

There is hope for us all!

2 Thessalonians 1:1-14, 11-12

Paul gives thanks for the people of Thessalonica because he witnessed a real growth in their faith. He has seen how they remain faithful in the face of persecution and afflictions. They have found a way to care for and love one another. Being a part of a faith community gives us an alternative way of being in the world. Christ calls us to challenge practices in this world that exclude and harm others. Like Jesus, our mission is also to seek out and save the lost. We are called to seek justice in the face of oppression. We are called to reach out and share what we have with others to ensure that all people in the world are cared for and loved. This call is not easy for there is so much brokenness in our world. How do we, like the Thessalonians, stay faithful? How do we remain faithful in the face of persecution?

Luckily for us we have been given practices that can provide us with strength and with courage. In September we talked about the importance of daily prayer; how important it is for us to pray because it helps to remind us of what is important. It helps us to reach out to God, for God does provide us with courage strength and peace in the face of challenges. Then in October we talked about the importance of weekly worship; the opportunity to come together as a faith community to praise God, to give thanks, to share our joys and sorrows with one another in a safe place where we truly are forgiven, and truly loved for who we are right now.

This month, as I introduced to the children, we will take time to explore how reading the Bible can also be a source of strength comfort and wisdom. It is said in 'A Song of Faith', one of our United Church creedal statements:

“We are called together by Christ as a community of broken, but hopeful believers, loving what he loved, living what he taught and striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and place.”

The Bible is a wealth of knowledge upon which our faith is based. In the United Church we do not look at the scriptures as the literal word of God, but within the Bible there is truth, there is wisdom and there is great experience. The scripture is the living word of our journey passed on from generation to generation to guide and inspire; that we might wrestle holy revelation of our time and place from the human experience and cultural assumptions of another era. Which

means we read the Bible in the context of history, sociology, ecology, economy. We need to keep those lenses in mind as we do.

Throughout history people of faith have sometimes been led astray, taken the wrong path, got lost and stumbled. Though we make mistakes we trust in God's unconditional love and we hold onto the hope of what is to come. Our faith, the truths and teaching of the bible, our experiences and our trust in God is what helps to transform us and the world in which we live. The stories of our ancestors, our friends and people of faith inspire us to look at things differently; to change some of our past practices that have ended up harming people; to choose differently and to be aware and mindful of how our actions also affect others. Both scriptures we heard today remind us there is always hope for us. Know that none of us are perfect and we're not going to get it right the first time or the 20th time.

The story of Zacchaeus is great because it shows us this directly. Zacchaeus as it was said was a tax collector. All tax collectors at the time of Jesus were very wealthy. They purchased the right to collect taxes and profit from them. He was very wealthy and as a story points out he was also short in stature. Zacchaeus was known for colluding with the Romans, for taking advantage of others and making a profit. For some reason on this day Zacchaeus just had to see this man named Jesus said he had heard so much about. As I mentioned he was short and most likely the crowd didn't like him and probably wouldn't want him to be around and didn't do him any favours and probably blocked his view on purpose. So, he was forced to climb a tree; he climbed a tree in order to see Jesus. He showed great eagerness by doing this; earnestness in fact, and in that moment with the crowd of people, Zacchaeus was not thinking about himself. He was truly focused on Jesus. And then, by some miracle Jesus not only sees him, but invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house for dinner and to stay. This doesn't make either of them very popular. The people grumbled. Why would Jesus choose him he's, a sinner, he's not worthy, what about us?

Honestly this is a huge breach in etiquette on Jesus' part. He again demonstrated to the people that he really had a reputation for a reason because he often associated with the outsiders and the sinners. This is probably the perspective of the bystanders. I'm sure that we too have been like those bystanders where we feel that we deserve the opportunity because we have been faithful, but Jesus was holding true to his mission of seeking out the lost and saving them Zacchaeus was so moved by Jesus choosing to spend time with him that he instantly repents and changes his ways, offering without being asked to give back money to the people that he defrauded and in fact he promises 4 times as much as he took. For these actions Zacchaeus is redeemed. So what does this say to us today? How many of us are presently holding God's call at arms length not sure we really want to answer it? How eager are we to encounter Jesus like Zacchaeus? What lengths would we go to to reach out to Jesus? How do we remain faithful like the bystanders in the face of disappointment, persecution and challenge? Will we, like Jesus turn to the people who are lost and reach out to them with openness and lack of judgment?

I want to share with you an example of persecution, not to seek your sympathy, but to simply give you an example, that even Jesus and every single one of us will face persecution at some point and we all need to find a way to hold on to our faith. In this past week alone, I and some other staff have been called hypocrites, liars, told that we're not worthy of God and that we better repent. I've also seen faithful followers and volunteers being yelled at and persecuted because they did not meet the expectations that some people thought we should. And yet here we all are, finding a way to love one another. We are here seeking help so we can find a way to forgive others who have hurt us and who are obviously in pain themselves. We are broken, but we are also hopeful believers. We remain faithful to God by holding fast to our call, by trusting in God, by unleashing our anger and sharing it with God when we're mad; trust me God can take it. We also pray, worship and seek comfort in the scriptures.

For me personally, when I face these types of weeks, I turn to Romans 12 verse 9 to 13 and it gives me strength every single time. What it says is this:

“Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, but holdfast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lack in zeal but be ardent in spirit and serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering and persevere in prayer and by doing this contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers.”

I must read this verse over and repeatedly, but it does provide me with strength. Strength, to stand in front of these words that are being blustered at me, trusting that we're doing what God has called us to do to the best of our ability; and not letting those words change the direction that we are called, trusting that there are fellow followers who also believe and know that we're doing the best we can. The way we do that is to love people, love strangers, enemies, people who love us and people who persecute us. Will we be inspired and transformed into faithful disciples? How will the scriptures our prayers and worship lead us towards the light and help us to grow in faith? What will help you remain faithful in the face of persecution and challenge in your life? That is the question we lift to God. May God answer and remind us that though we are broken we are also hopeful believers. Thanks be to God. Amen.