

November 10, 2019 | Journey worship service

THEME: Giving Thanks

TEXT: [1Thessalonians 5:1–11, 16–18](#)

TITLE: Stay Woke

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

Paul formed the church in Thessalonica, but at the writing of this letter he was no longer in their midst. Paul sent Timothy with instructions to strengthen the community, when his efforts to return to the converts there proved futile. Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians as follow-up instructions in line with his desire to form, mold and nurture the community. This Gentile community of Christians were considered countercultural in the Roman territory and culture and were most likely the recipients of hostility from unbelievers. Thus, Paul's letter was dispatched to strengthen their hearts and to encourage them to stand firm and persist in their new way of life against the external social influences.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is an apocalyptic message, one in which he assures them that they have already been recipients of God's grace through the death and resurrection of Christ, and there is yet more to come. So, it was important for them to not grow weary in well doing, to remain faithful to that which he had taught them and to the God who already claimed them, to remain vigilant in their devotion and worship, and to continue to love and nurture one another, in other words to stay woke—there is more to come. In his *Church Dogmatics* (IV.2, 66), Karl Barth states, "The first thing we have to say is that Christians are those who waken up. Christians need continually to be awakened, caught up in the movement of conversion, a continuous repentance, transformation and renewal." Barth goes on to state that "We cannot define Christians simply as those who are awake while the rest sleep but more cautiously as those constantly standing in need of awakening from sleep."

This constant need to be awakened indicates that we are to keep moving, not become static or complacent, self-satisfied, convinced that we have it all together. Despite Paul's assurance that the Thessalonians are not children of the night or of darkness, we cannot ever become self-assured of such. There are times when it's difficult for us to differentiate ourselves as being in the light versus darkness. These days, I give a lot of thought to colonizers who traveled to lands inhabited by people of color and thought it their God-ordained duty to destroy the culture, lives, and land of the people they encountered. They did this often as people who considered themselves to be spiritually and religiously woke, and yet they were conducting themselves as people who were in darkness, all in the name of Jesus.

Today, we operate in darkness when we fail to value others. When we turn our proverbial noses up at the person who has not achieved, or acquired as we have; when we turn our backs on people we think are gaming the system, or slackers; when we fail to stand with those who are being unjustly treated by the judicial system; when we are so heavenly bound that we are no longer any earthly good, it is then that we too are operating as children of darkness.

Paul's admonition to stay woke is a direct call to Christians, and echoes from Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he discovered the disciples sleeping instead of watching and waiting. We are admonished to not become dull or disinterested in the plight of others, to not be so comfortable that we become complacent and stagnant in our positions of power and authority, only seeking that which enriches ourselves without any consideration for others. We are people who are called to stay ever vigilant to the new move of God, the new things that are ushered in continually when we are in Christ Jesus, and to ensure that others are included and aware as well. Barth states, "The Christian community is awakened to and equipped with faith, hope, and love, powers that allow Christians to cross the threshold of our private existence and move out into the open. In the open light of day, Christians accept a public responsibility as they expose the powers and principalities of night and darkness and unmask the lie that all is peaceful and secure."

It is our personal, Christian responsibility to unmask the lie that all is peaceful and secure. It is our responsibility to secure the least of these among us. It is our responsibility to share out of our abundance. It is our responsibility to comfort the afflicted and disturbed and to afflict and disturb the comfortable. It is our responsibility to ensure that all people have the necessities and life. It is our responsibility to love and value neighbor as we love and value ourselves.

It was Paul's responsibility to secure the believers in Thessalonica, who believed in that which they could not see, feel, hear or touch, who were being ostracized and possibly mocked by others because of their faith and belief, and who may have grown weary as they anticipated Christ's return in their lifetime. Paul's message was one of perseverance and sustenance while they were waiting, and remains as such for us today. I don't know about you, but there are times when I grow weary. Weary with all the political upheaval and rhetoric, weary with all the suffering and violence, weary with the blatant racism that has been given permission to come out of hiding, weary with the financial and economic disparities that exist in our country, and weary with the justice system that seems to be for just us.

Paul's letter is relevant as long as Christians are in the world, and we live with anxiety, weariness and sometime doubt. Part and parcel to being woke is being real with ourselves and with God about who we are. I was talking with someone yesterday day who was bemoaning Christians that always act as if they have it all together, that their lives are "sinlessly" absolute, that the sun always shines on their side of the street and that they are ever faithful, smiling and living the good, Godly life. Well, I submit to you today, that one aspect of being a woke Christian is admitting that we don't have it all together, that sometimes uncertainty slips in, that our behavior doesn't always reflect who we are in Christ Jesus. We might as well be real, because God knows who we are, God created and claims us and sent Christ to redeem us, and Christ is indeed coming again.

So it is in the tension of being woke to that which is going on in the world, and who and who's we are, that we live in a time of already and not yet. Being woke we live in constant preparedness, realizing that the day of the Lord has already come to us through the faithfulness of and our calling in Jesus Christ. Being woke we recognize that when trouble and weariness come, it is the saving love of Jesus that will sustain us and allow us to engage in lives of love and service.

Paul tells the Thessalonians "to encourage one another and to build each other up, to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us." Paul's words are not a panacea. His admonishment is not a call to high praise without action that seeks to mitigate and work to undo that which is not of God in the world. God's call and will is for us to stay vigilant, to be faithful and fruitful, to be thankful and humble, and to wait and work. That's why we must stay woke serving and worshiping, to acting and to praising, for this is the will of God as we anticipate Christ coming again.

Amen