

The Urgency of Now
24th Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Welborne UMC ~ November 19, 2017
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When was the last time you were aware of feeling urgent about something? This week I felt an urgent need to get out of the car and away from traffic. It was Wednesday, which is a day I may a round trip from work to home to do some late afternoon driving as a parent. As I headed up I-95 from Welborne to my home in Hanover, I saw with dismay a multiple mile backup going the other direction. The other direction that I would need to turn around and drive back into in about 10 minutes. Gratefully, my navigation app, Waze, redirected me around that mess. But, when I found myself trying to return to Welborne about an hour later, I found myself on a backup on I-64, and then on Patterson, and then on Forest.....I was DONE and urgently wanted to be out of the car.

So, urgency is a feeling we might know, and our scripture for today is a nudge towards urgency when it comes to living our Christian lives. This piece of Paul's letter to the early church at Thessalonica is considered apocalyptic writing, and apocalyptic writing is all about giving us a sense of urgency. Apocalyptic writing is focused on the end times, or the second coming of Christ. Generally, this kind of writing encourages us to get ready and to be watchful, as Paul does here, because we do not know when Christ will return again.

Yet, Paul seems to be writing to a community that has lost its sense of urgency. After all, a long time—for them—has passed since Christ's resurrection. They have gotten complacent. Jesus died in 30-33 CE, and this letter is most likely written before the end of 52 CE. So roughly 20 years has passed since Christ died and was raised and it seems these early Christians have lost their urgency in Christian living. Paul reminds them that they are children of light, children of the day, and are called to live that way. Living as children of light calls us to practice our faith with urgency, now, because we must be ready when Christ comes.

If the folks who lived in Thessalonica had gotten complacent after waiting a couple of decades, what about us? We've waited a couple of millennia for Christ's kingdom to come in final glory. Have we lost a sense of urgency in Christian living? I am going to argue yes. We've gotten comfortable. Most of us are paying the bills. We tune into shows on TV that help us escape any hard realities of life—from Riverdale to Top Chef and House Hunters International. We can even DVR or stream them at our own convenience. We can build a wall to protect us from the moral urgency of a broken world quite easily. And heaven knows we've got a lot of brokenness from which we'd like to try and insulate ourselves. Has anyone besides me gotten in the habit of NOT watching the news? Not because I don't want to be informed but because my psyche can barely handle all of it, all of the urgency hurtling at me, urgency that causes me to ask questions like:

- How can we live in a culture where all kinds of men from Hollywood moguls to those who hold or wish to hold national office can't seem to grasp what it means to behave decently toward females?
- How can we live in a culture where 94% of Americans, according to a Quinnipiac poll this week, favor universal background checks, and our legislators are moving like snails on this issue?¹
- How can we live in a culture where the terror threat level being raised to yellow or orange is now something that hardly makes us blink?

Is it any wonder we are complacent, Apostle Paul? The only other option seems to be to get pelted by despair and continually ask, "how did we get here?"

And yet. And deep down inside, we know what Paul is saying. Following Jesus should mean that we act differently. Paul uses some contrasts here in our scripture—light and dark, night and day, sober and drunk. Jesus followers should be recognizable in our world. It should be obvious to those around us who is guiding our lives. And, sometimes it is not.

Twentieth century theologian Karl Barth argues that the challenge for those of us who get complacent and fail to stand out to the world as Christ followers is exactly what Paul talks about in this text—awakening. This awakening is a "not only the first moment of conversion but the entire life of discipleship, for Christians "need continually to be reawakened." Being continually reawakened entails, for Barth, being "caught up in the movement of conversion"—being set in motion."²

Urgency sets us in motion. It causes us to act. Are we urgent about the love of Jesus, church? If we are, then we will act. We don't have to act in publicity grabbing, headline inducing ways. We don't have to orchestrate a major revolution. In fact, it is the simple practices of living like we are aware of Jesus in our daily lives and in our community which will set us in motion.

