

“Idle Hands”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament Lesson: Proverbs 12:11, 24; 13:4; 14:23; 16:13

New Testament Lesson: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

A guy named Wayne arrived at the Taizé community midweek. The first words out of his mouth were, “I’m sick,” and then he went on to explain that he was a stock broker on Wall Street, but had to leave his job. The environment was killing him.

Now, Wayne was not talking about the hustle and bustle of working in the New York City financial markets. Wayne was talking about the environment – the air around him and all the particles that float around in it.

He said he developed a serious, life-threatening immune-response – or allergy – to the air, as well as other environmental factors that one encounters anywhere on the planet, though for Wayne, some places were less life threatening than others.

Wayne was traveling the world looking for a place where he could live a long and healthy life, if that was even possible for him. I didn’t get to know Wayne very well. I was a little leery, naturally. And my efforts to engage him one-on-one and see if I could help didn’t work. Whenever we spoke, he would go into his story with such certainty and passion, and then just quickly, move on to someone else. Truth be told, I don’t know what was up with Wayne.

I do know that I had my doubts and concerns about him. As the week continued, I learned that Wayne had been invited by the sisters to stay at the monastic community for as long as he liked. The next day, I was surprised when some guys were recruiting musicians for a jam session and they told me, “A guy named Wayne came up with the idea. We’re all going to meet up” they said “and jam out to some praise songs.”

Wayne was contributing to the community, as a leader! I was surprised. He seemed like such a taker, so needy, so lost, and so consumed by his own story, with little time for others. Had I misjudged Wayne? Yes, to some extent. And I wonder, thinking about the Thessalonica community and the Apostle Paul, do you suppose he encountered people like Wayne as he ministered and preached? Or at least people who actually preferred to drop out of the work force rather than have to work? I think so.

I think when Paul said to the Thessalonians, “... Keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us,” Paul was talking about people we see as takers, people who are so consumed by their own stories, their own plight that they really don’t want to contribute to society. Now, I’m not talking about anyone here and neither was Paul.

Paul was talking about able-bodied men and women, boys and girls who refused to carry their own weight, for selfish reasons. In fact the Christians throughout Thessalonica saw that some believers were choosing to not work and just wait for the return of Christ, happy to have the church feed them and take care of their needs. It would be like anyone from throughout Independence or some other community who could get a job but chooses not to because they can get by on government assistance and charity.

Now, I already told you that Wayne even though he dropped out of the workforce contributed to the Taizé community as a leader, bringing people together to create music in praise and worship. And this raises the question, who's pulling their own weight in society and who's just living off the dole, unwilling to work or contribute, preferring to be idle? And how are we – as Christians – supposed to react?

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians can be broken into two parts. Most of it speaks to the person who is choosing to not work, not contribute, the person who would rather be idle than have to get out there and make something of him- or herself. The last part of the letter speaks to the church and how we as Christians should react to such a person.

Let's look at what Paul says to those who choose idleness over work – and that includes all forms of work and contribution, which are honored by God, paid and unpaid, professional and volunteer, in the office or the home, and yes, even organizing jam sessions at Taizé.

Paul is adamant that people work, people contribute to their community in some fashion. Paul is so adamant – so forceful – that you get the sense it's as much or more about the individual's wellbeing than the community's need. "... With toil and labor we worked night and day," says Paul, "... to give you an example to imitate."

Paul is saying, work is good for us. Idleness, laziness as a lifestyle is not, not good for us as individuals and not good for society. It's for the good of the individual as much as anything else that Paul is adamant about people contributing to society in whatever way they are able, to the extent that they can, even if that's through cards and phone calls and prayers for those in need.

That's why when he's talking to the church at the end of the letter, he says, "Brothers and sisters, ... do not regard (such people who refuse to contribute in anyway) as enemies, but warn them as believers." In other words, we are called to tell people like it is, gently and with encouragement, saying something like, "I wonder if you might feel better finding something to do in the community, or on behalf of your family, or something to help out a neighbor."

As Christians, our concern is always for the other person. There's another aspect of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians I want to mention. In addition to being a good example to others and encouraging them to give of their time, talents and treasures, Paul also says we are to (quote) "have nothing to do with them, so that they may be

ashamed.” Sounds a little contradictory, doesn’t it? But that’s Paul – he’s nothing if not complicated, as a letter writer, preacher and pastor.

But here, Paul is showing concern for the church, he’s not telling us to ignore the wellbeing of those stuck in a lifestyle of idleness. After all, he says in the very next breath that we are to “warn them as believers,” and “not regard them as enemies.”

No, the reason Paul warns us to “have nothing to do with them” is because wanting not to work can be contagious. He’s looking out for the community as much as he’s looking out for the individual.

It’s easy to look at folks who don’t have to work just because they’re on the government dole and feel like, “Geez, that would be nice.” Oh, we know being like that is not for us, but the temptation is there nonetheless, or it can be, for some people.

Rather than having us risk being tempted to sit idle all day, Paul says it’s better to not associate on that level with people living in idleness. It’s not for us, it’s not what God wants for us, as human beings – adopting a lifestyle of laziness even in our most productive years. We are to work for and contribute to the betterment of this world however we’re able and be happy to do it.

“Do not be weary in doing what is right,” says Paul. Don’t allow yourself to get sick of work, whatever your calling might be, whatever you can do to contribute. And do not be weary of or tempted by those who fail to do what is right, those who refuse to contribute, even though they could and should.

Ours is not to give in to temptation by craving and adopting a lifestyle of laziness. And ours is not to judge those who seem to us like they’ve done that. Instead, we are called to be of help and encouragement for others, coming alongside them in search of a better way, if they’ll have us, if they are willing to accept the help God is sending their way.

Let us all be an encouragement and an example in this world for people who don’t know or can’t see that there is a better way in the example and spirit of Christ. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful Savior, we know what it is to grow weary and fall behind, lagging in ardor and zeal, energy and patience for the tasks at hand.

You do give us work to do: proclaiming the kingdom of God, comforting the brokenhearted, caring for widows and orphans, and pursuing justice in our world.

And, you make us fully able to accomplish your purposes. You give us your presence always. You empower us with your Holy Spirit. You grant us your peace.

We praise you for counting us among your followers that we might love and serve you.

We pray, Lord, for those who have lost the desire and will to do your work, for those who would rather sit idle than to in anyway contribute to society.

Guide and encourage them toward the life that you would have them lead, and wherever possible, let our words and actions be an example of right living, alongside you, in fulfillment of your will.

We pray all this for Jesus sake, using the words that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**