

Remembering Before God

I Thessalonians 1:1-10 October 5, 2008

This first letter to the people of Thessalonica was one of the earliest letters Paul wrote to the initial communities of faith he had a hand in establishing. He had first gone to Thessalonica several years prior with another early church leader, Silas. They shared about Christ in the local synagogue.

Now, when Paul went into a community one of two things was sure to happen – either a revival or a riot would break out. Actually, most of the time, whichever happened first, the other would not be far behind. As a result of Paul and Silas’ preaching many Jews and Gentiles became followers of Christ. Yep, a riot resulted.

In the 17th chapter of the book of Acts we hear what the synagogue leaders were purported to have shared with the local community leaders: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them; and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” Talk about a reputation! “These men who have turned the world upside down ...” Talk about influential! Paul and Silas were regarded by the religious and secular leaders of that day as men who were making a profound difference.

Now, Thessalonica was a fairly large city at the tip of the Aegean Sea. It had about 200,000 residents. The early Christians in the community underwent some pretty severe persecution after Paul and Silas left them. Paul wasn’t exactly a welcome presence in the town. And so, as a result, Paul sent Timothy to the area to see how things were going. And, oh what news Timothy had to share! Timothy reported to Paul that the Thessalonians were truly being faithful – that their influence in the community was growing – that new followers were being added.

As a result, Paul wrote them a letter to praise them and to encourage them. He could hardly contain his enthusiasm for all that they had done! Early in the letter he told them of the outpouring of his prayers of thanksgiving – of his always remembering them in his prayers.

Paul offered up prayers for the people of Thessalonica constantly, regularly, always because he was thankful for the influence they were having on behalf of Jesus Christ and the message he had proclaimed among them about Jesus. As I read the passage a few weeks ago I began to wonder about the people who have influenced others on their walk of faith – who have, as a result of their faithfulness, caused us to get turned on to wanting to live a faithful life.

Carveth Mitchell told in his book No Silent Saints of a woman who came up to him following a worship service one Sunday and said: “You probably don’t remember me because the last time you saw me I was in bed.” Mitchell noted that it wasn’t probably the way he would have chosen her to start the conversation and he did look hesitantly around to see if anyone was listening. She continued by reminding him of a time she was in the hospital and he visited one of his members in the next bed. She said: “I have not been a church-goer to any great extent. Oh, I believe in God, but I was pretty vague about it all. I was having surgery in the morning, so I was fearful, anxious, and discouraged. When I started to cry, Mary (the member of Mitchell’s church) said, ‘I’m just getting ready to read my Bible and have you in my prayers. Maybe you would like to join me.’

“When we were finished,” she said, “she told me a little about what Jesus meant to her, and how her prayers and Bible reading and church friends gave her strength and courage. I knew then I had been missing something.

I've thought about it – yes, and prayed about it, but I'm not very good at that yet. Mary invited me to church. She's waiting for me now. I want you to help me find a faith like hers."¹

There once was a woman by the name of Dranafice. She was also known as Rose. She was a poor woman. She lived in Albania. Rose and her husband made it their practice to open their home to the poor and hungry of their community. Whenever one of their daughters asked who the visitor was at the family table, Rose would answer that it was a relative. Rose's daughters grew up believing that they had a really big extended family.

Rose continued the practice even after her husband died and the family became even poorer. Somehow Rose found a way to give food to those who were hungry and needed help in her community. One of Rose's daughters was especially influenced by her mother's sacrificial love. Are you ready for Paul Harvey's rest of the story finish? The daughter's name was Agnes. She grew up to an advocate for the poor. She devoted her life to caring for those in need. Agnes grew up to be known around the world as Mother Teresa. Talk about lives of influence – Rose influenced Teresa and will we ever know the number of people Mother Teresa has influenced?²

Paul and Margaret Brand were known for their work in India among the people with leprosy. Paul was an orthopedic surgeon and Margaret was an ophthalmologist. Sadan was the name of one of their patients. He was a "miniature version of Gandhi." He knew the rejection of being a leper. His life had been full of being made fun of, kicked, and turned away from even hospitals. Sadan said: "I can still remember when Dr. Brand took my infected, ulcerated feet in his hands...Dr. Brand and his wife were the first medical workers who dared to touch me."

