

## **That Awkward Sunday**

Psalm 25:1-10  
I Thessalonians 3:9-13

When I accepted my first call to serve as an Associate Pastor at a church in suburban St. Louis, I was initially told I would not preach. The Senior Pastor preached each of the 48 Sundays per year he was around. The other Associate Pastor, above me in the food chain, got all four of the remaining Sundays. There was no room for me in the pulpit. Young and cocky (the Christian Educator nicknamed me “Flash”), I tried negotiating for at least one Sunday a year. As it happened, the other Associate did not love preaching, so I got one of his four. I got the Sunday between Christmas and New Years, when attendance was roughly half of the usual. By the time I left that church five years later, I had gotten one more Sunday per year: Father's Day, when attendance was roughly two-thirds of the usual. I got the awkward Sundays.

Today is one of those awkward, “low Sundays”. The Sunday after Thanksgiving, usually also the first Sunday in Advent, generally sees a drop in attendance. We want to have the joyful spirit appropriate for the season but find it hard to make it happen when we are short-staffed, so to speak. Our bodies have yet to process all that tryptophan from our Thanksgiving turkeys and we feel a bit sluggish. We accept that Christmas Muzak started playing somewhere back there near Halloween, but we do not yet really feel the Christmas spirit. Psalm 25 gives us a template for how to address this situation. As so many Psalms do, this hymn takes the form of a prayer for

deliverance from personal enemies. King David wrote it, without question. We know from Samuel I and II he had a lot of personal enemies. He lifts up his soul to the Lord because he has learned, the hard way, that no other remedy for the spiritual weariness he feels will have any real effectiveness.

“O my God, in thee I trust, let me not be put to shame,” David continues. Trust is a surprisingly big word. That same historical record in the Samuels tells of intrigue, manipulation and even murder at the royal court of Israel. David has seen he can trust only a very few. As for the rest? “Let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.” Yet he finds spiritual strength by turning to the Lord. “Make me to know your paths,” he writes, and, “Lead me in thy truth.” “Be mindful of thy mercy, O Lord, and of thy steadfast love.” “Remember not the sins of my youth.” All of this leads to the climax of Psalm 25: “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and righteousness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.” Those who obey God's will and heed God's word will find healing, healing for their bodies and souls. When we feel low, these words have the power to restore us to spiritual health.

Two weeks ago a deacon and I took communion to an elderly member of this congregation. I always enjoy the intimacy of home communion visits. And they clearly mean a great deal to those who can no longer come here to receive the sacrament. But I must admit I especially look forward to visiting this particular woman. She has lost her eyesight and has had to deal with serious illness, for both herself and her family. Yet her faith and spirit have grown. She still writes original poems each year to

include in her Christmas cards. Last week, she recited this year's for us from memory. She has often quoted Bible passages, some quite long. Oh, did I mention she is 98 years old? (She would not mind my saying so, as she proudly told us at least twice.) On one of our visits she recited Psalm 25:6: "Be mindful of thy mercy, O Lord, and of thy steadfast love, for they have been from of old." I always leave her presence feeling an upsurge in my spirit.

We cannot help but get worked over by the conflicts we experience, the disappointments, the vicissitudes of our relationships, the physical ailments. Over time, these can burn us out and make us bitter. The woman we visited this week has no place else to turn for help. She has no strength—beyond the impressive strength of her mind—no physical capability. Her family had supported her through the years but even much of that was taken from her by the pandemic. She has only her spirit. It is more than enough. The lesson we can draw from her is that this path of the Lord is open to every one of us. But do not wait until waiting on the Lord is your only option. I have seminary friends who retired early, angry and washed out, because they got caught up in trying to please the people in their churches, not pleasing the Lord. Yes, trying to please both people and the Lord can line up in one path. Often, however, they do not. And like physicians who struggle to heal themselves, pastors also can be reluctant even to admit they need help. How about you? Are you turning to the Lord?

