

“Witness of the Saints” GPPC 11-5-17
Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

The Personnel Committee of the Thessalonian church means business. With everything else going on, it has the Apostle Paul and his assistants, Silvanus and Timothy, write up a year-end report, a self-evaluation of their ministry with that congregation.

And you’ll be pleased to know that using the most sophisticated methods, this *very* morning we’ve been able to hack into their report and we read part of it to you now.

Paul writes, “You remember our labor and our toil, brothers and sisters. We worked night and day (without payment) so that we wouldn’t be a burden on any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You and God are witnesses, how pure, upright, and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. We dealt with you like a father with his children, urging, encouraging, even pleading that you lead a life worthy of God who calls you into God’s own kingdom and glory.”

So looking back over their time ministering with the Thessalonian church, Paul does not look at the ground and mumble, “Aw shucks! It

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was nothing.” No. It sounds as though Paul gives himself and his helpers an A+, doesn’t it? We might have expected that he would list at least a few “areas for self-improvement,” “growing edges,” or even, heaven forbid, “weaknesses.” And he doesn’t do that.

But, of course, this is *not* a self-evaluation for a personnel committee. It’s something else. What is Paul talking about? What is he actually doing here in this section of his letter?

In one chapter in his fine book, *The Road to Character*, New York Times columnist David Brooks tells about the life of George C. Marshall. Marshall was born and grew up in the little coal-mining town of Uniontown, Pennsylvania. Eventually he would grow up to become the Chief of Staff for the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II, a Nobel Prize winner, and U.S. Secretary of State.

So we might imagine that Marshall was a precocious child, dazzling people with his quick responses and easy learning. But not so. As he said of his time in elementary and secondary school, “I did not like school. The truth is I was not even a poor student. I was simply not a student, and my academic record was a sad affair.”

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Yet Marshall wanted to follow in his elder brother's footsteps and go to VMI, the Virginia Military Institute. And when he overheard his elder brother telling his mother that he should *not* be allowed to go because he might "disgrace the family name" Marshall decided then and there that he would prove his elder brother wrong.

He managed to get into VMI (though as Brooks points out, there is no record of his actually taking the entrance exam, and once enrolled he did not suddenly become a great student.) But in even more important ways Marshall flourished at the school, because of the culture and community he found there.

Brooks says, "VMI had a moral culture that brought together several ancient traditions: a chivalric devotion to service and courtesy, a stoic commitment to emotional self-control, and a classical devotion to honor." VMI placed great emphasis on learning about what Brooks calls "the great paragons of history, Pericles, Augustus, Judah Maccabee, George Washington, Joan of Arc, Dolley Madison..."

And Brooks quotes James Davison Hunter who said character requires "a conviction of a truth made sacred, abiding as an authoritative

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presence within consciousness and life, reinforced by habits institutionalized within a moral community. Character, therefore, resists expedience; it defies hasty acquisition.” At VMI Marshall’s character was developed over time by a moral culture and in a community of commitment, accountability, and honor. As he put it later on, “What I learned at VMI was self-control, discipline, so that it was ground in.”

(David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 105-111.)

When the Apostle Paul describes his time with the Thessalonian church he’s not bragging for a self-evaluation. Instead, he is proclaiming the sacred truth, “the gospel of God.” And he is describing the culture and community of the church “ground in.”

Paul says, “You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.” In other words, Christian ministry is not about getting rich. It’s not about ostentatious wealth or about arrogant behavior. Christian ministry is a call to be modest about who we are. Living simply and sharing generously. This is the example Paul and company leave us.

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And, says Paul, “You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless was our conduct toward you believers...we dealt with each of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

Now maybe Paul’s description is a bit idealized. Surely he, Silvanus, and Timothy had their “off” moments or even “off” days when they weren’t utterly pure, upright, and blameless. We can assume they were not perfect. Yet they are still heroes in our faith.

So what Paul is doing is painting in broad strokes the general culture and community of the church that shapes Christian character. The church forms Christians with the ability to discern and live a life worthy of God. It isn’t easy, and it doesn’t happen overnight. But over time, in a moral community and culture, God develops in Christians what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit”--“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

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And God also develops within the church the ability to recognize and stand against the dominant culture not only of the Roman Empire but every empire with its unquestioned cruelty, unfettered scramble for power and prestige, and rampant idolatry.

So Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy were kind but firm, gentle yet strong, “like a father with his children,” “like a mother with her children” urging, encouraging, prodding the Thessalonians to “lead a life worthy of God.” And that goes for us too.

The church is a school for the soul. The saints who’ve gone before us are our companions and fellow teachers. The martyrs who’ve died because of their faithful obedience to Christ shake us from our flimsy excuses and move us to awe and action. And Jesus, our divine teacher, Instructor over all, Lord and Savior, not only calls us to a life worthy of God but demonstrates and empowers us for that life, forgives us when we fail, and picks us up to try again.

We notice in the news how gangs, and terrorists at home and abroad, try to recruit American young people to their cause. They look for young folks who may be lonely, who feel disconnected,

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unsuccessful, and unloved. And they promise to fill that vacuum with the false and evil community of a gang or a terrorist group. How wonderful would it be instead if Sunday School and youth groups and children's groups and worship were *overflowing* with our young people? And how marvelous is it when our children and youth gather (along with adults), as some of them did yesterday afternoon, to be with Muslim children and youth, to kick a soccer ball, throw a Frisbee, share a holy meal, build understanding, focusing upon shared values and love? We learn the gospel of God by repetition over months and years.

So we come in here week after week, some of us with children in tow, not for entertainment but for faith formation. We know that God—not sports, not recreation, not our own wants and desires—God is the most important subject in the universe. So we keep coming in here for worship and study and fellowship and service with the church so that a life worthy of God is “ground in” to each of us and “ground in” to the children we’ve promised to nurture as followers of Christ. As Tony Campolo put it, “People are defined by their commitments.”

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Committed followers of Christ built this church about 70 years ago, and committed followers of Christ continue the witness of the saints. What will people say about our commitment in a few years? Even more important, what will God say?

Praise God for the saints' "ground in" faith. And praise God for our own opportunity to grow and serve as well. May God give us "ground in" faith, the witness of the saints. In the name of God—Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal