

**“May the Lord Be With You Here”
1Thessalonians 3:6-12; Joshua 1:6-9**

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It has been said that Jesus came, proclaiming The Kingdom of God... And what we got was the church. I don't think this was a positive statement about the church. Instead of the heavens opening up and a terrifying battle of God crushing the evil empire and all the evil people, (and we know who they are), and all of them getting their just reward, we get... us, the church... ho hum.

Did God forgot to take the Organizational Behavior class? Did The Lord really leave kingdom building to vulnerable, tired, overworked, struggling, unreliable people like us?

Actually...this is the way Jesus worked from the very beginning. The Disciples never quite understood what Jesus was about. They were never faithful enough. When crunch time came, and trouble was near, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times. Thomas will not listen to stories of resurrection. “Doubting” Thomas is a good scientist; he had to put his hand in Jesus’ wound before he believed. The disciples were all *too* human.

Whatever the disciples did not understand, they did something that changed the world. They stayed together, they prayed, they spoke of what had happened, and in their community, the church was born in the holy land where Jesus lived and preached. Soon, by the power of the Holy Spirit, amid some theological struggle, these early followers of Jesus realized that the Gospel message was not just for the Jewish nation, but was intended for the whole world. And Paul was chosen to take the good news out there. Moving along the Aegean Sea, along what is now western Turkey, to Greece, Paul established Christian communities.

One of these communities, only a few months old, worried Paul a lot. He knew they were being persecuted and he desperately wondered how they were holding out. Most likely from Corinth, Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians, written sometime between 49 and 51 CE. That is-- within 20 years of the death and resurrection of our Lord, and approximately 20 years before the first Gospel was written-- this letter to the Thessalonians contains the first written words of the New Testament.

So, what great mysteries does this first New Testament document tell us?

Well, if you like conflict and theological warfare, this letter is almost boring. You might ask, are we missing something from this letter? Where are the impassioned pleas we hear Paul speak against the Galatians for going after false teachings? Where is the pleading we hear for the Corinthians to treat each other decently? It's not in this letter.

Paul had sent Timothy to check in on the Thessalonians, and Timothy came back with a report. As Paul writes this letter, we hear Timothy's report:

Timothy: “They miss you, Paul.”

Paul: “We [Paul and Silas] miss them too.”

Timothy: “They love you.”

Paul: “We love them too.”

Timothy: "When are you coming back?"

Paul: "We want to come back and visit."

It is almost quaint, gushing. It brings to mind an old-fashioned term, "pen pals," friends writing to one another, missing each other. Maybe that is mystery enough.

First as an intern, and now as Kelly and I end the formal role of youth coordinators, I'm not sure where my future lies. I hope to hang around for a while, but if I were Paul writing to Caldwell Presbyterian church, this is the kind of letter I would write, a letter full of love, full of gratefulness, full of joy and Thanksgiving. A letter to friends.

OK, so now that we are on touchy-feely, intimate terms I can, as Paul suggests to the Ephesians, "Speak the Truth in Love"...because as I say, our Scripture reading is from the first letter of the New Testament, but it is not the last word... So I would continue my letter by challenging you, challenging you to fully engage into the future of this church with your resources, with your time, and with your whole selves. (I've never preached an old-school, three point sermon, I'm not much of a linear thinker, but it's never too late to try.

Point 1

Come to worship--I know I'm preaching to the choir. But pass this along to anyone you think could hear this. I have been asked "Why should I come to worship? I don't feel comfortable. I don't like to give up my Sunday mornings. I believe in what this church does, but worship is not for me".... The simple answer is we come to worship to glorify God. As I have heard the choir sing, "Does anybody know what time it is?" You know the answer, "It's time to serve the Lord." Worship is the focal point of the church. Everything we do from the administration demands of operating the church, to pastoral care, to education, and mission and justice, all radiate from the worship service and our understanding of who God is and our gratitude for the gift of Jesus Christ.

Completing Jesus' great commandment to love God with all our heart, mind and soul, we also love our neighbor as ourselves... we come to worship for the neighbor sitting across the aisle, the one we don't know, the stranger, the newcomer, the one who is struggling with emotional or financial issues that we may never know, the neighbor for whom a smile, a friendly word, a good old fashioned Caldwell passing of the peace, may help them make it through the day and through the week.

Point 2

Engage in the life of the community-you are the body of Christ-----Don't make me demonstrate my vast theological understanding by dressing up like Paul and doing the hokey pokey like I did this past summer at a SNAC gathering. But really, you gotta put your whole body in [shake it all about]. Christ is present in our coming together, he invites all to participate in kingdom building. Christ calls us in our individuality, with our unique gifts and talents because the whole body is needed for the kingdom. There is a "Gift-o-Matic" online, created, not to plug you into a committee or try to pigeon hole you into "your place" in the church, but created to help you explore and reflect on your own gifts, and by talking to others in a workshop to help you discern where you might choose to serve. There are an amazing amount of activities going on in this church. Please, find a way to put your whole selves in and join those who are already shaking it all about-- and shake it up.

Point 3

Finally, Caldwell is blessed to need an Associate Pastor, and blessed to need building maintenance, and blessed to need a youth coordinator. I say blessed, because too many churches do not need more help. Too many churches are shrinking and trying to hold on to what they have. I say blessed because every aspect of the church will work better to achieve all that God is calling this church to be and do when an Associate Pastor is called. Again, I am probably preaching to the choir, but please turn in your 2018 Pledge Cards. The session has asked for a 15% pledge increase. What you give is a prayerful decision between you and God. But, **please, do pledge....**

Moving back to Paul's letter, in the 12th verse of our reading, Paul speaks of love using two words that we translate as "increase" and "abound." Let me give you a more literal translation of that verse, "Moreover, may the Lord make you have more than enough and exceed in overflowing love toward one another and toward all, even as we do to you." It is a kind of benediction.

What does a gushing, overflowing, unstoppable, boundless love look like? It looks like a Sunday morning with doors open and lights turned on – like old buildings that are maintained. It looks like Sunday school, like refreshments after church. That love looks like meals brought to others in times of need, it looks like people who clean up when everyone is gone, like rides given to friends. It looks like an insane Youth Lock-In where amazingly no one gets hurt making tons of soup. That love looks like precious time spent at meetings.

And as that love overflows into the streets of Charlotte where there have been more than 70 homicides this year, where affordable housing is an ongoing issue, where harassment and discrimination of every kind happen daily, that love looks like a presence and a voice that will not be silenced until justice rolls down like waters. And, finally.... that love looks like the table set before us.

This day, in particular, All Saints Sunday, we remember that we stand on the witness of all the saints who have come before us these two thousand years. Whether our faith is weak or strong, we come today with the good news that Jesus Christ – who knows each of us better than we know ourselves, who knows our strengths and weakness, who knows our faults and shortcomings – has chosen to have faith in us. Through the cross, He has given us the stewardship of His church.

So are the heavens opening up – sometimes it can feel like the heavens are opening up around here....

We are told in the Gospel of Luke that the Pharisees asked Jesus, "when is the kingdom of God coming" and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, [Luke 17:20-21] nor will it be said, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is in your midst."

Caldwell, Live into that Kingdom.

So I end my letter, and like Paul, I say, "Greet all the sisters and brothers with a holy kiss." I say like the children of Caldwell say every week, "May the Lord be with you here."

Amen