

Benzonia Congregational UCC  
November 7, 2010  
Pentecost 24 (C) Prop 27 All Saints  
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17  
"Hold on to Faith"  
Dan Furman

Faithful and Loving God,

We, your children, gather this day in this place to give thanks, to pray, to sing praises, to seek you, and to find peace. We come for many reasons, each important, each with a purpose. This day we yearn to draw closer to you, and toward your embrace. Strengthen our faith and guide us as we continue to make our way in this, Your world. We pray that the words that are spoken and the communion of our gathered thoughts, bring peace and glory to you, O God, for we believe that you are steadfast and transforming. Amen.

What a difference a week can make! Just last week, I was dressed up like the Skipper from Gilligan's Island, and I'd say about one third of the church was also dressed in wonderful costumes as we celebrated Halloween. And now here we are, prepared to celebrate communion, to recognize those who have been called to serve, and to remember friends and family no longer by our sides. How quickly time passes. How often do we find ourselves saying, "Just yesterday, just last year..." "I can't believe it's been 20 years..." "Where does the time go?"

This past Monday, we drove down to Grand Rapids to watch our 14 year old nephew play in a high school orchestra concert. Later that night, the family recognizing a significant growth spurt, pulled out a level and balanced it on my head and my nephew Andrew's head to see who was taller. It was close, but I still have a little on him. How did that happen? I can remember when he was just a couple feet tall!

How can it be that life changes so quickly? And how in the world are we supposed to keep up? Or keep things together? These are generational, and more than that, human questions.

The good news comes to us this morning from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians. The church of Thessalonica was the second church that Paul founded in the beginning of his travels after he left Jerusalem. The first church was at Philippi, and from there he travelled to the eastern Greek peninsula of Thessalonica; or what the Romans called Macedonia. Paul started a church of converts here, but soon after, the Jews in the area were offended by the "reinterpretation" of their Scriptures and they drove Paul out.

So Paul went on to Corinth to start a new church, one that we would hear much about in later years. While among the Corinthians, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how they were doing. Paul received word that they were not doing well. It turned out that they were anxious, that they were concerned because Paul had told them what Jesus had said, that he would be returning soon. The new church members thought Jesus was taking too long and wanted to know just **when** he would be returning. So Paul wrote the first letter back to them, reminding them of their gracious hospitality they gave him at his arrival. He reminded them to keep living the teachings of Christ as if Jesus were returning soon, and to support each other.

This letter from Paul seems to have satisfied them for a bit. They knew he had other churches to start, other congregations to pray for and consult with. And his words worked for a while. But without trying to sound too sacrilegious, the impact of the letter to me almost seems like the Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't worry, Be Happy." It's a catchy little tune that makes us feel good for a bit, but after a while, we realize it's just words and some notes. We need more to help us continue moving forward.

We hear this especially with the second letter written to the church of Thessalonica. Even though Biblical scholars are not convinced that Paul is the author of the second letter, it seems that there continues to be a lack of faith in the church; that they are wanting to put **everything** on hold until Jesus returns to fix all the problems. It seems that things were getting so hostile with the reality of persecutions, that some of the Thessalonians thought Jesus was returning imminently. And so we hear words from the author in today's reading that the Christians need not be alarmed. Rather, they should calm down and continue on with their daily Christian living.

The Thessalonians were in a bind. The Jewish apocalyptic Scriptures like Ezekiel and Daniel as well as other writings and prophets spoke of trials and tribulations as precursors to Christ's return. And with all that was happening in the world, Christians being martyred for their faith, Jesus being crucified, the Roman Empire dominating the world, there must have been more than a few who thought indeed it was the end of the world.

But the author of the second letter tries to console them, inviting them **not** to focus on the rebellion, **not** to focus on the signs, but instead to focus on **their righteous living** and to support each other in their common goals.

What a difference a couple millennia make. Though the circumstances have changed, there are many now, and indeed in every generation, there are those who point to what they consider to be signs: be they earthquakes, floods, political leaders, comets, or Scriptural references and think that the end is near. But this is not helpful. More often than not, becoming obsessed with signs leads to disappointment and discouragement. We are advised today from the ancient second letter, to also be vigilant, to be steadfast in our support of each other, and to focus on our Christian living, actions, and words.

But how long will these words help us? Does this still sound like "Don't worry, be happy?" If so, I feel this is pointing us toward a time to more closely direct our attention to faith, to what we believe, and even to our Savior. Now I know, we in the Congregational United Church of Christ don't often use the "Savior" language. We normally let our charismatic sisters and brothers use the term, but we are facing serious issues in our day and age. So let's begin with ourselves. How is your prayer life? Has it become routine? Has it dissipated lately? How about your Bible reading? How often do you read the Bible for devotions? If we only rely on once per week for prayer and Bible study, we can begin to see why stress, doubts, fear, and disappointment is beginning to eat away at us the further we move away from our faith. Do we believe that we can be saved from our stress, our doubts, our loneliness, or our fears?

Let's talk about our church. How are we doing spiritually as a congregation? We have been talking lately about the fiscal status of our church, our deficit, and we wonder about the future. We hear talk of low attendance in the Sunday school program, the youth program, and in our pews and we wonder about our future. And so I wonder, has money become our savior? Or has having more people or young families, become our savior, or what we yearn for to save us from the end? Do we have more than one savior? Or is Christ our savior? Is Christ our living faith and belief? For me, this no longer sounds like "Don't worry, be happy." This sounds like the building blocks of the return to a solid foundation.

Is it scary out there? Yes. Our society, even though the mid-term elections have passed, still seems to be rather divided politically. Our society continues to struggle with unemployment, lack of insurance, inequality, tensions in almost every sector. But to focus on signs and the end times is not helpful. What is helpful, is continuing to strengthen our faith, rededicating ourselves to our prayer life, rediscovering the treasure of wisdom and unconditional

love in the Bible, joining together in fellowship and supporting each other in our common loss and in our common joys.

What makes it hard for us, in our society, is that we are a people who have grown accustomed to fixing our own problems. But the problems we face in the church, and in our personal, spiritual lives do not have easy answers. If they did, we would all have written books by now, sharing our ideas with others, for a small fee. Instead, the answers for us have to do with obedience and discipline. And sometimes there are more questions than answers.

On this day, when we remember, when we give thanks, when we gather around a table, when we begin the process of thinking about what we can give to our church in 2011, let us also remember to hold on to our faith; and to rekindle the fire that once was strong within us. Do you remember a time when your faith took hold of your life, much like the billowing winds filling the sails of a ship and leading you forward? When we think of ourselves and our church, filled with the strong winds of the Spirit, it no longer matters what the numbers are on the line-items of the budget, or how many people of which age range are in the pews. What matters is that our faith is strong, and that we can depend on our faith in Christ, our teacher, our friend, and our savior. What matters is that we can support each other and move out into our community where we are needed, sharing the good news in a way that speaks to us. What matters is that we are no longer alarmed or alone, but that we are assured and inspired to serve as God calls us. Amen.