirit was alive on the dance floor Friday night, in the twinkly of lights that illuminated lively conversation in the courtyard and at the refreshment table where we received more than a tasty bite to eat. The Holy Spirit wove its way through the

stories that were shared on the video about why you love South Church. If you have not had a chance to see it, I understand copies will be made available soon and you won't want to miss getting yours. People shared again and again where they have met the risen Christ in this place and how the community has and continues to empower them to live out their faith. The Holy Spirit was alive on Sunday in the worship celebration and in the sharing throughout the afternoon. I believe it was the Holy Spirit that allowed even our young people to become a living statue to honor the many ways in which God calls us to be faithful disciples in this church. The living wax museum was amazing telling the story of South Church's faithful witness through the ages. I give thanks to you all for your works of faith, labors of love and steadfastness of hope.

Paul reminds us that the gospel has power. Sometimes we have to risk our own lives to speak the truth or to stand in solidarity with those who are persecuted. More often than not, it is not the words we speak but the actions we take that make all the difference. The gospel is just interesting words until it becomes infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. Then the gospel becomes more than words you may or may not agree with. It has power, it is a force, and it changes things. "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary, use words." I love this saying, but I know it is not as easy as it sounds. Thankfully, we have people in our lives who model this so beautifully and we need only think of them when we are struggling to do the right thing. Paul teaches us that when we appreciate what others do, we should also take time to praise them and give thanks to God for having them in our lives. Maybe that person is your mother or spouse or grandmother or pastor. I give thanks to God for each and every one of you for I know we all strive, sometimes wildly succeeding and other times not so much, to do works of faith, labors of love and to remain steadfast in our hope. It is in our faithfulness and perseverance that we will meet God. Amen