

“Encourage Each Other”
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Sermon #77
23rd Sunday After Pentecost
35th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
11.8.20

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 CEB

13 Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won't mourn like others who don't have any hope. **14** Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus. **15** What we are saying is a message from the Lord: we who are alive and still around at the Lord's coming definitely won't go ahead of those who have died. **16** This is because the Lord himself will come down from heaven with the signal of a shout by the head angel and a blast on God's trumpet. First, those who are dead in Christ will rise. **17** Then, we who are living and still around will be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet with the Lord in

the air. That way we will always be with the Lord. **18** So encourage each other with these words.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

While poring over the commentaries on today's scripture, I found something interesting. Beverly Roberts Gaventa shares a story on how she and her family would regularly receive mail for someone else¹. They never met the person whose mail they would be mistakenly given. Yet, they could tell you some things about that person: Name, college, general area of her profession, and

¹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa. *First and Second Thessalonians*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998. p.2.

political leanings. Gaventa even goes further to say that the person living at the other address was thoughtful because she left the mail she mistakenly received at Gaventa's backdoor.

No conversation. No contact. No other methods of investigating. Simply the mail delivered to the wrong person.

It's the same thing with the letters in the New Testament. Every time we read the epistles, we must remember that they were meant as letters. They have a context. Like 1 Thessalonians, they shed light on situations surrounding particular people. They weren't thought of at the time as being eventually included in one massive book we call the Bible.

This is a letter by Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. Thessalonica is primarily Gentile and there are believers in the God of Israel and in

God's son, Jesus. Early on in the letter in 1:9, Paul gives thanks to God for those who turned from idols and turned to God.

Thessalonica is under Roman rule, though still a Greek city, and is a major port city in the Roman Empire. The city is the capital of the province of Macedonia. There are different deities honored in Thessalonica, including Greek and Egyptian gods as well as Roman. So, in the midst of religious diversity, Christianity would be thought of as one option among many.

Now, today's words from chapter four are startling, no doubt. They speak of those who have died, the LORD coming down from heaven, God's trumpet, shouts, people who have died in Christ will rise, and the living being taken up to meet the LORD in the air.

These verses, according to another commentator, have been the focus of many interpreters.² People tend to focus on Paul's words instead of what Paul is saying. 4:13-18 are treated as if they are telling us what exactly is going to happen at the end of time instead of what Paul is trying to do as the pastor to the Church in Thessalonica: Comfort those who are mourning the deaths of their loved ones. Paul is not offering us the plan of how things will exactly go down at the end when the LORD returns. Paul "is offering consolation to members of the community" whose loved ones have died before Jesus Christ's promised coming.³

Between living in the shadow of an evil empire where there are many options of gods to worship, it makes sense that Paul is offering encouraging words. These converts were raised to believe one thing about death and here is Paul sharing a word of hope with

² Linda McKinnish Bridges. *1&2 Thessalonians*. Macon: Smyth & Hellwys Publishing, Inc., 2008. P. 117-9

³ *ibid.*

them. These Christians live in a place where there are various views and beliefs on life, death, and what happens after death. It's no wonder the Thessalonians are in need of some encouragement.

After encouraging words from Paul about living lives that please God such as abstaining from sexual misconduct, being honest with all people, and honoring their bodies as temples, Paul begins the new section on death. The Thessalonian Christians are concerned because their loved ones died before Jesus' return and they aren't sure that they will see them again.

So, a reminder on what's surrounding this letter: The Gentile Christians live in a city dominated by Rome, though the city still identifies as Greek, there are plenty of gods to choose from, people demonstrate lifestyles that do not honor their bodies as living

temples, and because Jesus hasn't returned Christians are scared that they will not see their loved ones again.

That has to be unsettling. So much uncertainty is thrown into the mix of a frightened people. But, Paul assures them: You will see your loved ones again.

Last week, a friend of mine and I were texting each other and we finally got to the phone to chat. She is a dear friend of mine who is one of two people in this world still living whom I consider to be a mom to me. We were talking about grief, especially as we approach the holidays in the midst of a pandemic and a bitter election. And let's be honest, even for those of us who have been without loved ones for a time, this pandemic WILL make the holidays tough. There is no getting around it. It is our reality, but our reality is not without hope.

My friend continued in our conversation on many things to consider, but one thing is this: Never say “I understand how you feel” to a grieving person because you don’t. What the person feels is their own and they are allowed to have those feelings because they are the authority on their grief journey.

I imagine that the people in Thessalonica heard many responses to the deaths of their loved ones by others who were well meaning, whether they were Christian or not. But, Paul gives the congregation AND us some words of encouragement. Like the Thessalonians, there are different opinions surrounding us on what grieving looks like. Some say: Do this and you’ll be fine. Some say: Keep yourself busy. Some who grieve, unfortunately, become recluses.

Sometimes in grief, what works for someone else doesn't work for you. Sometimes, staying busy is not always the best approach. Sometimes you have to take some time and hang out at home alone eating your favorite snack while you watch some T.V.

That's part of what Paul is saying. He's ENCOURAGING these Christians. No where in today's passage is he giving them a blueprint of what to expect in their grief nor in Christ's return. He says "encourage each other in these words" not "do this and you will feel good".

But, what's most important for the congregations of the 1st century and the 21st century is this: We mourn with hope.

It's hard enough for these 1st century Christians who probably identify as Greek living under Roman occupation surrounded by

any deity they want and unhealthy lifestyles. Put all of that on top of the grief of their loved ones. No wonder Paul is offering a word of hope to the Thessalonians.

However Christ's return happens and whenever it happens, we go on our lives living a defiant hope. This hope defies human logic. This hope rests in no one except in our LORD and Savior Jesus Christ. And because of the power of the Holy Spirit, we can get up every day, put on our clothes and shoes, and face the tasks ahead.

Friends, there is grief surrounding us. It is a grief over loved ones who have died. It is a grief over a way of life that was before this pandemic. It is a grief over our country and world. It is a grief that yearns to be hugged but that may endanger someone's health. I'm here to tell you: You are not alone. You have my cell and office

numbers as they are posted on the bulletin and in the PollyPress every week.

Beloved, as we move forward by the Spirit's power, remember the hope that surrounds us every day. Remember the hope found in today's scripture. Remember the hope found in the life of our Savior. Remember the hope that permeates in every story of the Bible from Creation to a New Creation.

Be encouraged and believe this Good News!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.