

In the Meantime

Third Sunday of Advent † 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24
First United Methodist Church, Des Moines † December 11, 2011

Before any one of the Gospels was written – before any other book of our New Testament was written – Paul wrote the first of his two letters to the Thessalonians.

This letter is the earliest Christian writing we have.

This morning's reading comes near the end of the letter. It fits nicely into the readings assigned to us during Advent, with their emphasis on waiting and being ready.

Earlier in the letter, Paul tells the Christians at the church he started in Thessalonika in Greece to keep awake and be sober because the end of history – the return of Christ – will come “like a thief in the night.”

Then Paul pastorally addresses the inevitable question arising in this congregation: We know Christ is coming and will surprise us when he comes, so, Paul, how do we live in the meantime?

Not wasting a word, Paul offers three practices for the Thessalonians Christians to live faithfully in the meantime.

First, he urges them to live a life of unflinching gratitude. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...” By this, Paul means God reigns *now*, even before Christ returns. Nothing that happens in our lives is beyond God's reach. Nothing that happens in our lives is beyond God's concern. We rejoice always and give thanks always, not out of some mindless automatic optimism. This is not a prescription for positive thinking. We rejoice and give thanks always because we believe, by faith, that God never ceases to love us no matter what comes. We rejoice and give thanks because we believe, by faith, that God's love is the most powerful force in the cosmos.

Death cannot overcome it. Darkness cannot dim the light of God's love.

We rejoice and give thanks always because of our faith in God's steadfast love.

We pray unceasingly for the same reason. God cares about each of us, as Augustine wrote, as though each of us was the only person alive. The unlimited, abounding love God has for us invites us into conversation and relationship with God. We call that relationship and the conversation and adoration which it generates prayer.

We pray by simply loving God and being with God, so we can pray unceasingly by staying in God's presence.

Secondly, Paul urges the Christians at Thessalonika to live in the meantime by listening attentively and generously to one another. For that is what he means when he says, “Do not quench the Spirit.” In the meantime, we live expectantly, wide awake to the Spirit’s presence. We must listen to one another with focused and generous attention.

Most of the time, we don’t listen generously to one another. Before the person we are listening to is halfway through her thought, we have begun to construct an answer in our minds, which means we’ve stopped listening. We’ve quenched the Spirit.

Sometimes, we interrupt even before the person speaking to us has finished. To listen partially like that is both ungenerous and foolish. It quenches the Spirit, for it keeps us from listening attentively to everything others say. The Spirit may be speaking to us at the end of another’s thought. If we’ve stopped listening – or begun answering – we could miss the Spirit’s leading.

Finally, Paul suggests that we listen thoughtfully. We listen generously and *critically*. That is what Paul means by his terse advice: “test everything.” We must test what is said to us so that we are not seduced into abandoning the good and flirting with evil. “...hold fast to what is good; abstain from every evil.” If we fail to test everything, to listen thoughtfully, we may chose the expedient rather than the good. We may succumb to the temptation for short-term gain when the means to that gain strays from goodness and collaborates with evil. For Paul, that is a slippery slope from which we cannot extract ourselves.

Paul couldn’t be clearer. His prose couldn’t be crisper.

Here’s how to live in the meantime, waiting for Christ’s return:

1. Be unflinchingly grateful.
2. Listen attentively and generously.
3. Listen thoughtfully.

May we follow his wise and loving counsel – in the meantime.

In the name of the One God, Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.