The Apostle Paul did not hesitate to admit his need for help. Almost all of his New Testament letters contain confessions of weakness of one form or another. Often

he writes of the “thorn in my side”, an undefined ailment that dogs him. Scholars have tried to decode the mystery, to discern exactly what he is talking about. Hypotheses include the aftereffects of a debilitating disease, like cholera or tuberculosis; internal conflict in the churches he has founded; or even that he is secretly gay. We just don't know. In a way, not knowing what Paul's thorn in the side is helps us. No matter what pierces our sides, we can find strength in the Lord just as David and Paul do.

The context of Paul's words in I Thessalonians 3 opens our eyes to their full impact on those who received this letter. The Oxford Study Bible calls this section “Paul's affection for the Thessalonians”. He has just finished rehearsing what he has been up to. Some years before he had come through Thessalonica, founding there the second Christian church on European soil. After helping that congregation get on its feet he had gone on to repeat the process in Athens and Corinth. While in Athens he sent Timothy back to check on the brothers and sisters in Thessalonica. Possibly while in Corinth he writes this letter to them. Timothy has returned to Paul, bearing “good news of your faith and love, and “report(ing) that you always remember us kindly” (a reference to their constant prayers for Paul).

Now Paul turns to a thanksgiving theme. He tells the Thessalonians that his constant prayers for them have become a kind of thank offering to God. He adds that he has two petitions to the Lord regarding them. He wants to return physically to them, and he wants to “supply what is lacking in your faith.” This may sound like a veiled criticism. Do they so lack faith that Paul must come to address the situation

personally? No, the syntax of his writing in Greek makes it clear that he respects and, frankly, adores them. The positive tone of I Thessalonians leads scholars to call it the Happy Letter. He simply feels called to develop the faith of all Christians. Yet a second back story, more context, lurks beneath the surface. Though Paul's letter makes everything sound like sunshine and roses, in fact the Christians in Thessalonica face severe persecution.

When Paul established the church there, the local Jewish synagogue rose up against it. Enraged that anyone could possibly believe that hick from the sticks Jesus was the Messiah, they had rioted and appealed to the Roman authorities to eliminate the Christians. The threat to Paul's life became so grave several men had to lower him over the city wall in the dark of night in a basket in order to make his escape. The Thessalonian Christians are manifesting love and faith in the face of treatment we cannot imagine. But our fellow followers of Jesus in other parts of today's world can. Christians with any means in Nigeria employ bodyguards to escort their sons and daughters to school in order to discourage their kidnapping into slavery. Christians in China must somehow navigate the constantly changing restrictions imposed on them by the Party. Christians in Ecuador often have to pay exorbitant bribes to the drug cartels in order to be left alone. Christians in many New Jersey school districts must fight the majority population of Orthodox Jews, who have developed the strategy of voting each other onto the school boards—though none of their children attend public schools—and defunding those schools to the bone in order to lower property taxes.

It may be that our lives of relative spiritual ease have given us a sense of complacency. Perhaps we have had it so good we have forgotten how and where to ask for help. Paul echoes David with his remedy: “may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all people.” Remember, not all the people in the Thessalonians love those Christians. Yet, “may (Jesus) establish your hearts unblamable in holiness...” Turn to the Lord and allow your faith and love to grow. The best definition for burn-out I have ever encountered came from church consultant Lyle Schaller, who wrote, “Burn out is all of the responsibility with none of the fun.” Though they may deny it, there are few here in this room right now who are burned out. I do not blame you. I simply want to offer you the path to healing: turn to the Lord.

To those who feel if they won't do it, it won't get done, turn to the Lord. Pray that God would raise up other servants to take up the slack. Observe a minor sabbath, a time away from responsibility. You can always come back to the work. And here is a remarkable thing about churches: if something truly valuable appears about not to get done, somebody will do it. Other ways to turn to the Lord include letting yourself worship Jesus Christ with greater abandon (singing louder, laughing more, etc.); holding strictly to a daily quiet time—no matter what seems incredibly pressing; and just hanging out with each other.

Turn to the Lord to find healing. Healing for your body, mind and soul. Turn to the Lord to abound in love. Love for God, love for each other, love for the world, even love for yourself.