Do Not Quench – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

The letter to the Thessalonians is believed to be the first letter Paul wrote that found its way into the canon of Scripture. Pastor and author Charles Swindoll has described chapter 5 as being especially appropriate…for sleepy Christians! The teachings about holy living and a life shaped by eternity are just as relevant for us today as they were for the believers in Thessalonica almost 2000 years ago. Relevant because we are called to live in relationship with God, but instead we plot and plan and flail forward as we see fit, expecting God to be on board. Or, we easily fall into spiritual inertia, the tendency to keep things the way they are because it’s easier than making a change. Our friend David Dobler likens this to “living as if there were no Holy Spirit.” But here we find advice, encouragement, instruction, correction and eternal hope to rouse us from our inertia and self-focus. So let me ask you: where are we sleepy? Where are the places in our lives where this inertia has settled? Where are we holding back, reluctant to share our Hope; staying in our familiar patterns and comfort zones instead of branching out? Where are we *quenching the Spirit?*

A few years back there was a bucket placed just outside the front door of the old clinic, and these words had been painted on the side: *Do not kick.* (I’ll give you a minute to think about that.) With that same idea in mind, imagine the Holy Spirit appearing before you, wearing a T-shirt. On the shirt are words that say, *Do Not Quench*.

While you chew on that, chew on this: Do you ever wonder what life would look like if we allowed the Holy Spirit to operate unquenched, to fully work and flourish in and through us? I do! What would that look like for you…for me…for our congregation?

One of the practices we follow in our denomination is to annually answer a series of questions that help us review and evaluate the life of our church, to identify places that need attention and celebrate places of growth and vitality. Some of you should recall participating in this as a congregation a couple of years ago. At last December’s session meeting we reflected on the Holy Spirit question, which is: 1. *How has the Holy Spirit been evident in your congregation in the past year; through conversions, growth in the fruit of the Spirit, or other transformational experiences that make disciples of Jesus Christ? How is the Spirit of God changing and transforming people in our congregation? Imagine a spiritual awakening among a youth group, or a new powerful movement toward mission, or a surprising visit by the Holy Spirit in a retreat setting or particular ministry: these may give us examples that help us discern where the Holy Spirit is on the move. There may be years when we don’t see much. That should be shared and prayed about as well.*

Of course, the obvious – and exciting – evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit has been through our mission connection with the work Carol and Steve are doing in Malawi, which has raised our awareness of needs they are supporting and kindled a desire in us to partner with them. Members throughout the church family have enthusiastically come together to share time, talents and resources. Apart from that, this was a hard question to answer. I hope and pray that the Spirit is on the move and changing and transforming individuals, but as a congregation, it is hard to gauge. Maybe we are too shy to be open and vulnerable to each other. Maybe inertia has set in. Maybe we are sleepy. I’m not sharing this to be critical, but to be hopeful, that the Holy Spirit is working to convict and renew us.

Our passage today is not unlike the questions that the session answers each year, for these verses go right to the basics of our life together.