Elaine Heath, Dean of the Divinity School at Duke University, suggests in her writing and speaking that the way for us to be urgent—without being overwhelmed by the broken world around us, is to adopt a contemplative stance as Christians, and become a contemplative church. Now, I know that when you hear the word contemplative, you may think of someone who spends their life alone, a nun or a monk, or a hermit. I want you to put away that idea—box it up and put it on a shelf. Elaine says that "To be a contemplative is to show up, pay attention, cooperate with God, and release the outcome."³

¹ <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2501>

² "Pastoral Commentary on 1 Thessolonians 5:1-11," *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011; p186.

³ Heath, E. A., & Duggins, L. (2014). *Missional. Monastic. Mainline.: A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Traditions*[Kindle iOS version]. Location 451

Do you hear that four-fold movement? Show up—be present in the world. Be present with the pain of the world. Then be attentive to how that makes you feel, and how it makes us feel as a people. Where are our hearts pulled, and our souls nudged? When we pay attention to that inner movement within us, then we cooperate with what God is already doing, and release the outcome. Let me unpack that second half of the movement, the outward part of the pattern.

Once we pay attention in our interior, and find our hearts broken, then we have to look around us and notice where God is already moving in our midst. You see, when we try to pretend that God's movement us up to us, when we try to pretend that we've got God in a box, and God is not at work in the world unless we open the box---well, friends, I am afraid the mere idea that we somehow decide what God is going to do is just plain false. God is always present in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our job is not to somehow unless the Spirit, but to pay attention to what the Spirit is already doing, and jump on board.

But once we are on board, we have to be willing to release the outcome. You see, the temptation is, once again, now that we are cooperating with God, now that WE are involved, then we get to determine the outcome. We have joined the God movement, and things are going to change! Again, what we find is that we will, most often, be surprised by what God is doing.

Back in 2014, we thought we were cooperating with God when the food pantry expansion began. Over the next few years we began to serve many more people, we created new space, we developed community partners. God was moving in a mighty way. And then we began to develop relationships and learn stories....stories not unlike our own, of shame and loss and fear. And we have begun to realize that perhaps the outcome God is moving toward is not at all feeding the community—perhaps the outcome is building relationships, building a community. So, as daunting as it is to us, the leadership of the pantry, including a Board newly formed this fall, have applied for several grants for funding to begin a new ministry called the Welborne Welcome Table. My vision for this ministry is that once a month we might gather as a great big family here at Welborne. We prepare a meal that can be prepared from items we stock in the pantry. We teach about healthy eating in a community which is plagued by heart disease, diabetes and other diet related illnesses. And then we share the table fellowship of Jesus as we conclude—the bread and the cup, broken and poured out for all of us.

That kind of outcome is not at all what I thought of back in 2014. But as I have paid attention, as we have paid attention, to what God is doing in the pantry ministry, this seems to be how God is inviting us to cooperate right now—to invest in forming relationships with one another at table, relationships which will shape the fabric of our community in new and life-giving ways.

This feel urgent to me. Maybe not chronologically urgent—it doesn't have to happen on a certain time frame. But building relationships across socioeconomic and ethnic lines in our neighborhood feels morally urgent. It seems like answering God's call to live generously, to

treat one another with justice, and to share love. John Wesley called this living with a holiness of heart and life. What he meant by that was that we needed our attentiveness to the Holy Spirit within us shape how we live beyond ourselves—how we connect to our world. And when we combine these things, we cannot help but belong to the day, as Paul urges, wearing faithfulness and love and hope.

But it will not be easy. Which is why Paul's final words urge us to encourage one another, to build each other up. That is why we need community, why we need to sing with joy together in worship, to share our worries and our fears with one another in smaller groups, to text notes of encouragement and strength to one another throughout the week. It is through encouraging one another that we will be able to keep on keeping on. It is through encouraging one another that the image of Christ we reflect will become more than just a passing thought, and instead become a constant portrait.

Brothers and sisters, let us be aware of how urgently the world needs us to reflect the image of Christ, to live as love-filled, grace-grounded people. And let us not merely be aware of that need, but let us respond to it, encouraging one another in life-long discipleship that transforms the world into a place of hope.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.