After numerous operations including tendon transfers, nerve stripping, toe amputations, cataract removal, listen to what Sadan had to say about his life: "I must say that I am happy that I had this disease. Apart from leprosy, I would have been a normal man with a normal family, chasing wealth and a higher position in society. I would never have known such wonderful people as Dr. Paul and Dr. Margaret, and I would never have known the God who lives in them."³

People influence others to try the faith because of the way they let Christ live through them. Paul praised the Thessalonians for such influential living. It is how children grow into being responsible adults and it is how people come to have faith in the living Christ.

A young mother of ten children with another one on the way was having a particularly hectic day because one of her little ones simply wouldn't leave her alone. She wasn't able to get even her routine chores done because every place she went and everything she tried to do, three-year-old Len was on her heels. She was constantly tripping over him. Several times during the day she suggested that he go do something else, like play on the swing set.

He would innocently smile and say after every suggestion: "Oh, that's all right, mommy, I'd rather be in here with you."

Finally, she lost her patience and after again insisting he go outside and play with the others, she asked him why he was acting the way he was. And he looked up at her with those sweet green eyes of his and said, "Well, mommy, in primary my teacher told me to walk in Jesus' footsteps. But I can't see (Jesus), so I'm walking in yours."⁴

Paul prayed constantly for those Thessalonians who had so faithfully imitated Christ in their daily living. St. Paul praised them for their being the kinds of examples that caused others to become believers. Before they were imitators of Christ, they had been idol worshipers. They were imitators of Christ at the same time they were being persecuted. There was nothing phony about their lifestyles – about their deeds of kindness. Their story was a compelling story and people came to the faith as a result of them.

Today is World Communion Sunday – a day when we remember our oneness in Christ with Christians around the world. It's also the first day of our *My Hands Are Christ's Hands Stewardship Campaign: The Seasons of Our Giving*. Our stewardship campaigns have in recent years been a time when we have called one another into a time of recommitting ourselves to supporting the ministries of Maple Grove with our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service – the four elements of our membership vows which each one of us affirmed would be the case when we joined the church. Today we think about the importance of our praying for the church to be all it can be.

As we prepare to reaffirm our commitments to pray for the ministries of the church, I invite us to think for a few moments about those who have brought us to this place – to think about those for whom we need to give thanks to God for their faithful witness of Christ's presence in their lives. We are a remembering community – a remembering before God community. It is because of those who have gone before us that we are who we are today – some in other communities and some in this community. It is because of their offering their prayers on our behalf – because of their sacrificing to provide this space so that we might worship and learn and get ourselves prepared to be deployed into the world – it is because of their influence/example/modeling that we are here today.

Friends, we need to be those who imitate for those who come after us – those who are in need of a reason to be a follower of Jesus – and, I would suggest to you that we need to pray for one another – pray for the ministries of Maple Grove – in order for us to be ready to make the sacrifices it is going to take for us to be faithful and to provide the resources that will open the doors for the next generation of faithful followers of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Prayer is remembering before God those who have gone before, those who have had an influence on our lives, and the vital ministry of Maple Grove so that we might be all we can be for God and with God. I invite you to join me in making prayer a vital part of our faith journey in the coming year?

Let us pray.

1. Carveth P. Mitchell, No Silent Saints (Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 16-17 as quoted in Raymond Gibson, Jr.'s "Genuine Imitations," Forever in Debt (Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), 0-89536-461-1.
2. Kay D. Rizzo, "Teresa's Mother," Signs of the Times, May, 1998, p. 14 as quoted in King Duncan's "Setting an Example," Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
3. James Townsend, Peloubet's Sunday School Notes 1993-1994 (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Pub. Co., 1990) as quoted in "Setting an Example."
4. David Dalton. As told to JoEllen Johnson, "In His Mother's Footsteps," Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Patty Aubery, Nancy Mitchell, Chicken Soup For the Christian Soul (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc., 1997) as quoted in "Setting an Example."