

2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13 “Compassion Fatigue” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/17/19

So I neglected to mention in our time of prayer concerns a sudden death of a beloved church member – this person is one of our church’s most valuable members and news of their passing is going to grieve you all, maybe it is the reason I subconsciously skipped over it as even us ministers don’t like to be the bearer of bad news anymore than you do. It is with deep sadness that I share with you about the sudden passing of “Someone Else.” Someone’s passing has created a huge vacancy here that will be difficult to fill. Else has been with us for many years, and for every one of those years, Someone did far more than the normal person’s share of the work. Whenever leadership was mentioned, this wonderful person was looked to for inspiration as well as results. People would readily pop up with “Oh Someone Else can work with that group. Wouldn’t Someone Else be a good fit for that position?” Whenever there was a job to do, a class to teach, or a meeting to attend, one name was on everyone’s lips, “Let Someone Else do it.” It was common knowledge that Someone Else was among the largest givers in the church. Whenever there was a financial need, everyone just assumed that Someone Else would make up the difference. Someone Else was a wonderful person, one who will be greatly missed in our community. Someone Else occasionally appeared superhuman, but one individual can only do so much. Truth be told, we all expected a lot of Someone Else, sometimes we expected too much. Now Someone Else is gone. We wonder what we are going to do. Someone Else left a wonderful example to follow, but who is going to follow it? Who is going to do the things Someone Else did? It will be hard to get used to our new normal. We can’t depend on Someone Else anymore – God rest their soul.

In honor of Someone Else’s death, we hear from the 2nd letter to Thessalonica written under Paul’s pseudonym. It is a very short letter sent to a church that is struggling because

they have heard rumors that Christ had either already come or was definitely returning in their lifetime. In their mind, this meant sitting back and holding out for that moment when they would strike it big. They were waiting for another great Someone Else, the Messiah, to return, reward them for their beliefs, and whisk them away from all their problems. It is like the car bumper sticker I saw this week which made me gag, "In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned." Paul probably would have gagged as well, being one who didn't like having his words taken out of context. Our scripture has often been misconstrued being used against all manner of welfare programs to make work a condition of assistance and aid, because nobody should get a free lunch. Just a few years ago, a congressman quoted this text to argue that if folks aren't willing to work, then they shouldn't be fed. I guess we can't blame him because if we take it at face value, we too might succumb to the belief that all the doors of soup kitchens and food banks should be closed. The problem is, as Someone Else understood quite well, this approach negates so many other scriptures while ignoring its context. This approach contradicts the prophet Isaiah's invitation in chapter 55 for everyone to "come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy, and eat." It forgets the words of God in Deuteronomy 15, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" It turns a blind eye to Jesus' own directions to his disciples at the feeding of the 5000, "You give them something to eat" as well as his words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Give to everyone who asks from you and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." It overlooks a common community thread over the ages – people need food and so how do we justly distribute it?

Someone Else might encourage us to look again at the context of the scripture, the drama of the times, to understand its implications. As I shared, those in the Thessalonica church were perfectly happy letting Someone Else contribute to the work of the community, because their job was to focus on the glories that lay ahead, the rapture to come. The same issue was addressed in the first letter to Thessalonica, chapter 5, but apparently it hadn't gotten resolved, so now the author doesn't mince words. He tells the responsible ones of the community, the Someone Elses if you will, to keep their distance from the slackers and tells the slackers to either get back to work or expect not to eat! The church couldn't afford to have folks who were perfectly able to work but weren't willing to help. It should be noted that this text in no way addresses those who were physically or emotionally unable to work. The New International Version tries to help pin down the problematic behavior by using both "idleness" and "disruptiveness" to help translate the one Greek word "ataktous." It comes close to gathering up all the concerns the author has in this matter. Fundamentally, he wants to ensure that no one takes advantage of the altruism of the Christian community, which ultimately undermines generosity as a trustworthy bond of life together.

We have all seen examples of such disruptive idleness. A colleague of mine tells a story of running into Joe, a homeless man with a sorrowful life story. He had not eaten in days. My friend was street smart enough to temper his desire to just hand Joe some money and instead, he offered to buy him a sandwich. "What would you like?" he asked Joe. "Roast beef? Cheese? With mayo?" "Sure, thanks" said Joe. It turned out to be a really good, large sub sandwich. The colleague felt he had done the right thing, until he heard Joe's voice behind him on the

street corner calling out to a passerby, “What will you give me for this great roast beef sandwich?” Disruptive idleness weighs heavily on those who are trying to do good.

In contrast, there is Doug who is present whenever we provide meals at the Hope Van. He too has a rough history, grew up as one of 13 kids, and continues to struggle with housing issues where available low-income housing is almost non-existent. But he faithfully comes and helps set up tables, passes out lunches, cleans up afterwards, and serves as a “spotter” keeping track of the clothes and toiletries so that all these things are justly distributed to those in need. On those days, he doesn’t seem to tire of doing good, no complaints, just willing service. Apparently, Doug has embraced the Someone Else within him who is alive and well. I don’t know whether we can all say the same.

Doug’s practice is one which is common in pilgrims of the Iona Community in Scotland and the Taizé community in France. They are given the opportunity to serve in the working life of the community. Jobs such as assisting in meal prep or tending a garden not only deepen appreciation of the ministry of that place, they also allow participants to join in communion with others whom they might not otherwise encounter. Opportunities to work are invitations into the inner workings of the Christian body, deepening relationships with others. Participating with and embracing others in the work helps to alleviate compassion fatigue, that is, a weariness towards doing good. All of us can grow tired of doing good but some of us slip into slacker status simply because we have taken on too much in the past. Interestingly, our text doesn’t identify the problematic people by economics, it doesn’t say they were poor, it just says they were idle, disruptive, busybodies. The author could easily be referring to a group of idle middle class or rich folks, with resources for doing good, but who spend their time

meddling, throwing their weight around because they can. In our society just like back then, doing things, or not doing things, simply because we can is a dangerous temptation. The workers in Thessalonica had a right to be fed by the church for their work, but that was not why they did it – they did it to set an example, something to imitate. To do anything because it is “my right” is disastrous to the well-being of a community and a nation.

Therefore, the author seeks to provide some encouragement for the good of all, so that mutual efforts are at work to do good. With an emphasis on decreasing chaotic behaviors, not on establishing or deconstructing social policies like welfare, the author sums it up by saying, “Do not be weary in doing what is right.” Somebody Else could have said it just as well: Do whatever you can, whenever you can, wherever you can, in whatever ways you can – even if you don’t have to. So today we give God thanks for a life well-lived; a life worthy of imitation. Yet that all-important question is still up in the air, “Who is going to do the things Someone Else did? Who is going to follow by example?” Could that be you? The very life of God’s community depends upon it.