

First Sunday in Advent 2009

Grace mercy and peace are yours along with everything you need for your body, while you wait for the returning of our Savior and King.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 “How can we thank God enough for you...”

Introduction: Fellow “Fools for Christ” with my family and me, how do you say “Thank you” to someone? No, I don’t just mean the regular thank you. I mean a really big thank you. We even say, “Words cannot express my thankfulness”. Today marks the beginning of the new church year, which actually leads us to the end of this sinful world – our Savior’s return to take us to our new home in paradise. So today we begin by thanking God for our fellow believers, but not just with a word of thanks but by praying that the Lord would increase our love for each other and that the Lord would strengthen our hearts so that we would be able to talk and live our faith until his return on that glorious day our first day in paradise with all the holy ones who have gone on ahead of us.

How can we thank God enough for you! Out of thanks to God I pray for your faith to mature in understanding and action, your love to increase for everyone and your heart to be strengthened against the tug and pull of this world away from Jesus Christ, who will return for us, His holy ones.

1) Mature in Spiritual Understanding

The group of believers in Thessalonica has a very interesting story. Paul along with Silas came to their city in 51 AD. Thessalonica was a booming town with 200,000 people because it sat on the trade route from Rome to the Far East! Paul and Silas though only spent 3-4 weeks preaching the gospel in that metropolis. Even though when they preached the gospel God blessed the results with some Jews believing, not a few prominent women, and a large number of God fearing Greeks, persecution was too great. Jealous Jews started a riot organized a mob and chased the Apostle Paul and Silas out of town. You might think that with all that persecution and influence from the false religions in that large city the 3-week-old church might fall apart, but just the opposite happened! The Thessalonians became known around the world as “fools for Christ” with the apostles. They held to the gospel, and shared the gospel with everyone. The Apostle Paul was so overjoyed and grateful to them he writes, “How can we say thanks to God enough for you!”

Paul isn’t patting himself on the back or even the Thessalonians; he clearly states he is thanking God. It was a miracle of faith that showed in the lives of the Thessalonians. I have been here at St. Luke’s ¾ of a year and the life of faith and love and concern for the Gospel ministry is amazing. The amount of blessings that my family has received from your generosity and words of encouragement is well beyond what my words can express. I thank God for your willingness to carry on the gospel ministry and caring for the needs of my family. No really, look me in the eye, “Thank you for your gospel ministry.”

Sadly, the Apostle Paul was separated from the Thessalonians because of the persecution of the jealous Jews. Those jealous Jews chased Paul and Silas from town to town trying to force them to leave, stop preaching and even worse, imprisonment and stoning. But Paul knew who was in charge controlling all events, the Lord. So he prayed that he might be allowed to return to them to supply what was lacking in their faith.” Its not that the Thessalonians had a bad faith in Jesus or they were less of a Christian because they only had 3-4 weeks of training under the apostle Paul, Silas and Timothy. No not all, they simply were immature, young in their faith. They needed to add to their awesome faith, spiritual understanding and spiritual action. For example even though the Thessalonians were believers in Jesus Christ, forgiven all their sins and bound for heaven, they had a misunderstanding about Jesus Christ’s Return. Many of them thought that Jesus Christ would return before any believers would die. So when a believer died among them, they were all confused,

saddened and depressed. They thought that the person who died missed out on heaven. They were confused about Jesus return and the meaning of the resurrection. They needed to grow in their faith to have spiritual understanding of more things and then be able to live on that spiritual knowledge as believers.

2) Increase our love for everyone

This past year I have seen the great faith here at St. Luke's in your support of your ministers of the gospel, pastor and teachers, your support of WLA for the Christian Education of our young people no matter what vocation the Lord will place them they will be equipped to serve God's Kingdom and your support of our synod, how we are able to conduct mission work around the world and to train our next generation of pastors and teachers for full time ministry. There still is spiritual understanding and action that is lacking at St. Luke's. Not that there is anything wrong with your faith. There isn't. We too need to hear God's Word and apply it to every area of our life so that we might grow and mature in our knowledge of God's Word and then apply it to our own personal lives that it might translate into an increase of love for each other and everyone else.

Paul prayed for the love of the Thessalonians to increase and overflow for each other and for everyone. What is your tipping point? Usually when we think of a tipping point we think of our anger. We can only take so much until we tip and pour out our wrath and anger on who ever we find in our path of destruction. Just think though is we could have just so much love that reach our tipping point. We can't take anymore love for ourselves so it overflows and is poured out on whoever we find in our path!

Paul does not command love but he prays for it. Love does not come by rules, laws. God creates love and God pours out love into our hearts. We need God's love in order to love each other and also to keep God's perspective of loving others. We are inclined to think selfishly and live selfishly. We need God's love to keep a god pleasing perspective. We need the message of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ to truly love each other and everyone.

3) Strengthen our Hearts

Paul not only prayed for their love to increase but also that their hearts might be strengthened so that they would be blameless and holy in the presence of God on the Day our Savior returns. Growing in our spiritual understanding and increasing our love from God still has a danger: Our hearts. Feelings are so strong they stick with us years, decades after the experience is over. I still remember where I was when I said I love you for the first time to my wife. Every time I hear "Jerusalem the Golden" I'm immediately transported back to my grandfather's casket in the front of St. John's Lutheran Church in Oak Creek, WI. Our hearts are so strong they have the ability to lead us away from Jesus Christ. Our feelings pull us away from Christ and His Word that we are not thankful for His Will, instead we are angry, doubt, question, lose comfort, worry and even give up hope that Jesus loves us and is in control of everything for us. The truth of our faith is that we are holy and blameless in God's eyes and that on that last day Jesus Christ will return and takes us to heaven as his holy one and we will be united with all our loved ones who died in the Lord as his holy ones.

Sadly our hearts can lead us away from that truth and to live and talk as if Jesus Christ's life, death resurrection and return are not true. May our prayer be this year that our hearts, our strong feelings might be strengthened and solidified against all the world's tugs and pulls and remain connected to Jesus Words of love and power for us.

Words cannot express the gratitude I feel in my heart to God for being called to serve you. Out of thanks to God I pray for your faith to mature in understanding and action, your love to increase for everyone and your heart to be strengthened against the tug and pull of this world away from Jesus, who will return for us his holy ones. Here He comes, get ready children.