

Be.Church.Now: Share.God.Now
I Thessalonians 2:1-8
October 11, 2020

Covid-19 has upended our world, leading us to change routines, abandon gatherings with loved ones, and set aside many activities that we hold dear. We have had the additional upheaval of fire and evacuations that have unsettled many. We are moving through anniversaries of fires of recent years. It is much to endure.

This is a sensitive time when many feel vulnerable. Hearts are hungry for love, for nurture, for a gentle caress. As we reflect on how God is calling us to be the church now, we have an opportunity to witness to our faith, to share God's love with those who are hurting. As United Methodists, one response to the grace we've experienced is witnessing to our faith. We display our love of God and share our experience of God's love in word and deed. This is one of the core values of First UMC, SR. We are the hands and feet of Christ and we witness through our welcome, inclusivity, and works of justice and compassion.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul and colleagues write of their approach in sharing the faith. Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus did not approach them abrasively or authoritatively to coerce or impose their beliefs and practices. The apostles met people where they were and gently persuaded them to receive the love and grace of God through Jesus Christ. Since the apostles' recent visit with these new followers, the Christians of Thessalonica have experienced pressure from neighbors because of their emerging beliefs and practices. This intimate letter is a gift of encouragement to remain faithful to Christ and to the Christian community under trying circumstances. Remember the call to love one another.

I'm not sure if it is United Methodists or Californians or just me, but evangelism, which means "good news," is typically not one of our strengths. We shy away from being very outspoken about our faith life, whether we fear rejection, insult or critique. It may help to recognize the difference between conversion and witness. God converts. We witness. God is the One who changes heart and nudges people toward declaring allegiance to God. The task of a witness is to impart an accurate understanding of the Christian faith. To witness is to inform people about our faith.

There are a variety of expressions of the Christian faith. Many people have been turned off by one expression or another, leading them to close the door to any other interpretation. If we find the door open even slightly, we might have an opportunity to inform them about our expression of Christianity, how it shapes our heart, our life, and our thinking.

This scripture speaks of three styles in which we might witness to the sacred gift of God's love. One way is through bold speech. In spite of opposition and insults, Paul and his colleagues courageously shared the good news of God. Protest is a matter of bold speech. The Protestant Church was born out of protest; it is part of our name. In the face of injustice, Christians boldly share that God is a God of justice. Today it is in line with the prophetic tradition to proclaim that Black lives matter to God and to us. In the face of racial injustice and blatant disregard, it is long overdue to grant Black persons the dignity that God grants to them as their birthright. Christians do so because the Bible tells us time and again that God has a

preference for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed. One way we witness is to be God's voice on behalf of those who suffer unjustly.

Personal integrity and character is another way of bearing witness to our faith. The apostles contrast themselves with those who operate out of falsehoods, impure motives, or greed. These types aim to please people whereas apostles aim to please God. Author David Brooks has recognized "a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me, from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe."ⁱ In our current culture and climate, it is refreshing to experience people who are honest, pure in motive, generous and selfless. This quality of character can speak volumes as a witness to a God of justice, equity, and community.

The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa hinged upon the character and integrity of one man: Nelson Mandela. In delicate and difficult negotiations with the apartheid regime, it was often Mandela's demand to press on and not to give up that made all the difference. The dismantling of apartheid was the outgrowth of the spiritual character of a person who was guided by a compelling moral vision.ⁱⁱ Character counts and is a powerful witness.

Another style of witness mentioned in the letter is tender self-giving. The image is a nurse tenderly caring for children, nurturing them to become strong, healthy, and confident. Loving care is a reflection of Christ's compassion. Although less public than a bold proclamation, acts of caring are a powerful expression of the divine love that motivates and moves us.

These days people are vulnerable, fatigued, and afraid. The weight of multiple challenges is wearing people down. People are in need of a listening ear, an encouraging word, a caring contact. A phone call, text, email, a front porch visit, or an outdoor rendezvous is a caring gesture of witness. One among us told of a friend in crisis who reached out, crying in distress. After a time of listening, sharing, and encouragement, spirits were lifted and the friend was grounded again, equipped to move forward. I know that you are reaching out to one another, to neighbors, friends, and others in ways that witness to the love of Jesus that lives in you.

I've often found that sometimes the most powerful witness we offer is our presence – just showing up and being there. Sometimes there are simply no words. Our presence is a powerful witness to the God who came to be one with us in Jesus Christ, the God who stands in solidarity with us in suffering and in ecstasy.

How are we gifted to witness to your faith and love of God this day? Who in our circles of concern needs to receive of our gifts imparting the love of God?

Our broken world needs our Christian witness, boldly proclaiming the justice demanded by God; living lives of personal integrity and character; and selflessly offering tender expressions of compassion and care. People yearn to taste the goodness of God. Let us be ambassadors of divine love.

Loving God, we give you thanks that you are always reaching out to us, aware of our needs, hurts, and hope, responding with concern and care. Your immense love is beyond our comprehension, and yet, we are grateful, O God. Thank you for caring, for loving us into wholeness, for healing our wounds and restoring hope.

We pray for our community in continuing distress. Enfold those who have been shaken and are fearful of the future. Encourage those who are still evacuated from home, waiting to return to familiar environs and routines. Guide those who wonder how they will carry on. Strengthen those who face the task of rebuilding. We give thanks for the caring support of this community, for those who mentor from their past experience and show others the way forward. Bless Sonoma, Napa, and Lake Counties with your presence of peace, clean air, and fortitude for the journey.

We lift our gratitude for health care worker, essential workers, first responders. Thank you for working through them to save lives, homes, and communities. We pray for their spiritual, emotional, and physical health and well-being as they continue to give without ceasing. Encourage students and teachers whose difficult year has become more difficult with unexpected disruptions.

We pray that you would guide us in embracing the opportunities set before us to reach out to those in need, to offer a healing presence. Lead us to go where you call us that we might show the way of love to others. Plant in us your passion for justice, so that we might use our voices, votes, and action to move closer to your reign on earth.

We pray for healing for all persons struggling with COVID-19, cancer, and other illnesses. Be a compassionate presence to persons hospitalized and feel the physical absence of friends and family. Inspire your people, O God, toward respect for human life and actions which embody that respect.

Reenergize your church for the living of these days. Prompt us toward innovation that invigorates the life of faith. Move with us into the future, passionate to share your love to a world in need.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught his disciples to pray....

ⁱ David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (Random House, New York: 2016), p. 6.

ⁱⁱ Miroslav Volf, "Power play," *Christian Century*, October 11, 2000, p. 1010.