

Sharing Your Very Self

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
November 5, 2023

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Youth ministry specialist and author Dave Rahn, in his web post titled “Keeping It Real,” talks about how to share the faith with others, even though we’re not perfect, even though we have to keep plugging away at it, fighting the good fight.

In doing this, Rahn stresses the importance of having good role models alongside you, to inspire and guide you. He gives an example of this from his mountain climbing days, saying, “As I was climbing mountains in Wyoming, it wouldn’t have helped for my guide to perch on the summit and wave in my direction, mouthing (the words), ‘C’mon Dave, you can do it!’ In fact,” says Rahn, I depended most on the climber only a couple of steps in front of me – puffing, stumbling, sweating, and groaning just like me¹

That’s how we persevere as disciples standing up for Christ in a world of opposition and need – it’s through the example and encouragement of fellow Christians, those who are striving alongside us in the same direction, toward the same goal.

The Apostle Paul wants to be that role model for us, standing alongside all the faithful disciples we read about in the Bible. And he wants us to look to each other as role models, as well.

In today’s New Testament lesson Paul gives us a pattern to follow in being a good role model to others, and in finding our own role models to follow. The first thing to know is getting where you’re going starts by knowing where you’ve been.

To reach Thessalonica, Paul had to walk a hundred miles all the way from Philippi, which took him three days and nights. As he arrives, he comes before a crowded assembly of Jews. He wants to share with them the good news of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Of course, some are open to it and some are not. Some have no interest in learning about this new faith called Christianity, no time in their busy lives to listen to what Paul has to say.

Well, we can relate to that. Not only is it hard to share the faith with others, but it’s often hard just to do the work of ministry. And of course, the ministry of this congregation is one of the ways we share the good news of Jesus Christ – through worship, Sunday school,

¹ Youth Specialties Web Site, Youthspecialties.com. Retrieved December 19, 2003.

LOGOS, Small Groups, fellowship gatherings, service and missions giving. It takes planning, perseverance and courage to be the church.

Looking at Paul's experience, we know that his calling was not easy as a follower of Christ. And knowing what Paul went through and how he kept going can help you to understand your calling, help you live into God's plan and purpose for your life.

There are four things Paul does in planting and nurturing the faith in Thessalonica, four things that can help us plant and nurture the faith here in Independence, among our family and friends, and even with the strangers you meet.

First, Paul takes stock of what he's been through so far, saying, "... Though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, ... we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.

What is it to share the faith with others amid a world of opposition, a world in which it's never the right time to talk about Jesus or your faith, a world in which most people don't care about church, a world in which serving the common good gets harder and harder every day?

It takes courage to continue being the church, to help people to encounter Jesus in who we are as a congregation and as individuals.

To encourage yourself in this, start by thinking back on all you've faced in life, all the struggles that nearly knocked you off the path, all the sacrifices you've made as a follower of Christ.

As Christians, we are to make choices – not for your own benefit or convenience – but for the Lord. Reviewing where you've been can give you strength and courage to get where you're going.

The second thing Paul does in living the faith despite any and all opposition is he discerns and declares who he is as a follower of Christ. The Thessalonians – like us – were used to people who couldn't be trusted, people who would lead them astray, people trying to trick them into betraying their own best interests, people with ulterior motives like the ones we encounter who make us and everyone so suspicious these days.

But Paul is not some untrustworthy leaders or unreliable influencers. No, Paul says, "... Our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery." In other words, Paul isn't going to just say what people want to hear. He's going to do the hard work of speaking the truth in love.

That's a lesson for us all. The best hope we have of bringing folks closer to God and more in line with Christ is to meet people where they are in life and guiding them forward based on our knowledge and love of God and our trust in Jesus.

The third thing Paul does after drawing courage and inspiration from what he's been through, after affirming who he's going to be moving forward, the third thing Paul does is he takes a stand for his faith. He says, "... We never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed, nor did we seek praise from mortals...."

The world is full of false flattery and feel-good temptations, but how often do they bring you to a place of true joy and peace? Rarely if ever.

When was the last time greed or the fear of scarcity had you make the right choice? Doesn't happen.

How many times have you missed the chance to guide or encourage someone, and then lived to regret it? Sometimes we need to be bold in saying the right thing, even if it means challenging someone to stretch and grow.

You'd be surprised how God can use you to help nurture others, when you look for opportunities to make choices based – not on worldly concerns – but rather on faith.

And that brings us to the fourth thing Paul does. He reflects the Lord in who he is as a Christian, Paul lets his actions speak for him. He says, "... We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children."

Paul is not shy about reminding the Thessalonians just how much he loves them, how much he has given of himself for their benefit.

The image of a nurse or a nanny is the strongest image of love there is. A nurse in this sense is someone who cares for the children of others. Just imagine how much more love that nurse shows in caring for her own children, as Paul says.

That's how much Paul cares about the Thessalonians – and us. "So deeply do we care for you," says Paul, "that we are determined to share with you – not only the gospel of God – but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

Mustering the courage needed for a ministry such as that, deciding for yourself who you are going to be as a follower of Christ, taking a stand for the faith in your daily life, and gently and lovingly leading others to grow closer to God – this is the example, the pathway that Paul lays out for us.

It takes each and every one of us to be the church, to create and nurture faith-based encounters, to guide and assist others along the way. That is what it is to share the faith, that is what it is to come alongside others in faith, as Paul did, sharing in the challenges and blessings of Christian ministry. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, we who bear Christ's name make up a unique kind of family. We are not bound together by relationships that get charted on family trees. We cannot be identified by the family features of personality or physical appearance. We have not ever lived with one another in the closeness that is a family's greatest hope.

And yet, we are family nonetheless, and for that we offer our grateful praise. We pray for those in our church family experiencing struggles, and especially those with health issues and those we name in our hearts.

We give thanks for the faith that binds us together, for the spiritual heritage that has its roots in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We give thanks for the sharing of a commitment to do your will, for the striving to act in love, which serves as our identifying feature.

We give thanks for having in common a home in your creation *and* your eternal realm, for having a sense that all humanity is one family in your eyes. In our companionship with one another as brothers and sisters, we pray in Jesus' name, joining in the prayer that he taught us:

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.