

## REPUTATION

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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The verses Barbara read a few moments ago from 1 Thessalonians are widely considered to be the earliest recorded writings of the Christian church. Before the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, before any of the other letters of Paul, the very first Christian writings were these words. Written to the nascent Christian community in Thessalonica, an Aegean seaport and capital city of the region of Macedonia, these words formed a letter of love and encouragement.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, [said Paul], constantly remembering... your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We owe our being here today in some way to the faith, love and hope of the Christians in Thessalonica. So, I am grateful for this letter, this first letter of Paul, which draws us back into the earliest *ekklesia*, the first gathering of Christians, even before Christianity became a distinct faith, when it was still thinking of itself as simply another sect within Judaism. The Thessalonian Christians made it their practice to read aloud Paul's letter whenever the *ekklesia* gathered and, in doing so, created a permanent relationship with his words and sowed the first seeds of a process that would eventually give us what we know as the New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians. He is thankful for their faith, love and hope, because they are beloved by God and chosen by God. Paul knows this to be true because the message of the Gospel which he brought to them was received in power. Their lives have been changed by that power, and the power comes not because of who they are, but because of who *God* is in and through them.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, Paul is not the only one who has noticed. "You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and further south in Achaia," Paul tells them. Others are talking about your faith, he says. Others have taken heart and courage from the way you have lived out your faith. The work of Jesus Christ has made a "qualitative distinction" in the lives of the Thessalonian believers; their routines have been transformed by the

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<sup>1</sup> I came to a better understanding of this text thanks to Tom Long and the January 2008 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Louisville. The sermon owes a debt to Long, to Tom Are, whose excellent paper on the text for that meeting provided so much rich material for thought and preaching, and to Paul Meyer, whose subsequent personal reflections on the text stirred the final direction of the sermon. This first paragraph draws on Are, citing Beverly Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians: Interpretation Commentary*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrasing Are.

decisive event of the coming of Jesus into the world.<sup>3</sup> And others have taken notice. They're talking about you all over Macedonia, Paul tells them.

In our culture we often think of faith as more of a private matter between an individual and God; we may indeed prefer such ways of thinking about faith to what seems to us the distorted and loud and angry public faith of some professed Christians in our land. We may prefer to speak of the faith of *this* church in terms of our ministries or our involvement in the community or the world. But Paul commends the Thessalonian Christians not for their deeds; he talks about their faith, their courage, their hope, their labor of love... and of the way they "received the word with joy." My pastor-friend Tom Are says that the faithfulness Paul commends in the Thessalonians is "not a condition or a one-time decision; it is a lifestyle, a daily walk that filters every decision and touches every relationship. It is a work, a labor, a life that can be carried only by a hope in the strongest of tomorrows."<sup>4</sup>

This week, my consideration of what made the Thessalonian congregation exemplary has set me to thinking about you ... about what people are saying about you. This congregation has a reputation around this country and this denomination, a fact which you may or may not know. Did you know that others have been talking about you?

At a Presbytery event last fall I was talking with an elder from a congregation in Queens who spoke of how much he admired and respected First Church's "welcome" statement, and the fact we actually lived out that statement instead of just saying it. He said that he had a gay son who had said this was the first church where he truly felt at home. I can count a half-dozen similar conversations in recent months with other people around the country.

They were talking about you – and specifically about one of you – in a courthouse in Brooklyn after watching you accompany a young immigrant through a maze of legal steps both to protect her safety and to help her navigate strange proceedings and a strange, new country. And they said, that church cares about immigrants and refugees. And what a wonderful thing that is to hear in these days.

They were talking about you in Cuba, talking about the friendship bond you have developed with the congregation in Taguasco, about the way you made visitors from that island nation feel welcomed on their visit here and how you graciously accepted their hospitality when you made a visit there. And they said, those people from First Presbyterian Church are serious about exploring what it means to be partners in Christ's Gospel.

They were talking about you at the Institute of Sacred Music up at Yale, as they were pondering potential candidates for our music director vacancy, and they said, that church has long had a passion for the music of the church. They spoke of Guilmant

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Smith, "The First Letter to the Thessalonians," *New Interpreter's Bible, XI*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2001, 689, as cited by Are.

<sup>4</sup> Are.

Organ School and the legacy of Robert Baker and Bill Entriken and the remarkable singers and musicians who have filled this house with splendor. And they said, that First Presbyterian Church will continue to thrive musically, because it has worship at its heart.

Your reputation was a topic of conversation in Santa Fe last month at the meeting of the Moveable Feast preaching group, as people noted the strength and reputation of this church in our denomination, and of how important it is to attract excellent leadership moving forward. They said, that church is a beacon of light, a faithfully progressive voice in the midst of a culture that seems to have lost its way. They need someone to continue to enhance and encourage its strength.

