

## **“Raised Up by God”**

**New Testament Lesson: 1 Thess. 1:2-7**

**First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson  
January 31, 2021**

In his book “Jacob’s Journey: Wisdom to Find Your Way; Strength to Carry On,” Noah benShea tells of Jacob the Baker and his encounter with an old woman along a forest path. Unfamiliar with his surroundings, Jacob asks the woman for help in finding his way. Fearing that she has no assistance to give, she questions why he would ask an old and lonely woman for help. ... Pointing to the path ahead, he says, “Perhaps we can lean on each other for a while.” The woman laughed..., saying, “How can I be a support to you?” “Ah, that is not so difficult,” said Jacob. “You see, the difference between a Tower of Babel and a tower of strength is the difference between those who live to make themselves more and those who know the way to heaven is in making others more.”<sup>1</sup>

Today we celebrate the ordination installation and commissioning of our new church officers, those faithful souls who know the difference between building themselves up and building up others on behalf of First Church. Nobody walks the path of church work to build themselves up, at least not those who are following in the footsteps of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul, in today’s New Testament lesson, is celebrating the ministry of the church in Thessalonica, a church of faithful souls who helped to build up the Christian faith and spread it across the globe.

Among all the churches that trace their heritage back to Paul and the other apostles is First Presbyterian Church of Independence, MO. Among those instrumental in building up First Church are the elders, deacons and trustees being ordained, installed and commissioned today. “We always give thanks to God for all of you,” says Paul, “and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

To think that Paul had you in mind when he prayed for the Thessalonian church – wow, just amazing! And we know that he did because of what he says about the church in Thessalonica. Paul says, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord, ... an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” Macedonia and Achaia are the large geographical areas surrounding Thessalonica.

<sup>1</sup> Noah benShea, *Jacob's Journey* (New York: Villard Books, 1991), 37.

Paul is saying that it was their faith that spread across the globe, sowing the seeds that gave rise to churches throughout the ages. We as a church are an offshoot of the churches Paul planted. You as active members and friends of First Church are the faithful souls for whom Paul gives thanks and blessings from across time. Wow! Just amazing.

Paul not only gives thanks and blessing, but he sprinkles his letter with seeds for us to use in our ministry. He says, "For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction...."

When Paul speaks of word, power, Spirit and conviction, he is speaking first of all of the word of God, our knowledge of Jesus Christ, which is revealed to us through scripture; second, Paul speaks of power a divine power and strength, which we need for ministry; third, he points to the Holy Spirit who guides us in our ministry which way to turn and what to do; and fourth, he brings this all together in the conviction of our steadfast faith in the future of the church, with our hearts for Jesus enabling us to withstand the struggle and opposition we face building up the church.

Knowledge of Jesus Christ, divine strength from God, the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and an unwavering faith in the future of the church – what more could anyone need when stepping up for ministry and leadership?

I can tell you that there is not one person at First Church who has been an Elder, Deacon or Trustee; a committee member, church volunteer or worship leader; a mom or dad or individual getting themselves and their family ready for church – there is not one person at First Church who has not relied on the word of God, the strength of God, the Spirit of God, and our faith in God to do what we do on behalf of the church, on behalf of the Lord we worship and serve. Church work, regular worship, and spiritual growth are not easy. If it was up to us alone, we wouldn't do it. In fact, those who step away from the church do so because they've lost sight of God in all this. And that's sad; we grieve their loss. And we grieve our loss of their place beside us in worship and ministry.

But if that's as far as it goes, then we, too, are lost! Rather than resign ourselves to the loss of those who were once alongside us in ministry, we must be for them that light of Christ shining brightly along their path, so that they might find their way back.

As Paul says of the Thessalonians, "... You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia," all those around you who believe but are not stepping up in worship and ministry.

Have you ever thought about that? That by coming to worship regularly, volunteering at church or in the community, serving on a committee or board, being faithful in your own spiritual-growth practices, have you ever thought of yourself as an example to others and instrumental in building up the church that Paul and others planted. Well, you are. But if we don't realize that, if we don't own it and live into it – our identity as a light for the path of others – then that light is diminished and, in fact, it might just flicker out altogether.

Look, I know it's not easy to commit yourself to regular worship and active ministry, Paul knows it's not easy, God knows it's not easy. That's why Paul marvels at the Thessalonians, bragging about them, saying, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord ... in spite of persecution..." in spite of the fear that you're not enough, that you don't have anything to give; in spite of the time and energy it takes, in spite of the push-back you get from family and friends who would rather be doing something else – or nothing at all – when it's always you who's the one saying, "Come on, let's go to church," or "Hey, my church is offering this or that; would you like to join me?" We get push-back, don't we?

We all get push-back trying to be an example for others when it comes to the church. If you're waiting for it to get easy, you're going to be disappointed. But luckily for us – and it's not luck it's God – so thanks be to God that we don't need it to be easy, building up the church. We just need it to be a God-thing. We need it to be about God and not us. We need to be grounded in the word of God, which we are; we need to be supported by the strength of God, which we are; we need to be led by the Spirit of God, which we are; and we need to be driven by our faith in God, which we are – in our worship and work of ministry.

Paul wrote a very encouraging, powerful and practical letter to the Thessalonians. Paul was committed that neither they nor we would ever forget that God is with us in building up the church. Paul was so committed to this that he gave his life to it.

And here we are today – nearly 2,000 years later – giving our lives for the sake of the church. And so we turn to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians as we celebrate and fortify our ministry, and particularly the ministry of our brothers and sisters being ordained, installed and commissioned today.

If you ever find yourself feeling lost, depleted, overwhelmed or driven under in your worship and ministry – which we all do – I encourage you, and all of us, to look to God, look to God for whatever you need to continue on as the bright example of Christianity that you are, for this church and for all the world. Amen.