* In verses 12 and 13 Paul is asking the church to have a proper attitude of respect and appreciation toward workers within the community. On Sundays when Ryan is away, I know I appreciate him a lot more! It stands to reason that good leaders need good followers. The Message translation says, “And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you along in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love!
* In verses 14 and 15 Paul is urging the whole community to actively care for those who are struggling. Some are undisciplined, some are easily discouraged, some are weak. They need us to lovingly and patiently encourage and uphold them, to act for their good, because their good is that of the whole body of Christ, the good of all.
* In verses 16 through 18 Paul’s instruction changes from advising to commanding, in what some have called the “Standing orders of the Church”—Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. He is not talking about feelings that can’t be commanded or controlled, but *behaviors* that call us to a life of joy, prayer and gratitude. The charge to pray continually reminds me of Ryan’s installation service and the charge he was given by Rev. Bob Carter. Bob told of a story he had read, where the characters were allowed to go back in time and deliver advice to their younger selves, a message that the older self knew would be a helpful guide to the younger self. But there was a catch— the two selves could not speak to each other. Instead, the older self could only deliver the message in writing, and could only use two words. So the characters needed to carefully consider how to deliver a meaningful message in two words. One of the characters held up a sign with this advice for the younger self: Pray Continually!
* Verses 19 through 22 are further commands regarding the use of spiritual gifts in worship. Whereas the Corinthians were liberal and undisciplined with their use of gifts in worship, the Thessalonians seem to be on the other end of the spectrum, suppressing the use of the gifts, prompting Paul’s command: do not quench the Spirit. However, use judgment, hold on to the good, reject the evil. While Paul is primarily addressing quenching the Spirit in a worship setting, I think we can apply his command to all areas of our lives.
* Verses 23 and 24 culminate with a prayer that both invokes God’s protection, and promises the community of God’s faithfulness. One of the commentators described it as a “prayer-wish”: a prayer couched in the optative mood (which is the language of the strong wish or desire) rather than in the imperative mood. Paul is confident that what he has asked will be done, for God is the one who calls, and the one who is faithful. There is our part, too, to yield the whole human self—body, mind and spirit—to God; but we can’t do this without God’s assistance; it is always backed up by the faithfulness of God.

How faithful is God the Father? In a sermon on Psalm 139 Eugene Peterson writes, “The central item in the religious life isn’t my knowledge of God but his knowledge of me. Not my faltering search for God but his search for me. God’s aggressive search for us and his exhaustive knowledge of us have resulted in an existence in which there is no place we can go where God is absent. We can take the Bible out of the hotel room, take prayer from the schoolroom, take the Ten Commandments out of the courtroom, and we haven’t diminished his presence in any of those places. We can take his name off the coins, and he is no less a present reality than before. We can deny him, we can curse him, we can ignore him, and he is still intimately acquainted with all our ways, still tenderly holding us in his love, still faithfully extending his mercy to us, and still generously offering us his grace.”

How faithful is God the Son? In Margaret Feinberg’s study guide, “Pursuing God’s Beauty” (p56), she observes how Jesus takes the initiative to pursue those he loves, such as when he sought out his disciples, calling them to follow him, and when he encountered the woman at the well, who, though in plain sight, thought she was hiding. Though we do have our evasive moves—standing perfectly still, moving excessively fast, or diverting attention elsewhere—God sees and exposes us. The exposure is always an invitation to healing, restoration, and wholeness. As we sang earlier:

*Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God;*

*He, to rescue me from danger, bought me with his precious blood.*

How faithful is God the Spirit? The world tries to fill our lives with distractions. It’s like the “vog” we experienced on our trip to Hawaii. The Kilauea volcano emits a steady plume of smoke and ash, creating a smoky haze, a layer of vog that often settles over Kona. It reminded me that the world has its own emissions of evil and lies. Sometimes it’s hard to go the right way. Again, as we sang earlier:

*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;*

*Here’s my heart, O take and seal it; seal it for thy courts above!*

The Good News, is that the Holy Spirit dwells within us! At times we may falter, we may live as if there were no Holy Spirit. And yet, he is at work, prompting, leading, encouraging us to do our part and follow the signs: to respect others, to help those who struggle, to be patient and kind, to rejoice always, to pray continually, to give thanks in all circumstances; to hold on to what is good, to welcome the work of the Spirit, and so much more available to us through his Word and this community.

In light of that, how should we live? My prayer-wish is that we live with wide-awake, wholehearted devotion, pursuing the One who faithfully calls us and who will come again.

Come, O Holy Spirit,

Come as Holy fire and burn in us,

Come as Holy Wind and cleanse us within,

Come as Holy Light and lead us in the darkness,

Come as Holy Truth and dispel our ignorance,

Come as Holy Power and enable our weakness,

Come as Holy Life and dwell in us.

Convict us, convert us, consecrate us,

Until we are set free from the service of ourselves,

To be your servants to the world. Amen.