They are talking about you... not in Macedonia, of course, but in Queens and Brooklyn and Cuba and New Haven and Santa Fe and in other places where your reputation has spread. They are talking about you.

Now, most often in those times and places when they talk about you, they are talking about things you've done – your deeds, the outward manifestations of our life together. What is striking in reading 1 Thessalonians is how Paul says the reputation of the Thessalonian Christians grew because of their strong and unwavering faith. And it made me wonder... what would they be saying about your faith... about *our* faith?

Faith, remember, has not only personal, but public dimensions as well. For some faith communities it is manifest only by what they oppose, but for others by what they express positively about what they believe. If I were framing the public dimension of this congregation's faith, I would always speak of that more positive spirit. Maybe people see that in us. If they *are* talking about our *faith*, then here are five things I hope they are saying:

First, that we are a people whose worship of God is full of joy and gladness... that we sing and pray and lift up our hearts and voices with unself-conscious praise.

Second, that we are a people full of hope and confidence as we face the future, not so much because of our own strength and resources or out of any incurable optimism, but because we trust the endless provision of God and the promises we claim in Jesus Christ.

Third, that we are a people willing to engage in what Paul calls "the labor of love," extending compassion and kindness toward one another and toward all God's children, because we have known the extensive sacrificial love of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, that we are courageous, willing to take our confidence in God's love and God's best hopes for humankind into the public sphere to fight for justice and equity for all those normally pressed to the margins... that we do so because as students and servants of the Gospel of Jesus Christ we can do nothing less.

Finally, I hope they are saying that we are a people beloved by God and called by God ... and that our rich, personal and collective experience of such grace has, in remarkable ways, made *us* more gracious.

And, you know, they do. I have heard such expressions time and again. It is part of what drew me to you for this interim ministry. I am grateful beyond words to be able to serve a congregation with such a strong and good reputation. I hear the compliments everywhere I go. But I sometimes wonder if we know how fortunate we are, how much we have benefitted from God's abundant grace and goodness. I sometimes wonder what reputation this congregation has among its own members. I sometimes wonder if we realize the part we each have to play in cultivating and continuing to deserve that reputation.

So, let me ask a question – a question a good friend of ours used to ask his congregation, and one worth our pondering together.<sup>5</sup> The question is this: what if there were no First Presbyterian Church occupying this block on Fifth Avenue in the heart of Greenwich Village in the City of New York? What if this place were occupied by condos, perhaps, or another university building, or another group of stores or restaurants or bars? What would you miss? What would our neighbors miss? The late Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen once wrote about cities and churches, “A city without carefully protected empty spaces where one can sense the silence from which all words grow, and rest in the stillness from which all actions flow, such a city is in danger of losing its real center.”<sup>6</sup>

For one thing, this town would miss the stately architecture and lively history of a 300-plus-year-old congregation, which dedicated its first structure on this site in January of 1846.

Of course, this church's reputation and place in our hearts is more than a building. It is worship – lively and inspiring – and music that stirs our souls. It is the laughter of children in the Baby and Toddler worship or in the hallways of the nursery school, and the thoughtful faith of our members, who bring such gifts to our life together. It is the warm and welcoming conversation that greets us as we gather in this room on Sunday mornings, or at coffee in the lobby.

It's the countless men and women who come to this church in need of help, or a kind word, or a listening ear. And it's all those folks I mentioned earlier who depend on the work and witness of First Presbyterian Church.

If you think about it, the reach of this church is rather remarkable, given our size. It is truly a gift to so many of us and to so many others. *And it is worthy of our support.* I know, there are a lot of good programs and initiatives in this community also worthy of support. But here's the thing: unlike all those other organizations, for us, *you* are, *we* are

<sup>5</sup> Jon Walton asked this question in his sermon, “A Bountiful Harvest,” preached October 20, 2013, here at First Church.

<sup>6</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, Garden City, NY, Image Books, 1979, 38, as cited by Walton.

the only people who can make it possible for this church to fulfill its calling in the coming year. Unlike the museums, or the symphony, or the ballet, we have only the members of this church to ask for support. There is no wider audience of benefactors. There is no broad number of people beyond this congregation to whom we can appeal. There is just *you*. So, every one of you is important and essential to our continuing ability to thrive. Each one of us is responsible for our reputation. We must be as generous as we possibly can to support God's work through First Church.

Next Sunday, February 24, you will have a chance to respond. It is our Commitment Sunday. This past week we mailed stewardship information and a pledge card to every church household. We need every household – *every* household – to respond and to do so in a timely manner. It is that simple, and it is that important. We have a reputation, after all... one that is rooted in God's free grace, yet ironically one we must continue to earn.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> At the benediction, I asserted that the way we live out our faith is not to establish or maintain a reputation, but rather to give greater glory to God.