

You Are the Message

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10

“The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Gospel. The news of your faith in God is out. I don't even have to say anything anymore. You're the message! You are the message. That is the point of this sermon.

The Apostle Paul's earliest letter, the earliest one of which there is a copy in existence, was to the church in Thessalonica -- “the church of the Thessalonians in God”. This is a genuine “Paul” letter, certainly written by the apostle. It is probably the earliest New Testament document.

Paul was writing to a brand new church in the context of a brand new faith. Their example encourages Paul and the other believers. The good example of the Thessalonians is a result of their actions and their commitment.

The importance of deeds cannot be overemphasized. What we do reflects what we are. This was true for the Thessalonians. It is also true for the church of Crossroads.

Our actions reflect our vision which, in turn, reveals our identity and direction. Much of what we do are ministries. There is the Guatemalan ministry and the other mission trips our church members take. There is the Wayne St. partnership, a relationship we plan to continue wherever we find our church house.

We do programs at Crossroads Church. There is Sunday School with classes for all ages. We do youth and children's programs in addition to Sunday School. For adults, there are the Faith Dialogues and also other study and support groups. We work to put feet to our prayers.

We “do” by actively supporting members in their vocational ministry. Whatever you do with your lives, the church supports that. We support you in your family life and on your spiritual journey. We support you in the significant stages of your development. Such actions are important.

Action is important. Just as important, or perhaps more, is grace. This is the blessing of being, of faithfully growing, of discovering identity and calling and giftedness.

The apostle is telling us, in some sense, that just our being is a blessing. We're a new church. Our existence is a sign of hope in the idea of church. It is an affirmation of what church can be.

We are open and welcoming, modeling the inclusiveness of God's realm. In this, we represent a counter point to a lot of Christianity which sadly tends to be judgmental and exclusive. We are inclusive of various views: more liberal, yet we still have conservative voices. We are theologically diverse with some focusing on social justice, some on the prayer journey, and still others on cutting edge theology. We are blessed by each perspective.

Our worship tends to be fairly loud, but at times it is quiet and contemplative. It has a contemporary flavor, yet with an openness to classic expressions. We embrace new ideas and are wary of getting stuck in a rut, even while we affirm many traditional expressions

Crossroads is a new church. Our very existence encourages many Christians who feel caught between conflicting models of church – people seeking an authentic expression of being church and finding only some untenable options.

One option is the super churches embracing a business model of success. Too often, theirs is an emphasis on nickels and noses more than on faithfulness to the Gospel message.

There is also the fundamentalist option. Like Jesus' nemesis, the Pharisees, this way of being church gets caught up insisting on just one right way to interpret religion, as though there is ever just one right way for humans to interpret the divine. In this approach, believers are encouraged to close their minds to new knowledge from science and pretend that all we learn today, with our God-given minds, about the world and about the Bible doesn't change a thing about how we understand our faith.

Another option is that of new age amorphous spirituality, disconnected from religious tradition and scripture. At its extreme, this approach seeks novelty and good feelings more than faithfulness to the Gospel message.

Then, there is the church of secular religion. People choosing this option find themselves worshipping at the feet of science and technology.

The very existence of Crossroads Church, and other churches like us, is a sign of hope for the future of the Christian church. It also serves as a symbol of hope for many who have become estranged from Church or who have given up on Church. We represent a way for many to re-enter the story and to find connection to the past, connection to the community, direction and passion for the future.

We are the message: not exclusively and not uniquely, yet c. nonetheless unequivocally. What we do as a church is very important. Who we are and that we are may be more important. The challenge this body faces is to trust in the blessedness of our being and our existence – to trust the call of God for this community to be. The vision we clarify is important, but not as important as the vision we exemplify.

The world is becoming divided, according to many scholars, between fundamentalism and non-fundamentalism. This division is reflected in the contemporary controversy in theology: what we should believe. The depth of this division can be seen even more profoundly in terms of world view and people deal with fear and uncertainty.

Because you're here, your answer is not found in fundamentalism. Because you're here, you are looking for answers within the Christian faith, though not necessarily an orthodox interpretation of that faith. You are seeking a new Word from God.

Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong wrote a book titled *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. He keeps making that same point in his other writing as well. Much of what he has to say is compelling and suggests that Christianity, as interpreted in fundamentalism and in some more traditional ways, may be dying. As I look around, I see signs of it. In our faith, death leads to resurrection. For the church, death may lead to a new life of faith.

God's call to each of us as disciples is to die to the old self and be born to Spirit. Perhaps if the Church is willing to die – to let go of some familiar understandings and even some cherished understandings – it can be born anew in the Spirit and embrace new life.

This is a time in history of great change. The world needs a Christian church that reflects Jesus. The world needs a Christian Church that is born to new life in the Spirit. Let us accept God's invitation be that kind of church.

What is true for us as church is also true for us individually. How we live, what we do, is important because it reflects who we are. Some religions emphasize actions and behaviors to earn salvation at the last judgment. Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, emphasizes grace, but sees our actions and behaviors as reflecting an authentic relationship with God. One of the great truths of our faith is that God has made you and God has created us to be creators. Let us trust in the "blessed being" of our neighbors. Let us trust in the "blessed being" of ourselves. Let us trust that in this world you are the message.

"Give us a candle of the Spirit, God, as we go down into the deeps of our being. Show us the hidden things, the creatures of our dreams, the storehouse of forgotten memories and hurts. Take us down to the springs of our lives and tell us each our nature and our name. Give us freedom to grow so that we may become that self, the seed of which you planted in us at our making. Out of the depths we cry to you [Eternal] our God." Amen. (George Appleton, *One Man's Prayers*)