

July 25, 2021 | Summer Worship Service

TEXT: [1 Thessalonians 5:12–28](#)

TITLE: **First Words, Last Words: The Appeal of Faith**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I know nothing about Paul's stationery. Since I had no idea how big the paper was that Paul used to write to the church in Thessalonica, I did a little research into this topic. Most letters written back in the Greco-Roman world were short—between 100–200 words long. Most fit on one sheet of papyrus - something about the size of a piece of notebook paper. For his letters, Paul obviously needed more than one sheet of papyrus, because his shortest one (Philemon) had 335 words and his longest one (Romans) had over 7000 words. I mention this because in reading the last verses of 1 Thessalonians, it feels like Paul was running out of room on his papyrus. His sentences are short. He exhorts rather than explains, using lots of imperatives instead of full instructions. However, even if Paul was running out of room on his papyrus, he saved the best for last.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul expressed his love and gratitude to the faithful church community, telling them to keep doing the good works they've been doing while looking forward to the time of Jesus' return and the healing of the world. He knows they are a young church. They are having to learn how to balance being led by the Holy Spirit and how to be an institution of Christ's gospel—how to share the gospel with the world as well as how to be a literal church, meeting for regular times of fellowship and worship. In many ways, this tension is the focus of Paul's final words in this letter.

So he writes to them, "Be at peace among yourselves." That sounds pretty general, so Paul fleshes out this idea. *Admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all.* The word for "idlers" is a funny one. It doesn't mean people who are lazybones; it actually means people who are disruptive and disorderly. Think about a marching band. The idlers are the ones who march out of step, who keep veering off course and throwing off the others in the band. Every organization—every church has people in it who not only march to a different drummer, but who make it hard for everyone to stay on the parade route.

Let's continue this analogy. Paul also says to encourage the fainthearted – the shy flute players who keep their heads down, play too soft, and never fully join the group—and to help the weak—the skinny kid in the back struggling under the weight of the bass drum. The disrupter, the fainthearted and the weak: Paul doesn't want us to kick any of them out of the band. He literally says "*Be patient with all of them. Always seek to do good to all.*" The image here is not being the strict disciplinarian enforcing the rules, but rather being the one who stays behind after band practice to make sure everyone knows their part. It's like being the person who balances the bike for someone learning to ride without training wheels; being the one a friend struggling with addiction can call in a moment of weakness; being the one who encourages someone to get out of an abusive relationship; being the one who helps a friend sort through clothes or downsize a house after a beloved partner or spouse has died.

To be “patient with all” is not simply a bit of superficial faith advice. To do it well requires real commitment and spiritual strength. For us as a nation, it requires that we admit that our myths about America are not always true—that we are not a mixture of people, races and ethnicities that have all merged into one big family. As Daniel Moynihan pointed out almost 60 years ago, “the Melting Pot did not happen.”¹ We may move around this country and share a common language of fast food chains, sports team rivalries, and other cultural customs. But as critical race theory correctly points out, we have been shaped by our past—a past that includes institutional and individual racism, anti-immigrant, anti-black, anti-Native American policies; a past that has followed us into the present and still shapes our common lives today. That’s why Paul’s words are therapeutic—*be patient with all* - and transformative—*admonish, encourage, help the idlers, disrupters, fainthearted and weak in your midst*. And why should we do this? Because God has shown that same patience to us over and over again for all the same reasons.

The next cluster of verses focuses on goodness and gratitude. Paul squeezes onto the page a bunch of imperatives: *Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances*. Even as we continue to navigate this very long pandemic season, Paul’s words remind us to be of good cheer in every situation. A pastor recently wrote that she and her husband had hung a map of the world up on the kitchen wall and told one another, “Let’s throw a dart at the map and when we can travel again, we’ll take a vacation wherever the dart lands.” She was happy to report that they will soon be spending two weeks behind the refrigerator.

Face it: we can either spend all our energy bemoaning the disruption caused by the coronavirus or we can set aside time to reflect on what we’ve learned over the past year and a half including the many good things that have emerged. Yes, there have been losses and traumas, but we are not defined by them. We are defined by our identity in Christ Jesus who weeps with us, laughs with us, and abides with us. Near the end of his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul fleshes out this idea of Christian gratitude a bit more. He writes: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice...Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus* (Phil 4:4-6).

This is not something superficial—a “Don’t worry, be happy” bumper sticker. It is more like what the author Marilynne Robinson has called a “posture of grace.”² When faced with trials, we shouldn’t just shut down, angry at the bad luck that has befallen us. Rather we begin by humbly coming to God with a grateful heart for God’s many blessings over the years. Out of that posture—that posture of grace and gratitude—we then look at what is troubling us, what is broken in our world and our relationships. Then we are in a posture to decide what comes next—open to the leading of God’s Holy Spirit; committed to repaying no one evil for evil but holding fast to what is good. We combine a “posture of grace” with an “attitude of gratitude.” In that is peace. In that is comfort. In that is abiding faith.

Having written all these teachings and admonitions, Paul finally slips in his best word of encouragement. It's a little phrase that I hope you'll hold onto. I was reminded of it when I read how the well-known British theologian N.T. Wright told about being ordained several decades ago and receiving a number of cards and well-wishing letters for his special event. But the one that stuck with him was a simple note that quoted three Greek words—*Pistos ho kalon*—which means, “The One who calls you is faithful” (I Thessalonians 5:24).

That is a powerful reminder for us as individuals and as a church. Remember Paul is speaking to the whole group there in Thessalonica. He has explicitly told them to read this letter aloud—to discuss it as a group – to study it, open source its message, chew on it as they face the challenges before them. Yet as they do so, they are to hold onto the promise that “the One who calls you” —who called them together, who planted the mustard seed of faith in their hearts, who nurtured a “holy discomfort” with the troubles, racism, injustice, and problems of this world, who whispered in a still, small voice that they are beloved children of a merciful God—that One who calls us is faithful. Paul says this same thing in another letter of his, when he wrote *The One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ* (Phil 1:6).

Pistos ho kalon—The One who calls you is faithful. This idea is the true appeal of faith—in both senses of the word “appeal.” It is an appeal from Paul—an exhortation – like he said at the beginning of this passage: Respect those who labor among you, all the members of marching band, as it were. Be at peace, encourage, admonish, help as best you can by God's grace. But ultimately, living this way is the wonderful “appeal” of faith, the attraction that draws us to the gospel as a message of hope, as living water and life-giving bread. This is not the appeal of social media, with its Facebook fictions telling us that liking a certain post has a direct cause-and-effect bringing about positive change. That's just not true. At most it is like nodding our head in agreement when our friends say something we like, but in and of itself, nothing has changed – no sin is removed—no injustice is solved.

But if instead we allow ourselves to accept the appeal of the gospel, we become part of something bigger that does correct sin and challenge injustice and offer peace in a world besotted with guns, violence, and division. It's the appeal grounded on the belief that the One who calls us is faithful. We are to trust in Christ—the Lord of the church, the Mother of our global family, the Savior who intercedes for us individually and collectively. And no matter how much room Paul had on his papyrus sheet at that point, he knew he had to end with that message of hope. You are called and the one who calls you is ever faithful. Thanks be to God!

AMEN

¹ Quoted in “No Easy Answers,” Joe Klein's essay, *New York Times Book Review*, May 23, 2021, p. 16.

² Marilynne Robinson, *Home*, 2008, p. 45.