

1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8 "First Aid for the Suffering" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/22/23

I'm pretty sure I've shared the following story with you before but some just bear repeating because of their relevance to the situation. A farmer is coming out of his field along the back roads of a remote area, when a speeding car comes zooming over the hilltop and hits his rig. The driver doesn't even notice he has hit anything as he speeds by. The farmer lays pinned under his wagon, his dog not far away, and his mule across the road in the other ditch. Not too long after, the sheriff pulls up and the farmer thinks, "Oh Thank God, the sheriff is here to help me." The sheriff surveys the situation at a glance and sees that the mule is suffering greatly with 2 broken legs. He pulls out his revolver and shoots it to end its suffering. He walks across the road and sees the dog is even worse off, struggling with every breath and would never make the painful journey to the vet. So he puts the dog out of his misery. Then he walks back over to the farmer and asks if he is in pain. The farmer responds, "Never felt better in my life!" It's the extreme example of what our society has become, and even worse, what the church has become. We are told as Christians to always be optimistic, cheerful and happy, no matter what difficulties life hands us. The prosperity gospel widely preached today is an example of this misinterpretation where we are told if we are optimistic in all things then we will be rich, not just in spirit, but in treasure and money. Never show your true colors, keep your pain hidden deep inside, don't air your dirty laundry as Grandma used to say, and then you will be a good Christian.

To this philosophy, Paul says "poppycock!" Even back in the first century, we find Paul addressing the need for authenticity and honesty within the faith community. First Thessalonians is the oldest letter in the New Testament canon. It overflows with warmth,

sincerity, gentleness, great love, and intimacy. Paul and friends have come to Thessalonica by way of Philippi where they were shamefully treated, having faced extreme opposition. This experience, however, doesn't dissuade them from continuing to spread the good news of God's love seen in Christ Jesus. Paul hangs out some of his dirty laundry regarding what he has endured in the past as a way to build bridges of trust to these new believers. By sharing what burdened his heart from Philippi, he is also distinguishing himself from those in the public eye called "Sophists." Sophists were traveling teachers that displayed their oratorical skills through public speeches, and sought to attract students who would pay for their instruction. They annoyed rabbis and students alike because they tricked people into paying for instruction and were rarely interested in the content or quality of their teachings – it was all about how well they could speak in public. Paul tries to differentiate himself from such folks as he notes that the encouragement he offers doesn't come from deceit, greed, trickery or impure motives. He doesn't come to receive praise or to please others, but out of a true desire to please God.

Can you imagine that? Someone living and sharing their story without regard for the approval of others. Being a people pleaser from the time I was 5 or 6, I have struggled with this for too long. I even get a pit in my stomach when my computer posts "Subscription Cancelled" across my Word documents warning that on Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2024, Word will be disabled if I don't take immediate action. I have 6 weeks to renew my subscription, but I'm already getting scolded by a laptop! Previous conflicts in relationships have made me cautious to express true feelings for fear of igniting a fire I'm not sure how to suppress. My recent seminar on Thriving in Ministry revealed some truths I had either forgotten about myself or conveniently covered up. I'm not unlike the characters in this scripture, faith leaders who have received harsh criticism or

the Thessalonians themselves who are in need of nurture and care. Maybe you see yourself somewhere here as well? Part of learning to thrive wherever you find yourself is learning to name and practice what promotes well-being over what does not. This faith community Paul writes to is in need of a gentle nurse who is concerned with the nurture and growth of its believers. Paul uses this maternal language several times in his letters out of an abundance of love for the people. Paul says he and Silas care so deeply for the Thessalonians that they give their very souls to support their maturing in Christ's ways. Paul explains he is trying to be like a maternal nurse who will provide nourishment, bandages, and healing to the wounded.

Robert Smith Jr. says this text represents a kind of "triage" first aid for those facing hostility and even persecution on account of their faith. It is good to be reminded when you face opposition that God is still in what you are experiencing and that opposition is not a sign that you have stepped "out of line" with God's will. Paul reminds his readers that they have not been abandoned in their trials and that others are watching their struggles with admiration, thus affirming the value of their resistance and perseverance that they are exhibiting. These are words that kept Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu motivated; they are words that support Rev. Dr. William Barber today in his march against poverty and injustice. Additionally, Paul uses what might be called "reminding language" which runs through much of Scripture. The festivals of Israel were grounded in remembrance so that Israel didn't forget who God is and how God acted, which in turn serves as present and future encouragement. Next time you listen to the stories of the conflict between Israel and Hamas, take note that much of Israel's history is connected to "reminding language," trying to remember who they are and what that means in today's world. Just like all of us humans,

sometimes they get it right and sometimes not so right. But as it always has been, reminding language inspires you to take risks, to test yourself, to push your limits, to color outside the lines, try new things, stand up for what you believe in, and accept the challenges before you. Embrace the words of this anonymous author: “To risk is to be called a fool; to weep is to risk appearing sentimental; to reach out to others is to risk being involved; to expose your feelings is to risk revealing your true self; to dream is to risk loss; to love is to risk not being loved in return; to live is to risk dying; to hope is to risk despair; to go forward in the face of overwhelming odds is to risk failure. But risk we must because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing, does nothing, feels nothing. One may, for the moment, avoid suffering and sorrow but he/she will not learn or love or change or grow. Only the person who risks is truly faithful.”

John Stamos, actor from Full House and Fuller House, also an attender of a Disciples of Christ church, Church of the Valley in Van Nuys, just finished his autobiography. Howard Stern’s assessment was this man had a very real story to tell. Stamos writes, “I saw a lot of deep, dark stuff. And I thought, ‘If I’m not 100% honest, then why am I doing this? But I’ve never been 100% honest before in my life. It wasn’t the way I was raised. My dad was like, ‘Don’t talk politics. Don’t talk about religion. Keep it light. Keep it surface-y. Be Dean Martin.’ And here I was for many years not seeing a clear picture because I was drinking and stuff, trying to fulfill someone else’s idea living vicariously through me. I felt it was my duty to be that guy. After 20 years now, I’m getting back to a fearlessness which allows me to risk being myself, my true self, without trying to please everybody else. It’s finally freeing.” What about you? May we all discover and practice what Paul is teaching here –first aid for the suffering.