

“THE CHURCH’S WORK”

a sermon on Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19
November 13, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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A few weeks ago, when we were dealing with some of Jesus’ challenging parables, I mentioned to you my dad’s cynicism when it came to the story about paying those who arrived at the very end of the day just as much as those who had worked from sun up ‘til sundown . . . at least, in terms of what that meant about *tomorrow’s* workforce (which, of course, was not the point of the parable). Well today, with the possible exception of the Golden rule that was actually part of *last* Sunday’s Gospel reading, we come to what was probably Dad’s *favorite* Bible passage: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat,” or as it was paraphrased around my house for as long as I can remember, and applied to everything from daily chores to general social theory, “no workie, no eatie!”

And *unlike* the parable, the Apostle’s words aren’t some allegorical example or illustration. He was talking about able bodied members of the community being “unwilling” to do labor – as Paul and his own traveling companions did, so that they could pay for their own food in their travels.

That said, there *is* more to the saying. But it takes a little work to get there. First of all, the concept of “itinerate teachers and preachers” accepting the “hospitality” of those who were willing to open their homes to them was not only deeply ingrained in the ethos of that society, it was *also* the practice of *Jesus*, and, in his own words, that of Paul *himself*, in at least some places – most clearly and directly, in Philippi, where he specifically thanked that church for its “partnership” with him in “giving and receiving.”

So obviously, there was *something* going on in Thessalonica, or perhaps at the *time* at which this letter was written, that prompted Paul to take a different stance there, than elsewhere. And so then, perhaps we need to take a step back and consider Paul’s words about “work” and “labor” in the context of the whole letter, and consider this letter in the larger context of the Christian message and the church’s situation, as best we can surmise, at the time it was written.

Fortunately, the other readings for the day are helpful in that journey. Embedded in the ethos of the first Christians was not only the concept of hospitality, but also the notion that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God *finally*, after all the long centuries since the great prophets like Isaiah

had predicted it, was now “setting things right” – *restoring* the world to what it was intended to be when it was created – a place of plenty, a place where the world’s people lived together in peace and harmony, where, as Isaiah wrote, “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord.”

And Isaiah was talking, in those words, *specifically* about the City of Jerusalem – which subsequently, in the days of the prophets who came after him (most notably Jeremiah) – was overtaken, and then *destroyed*, but which then after the days of the Babylonian exile was *restored* . . . sort of. It wasn’t restored to its “former glory.” But it was restored to the best of the remnant’s ability given their limited resources and the fact that they were not a dominant power in the region, as Israel had been when David and Solomon built the *first* city, with its grand palace and temple.

And that’s where things stood in the days of Jesus of Nazareth. All was *ready*. Israel just needed God to send them the anointed one to conquer and restore the empire.

And so Luke records that after Jesus had entered Jerusalem triumphantly, and was *in that temple* teaching and preaching, some of those gathered were admiring the temple’s beauty. And Jesus launched into a sermon about how the temple would soon be *destroyed*, and his followers would be *persecuted*, and there would be *natural* disasters of all sorts, as well as *nations* at war with each other. And *even then* the end wouldn’t yet “be at hand.”

And he gives his disciples a warning. “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them . . . the end will not follow immediately.”

By Paul’s day – at least, *late* in his life – the Jewish rebellion, and Rome’s brutal response were well underway. Whether or not the temple had actually fallen by the time 2 Thessalonians was written (that happened in 70 A.D.), the city was again, as it had been on Old Testament times, under siege. And that had apparently led some to conclude that “the end” was at now *finally* hand. In the chapter before this morning’s reading, Paul writes: “As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as

though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way . . .”

That’s what was really going on in Thessalonica. Some in that day had apparently reached the conclusion that Jesus’ return was now so immanent that there was no need to keep “working” for a “living.”

Indeed, Princeton Seminary professor Beverly Gaventa argues that the word “idle” in verses 6 and 7 would be better translated “disorderly.” The Greek word appears only here in the New Testament. But it is used once in the Apocryphal book of Third Maccabees, where it is describing the conduct of young women who, along with many other faithful Jews, essentially *stormed* that same Temple when the Greek ruler of the time attempted to enter the holy of holies there – the most sacred place in the Temple, entered only by the high priest, and only once each year. As a result, basically, all hell broke out. And it says that “those women who had recently been arrayed for marriage abandoned the bridal chambers prepared for wedded union, and, neglecting proper modesty, in a *disorderly* rush flocked together in the city.”

That word translated in Maccabees “disorderly,” is the same Greek word that is translated “idle” in Thessalonians where it says, “For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not *idle* when we were with you.”

If that word, in fact, refers to acting in a “disorderly” way, then a very different picture begins to emerge. This isn’t just about people “not working.” It is about people *disrupting* work – good work . . . doing what Christians *ought* to be doing – which for Paul clearly included living as responsible citizens in their societies, going about the business of making a living, and then also preaching the Gospel, taking care of those in need, and generally, as Paul himself put it, not being “weary in well-doing.”

It’s been a challenging week in these United States. It shouldn’t come as any surprise that after the most divisive election cycle in at least my lifetime . . . and maybe in the nation’s entire history . . . we have ended up, well, divided. *Deeply* divided. *Some* of the rhetoric making the headlines and news broadcasts is actually pretty “apocalyptic” sounding – “this is the end of America as we know it,” sort of language. Riots in the streets.

We’re a long ways from the plight of late-First Century Christians, but still, we are living in a time of a pretty unknown and uncertain future, which begs the question of whether Paul’s words in Second Thessalonians might have some relevant meaning for us today, at this very moment in time.

And I think, in fact, there is. I think there is great *comfort* in Paul's approach of "life as usual," in the midst of *incredible* turmoil, by imploring the Thessalonians to essentially keep with the program – live peaceably with your neighbors, attend to the poor, do what is good and right.

In other words, people of faith have no reason to be fearful about the future – because we know that God is in charge, and God's plan is going to be accomplished in the end, no matter *what*.

That doesn't mean that political convictions don't matter, or that as Christians we shouldn't be engaged in the political, social, or economic debates of our day. But it means we should be able to engage in them as those who know where it is all headed – who know that God rules, and will prevail, and that the world is headed where God is (ultimately) taking it, whether at any particular moment in time that appears to be the case or not.

So work. Labor on. "Do not be weary in doing what is right." And to God be the Glory. Amen.