

Role Models
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1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Guess what? You have probably just now heard the oldest words in the New Testament.

Most scholars agree that 1st Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters that we have, written down just shy of a decade after the resurrection. That's how close it was to the events we read about in the gospels!

It was a time when everybody was trying to figure out what it meant to follow Jesus. They were waiting, waiting, waiting for Jesus to come back. And in the meantime, disciples and apostles were building community, organizing themselves into little house churches, pulling others in, feeding those in need and generally just turning their lives (and the lives of those in the area) upside down – in a good way!

That was certainly true for the church at Thessalonica, who had only existed for a few months. Paul and Silas and Timothy had visited that small seaside metropolitan community, found a small group of Greeks who revered the God of Israel (people who wouldn't have called themselves Jewish, but were considered God-Fearers), told them about Jesus and organized them into a small house church.

Then Paul left, to go somewhere else, to start a new community, leaving them all on their own. He couldn't stay with them forever, so he decides to send them a letter. He's heard some tremendous things about all the good they are doing together. Believe it or not, this new community of baby Christians were doing just fine, all on their own!

Thessalonica was the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia—an important place in that day. That congregation kept his letter, and well they would, since it begins with such words of praise for their actions. By Paul's standards it was warm and almost gushing. He uses the Trinity of Virtues here—Faith, Love and Hope. Yes, that is the same list used in I Corinthians chapter 13, the one you always hear at weddings. But this time, he puts hope last.

Does it matter? Paul wrote to each church according to their needs at the time of his writing. The church in Corinth had many problems of division and

strife within. But the church in Thessalonica did not—they were united in their works of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope.

And hope is what keeps us going when the going gets tough.

Paul praised the Christians at Thessalonica for being "*an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.*" Once they had been worshipers of idols, but now they were imitators of Christ. Remember, they made this transition in the midst of persecution. There was nothing phony in their newfound identity; they were the real thing. And everyone who heard their story was compelled by it.

That's what we need today. People who are willing to be examples. People willing to surrender their own wishes for the greater good. People willing to be role models. Have we ever needed role models more than we do now?

A good role model a few years ago was Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's hamburger chain. You may remember him for his charity work with orphans and kids in foster care. Something I didn't know about him was that at the age of 15, Dave quit school and moved out on his own. He got a job in a restaurant, learned the business, saved his money and eventually founded Wendy's.

In spite of his monetary success, as he grew older Dave regretted not finishing high school. So he got his GED. It wasn't easy, and the kids at Coconut Creek High School saw that. They adopted Dave and his wife and asked them to come to the senior prom that year. They crowned them King and Queen of the prom, so they could honor Dave for going back and taking care of business.

One reason Dave did it was so that young people would not follow his example and quit school. When other people his age were retiring, he was going to High School.

We need people who are willing to set an example. We have examples right here at the Monroe Congregational Church. You know who you are, and might even be embarrassed if I named you out loud. You are the ones who show up, even when it is hard. Even when you are under stress, or filled with worry. You are the ones who invite others to get connected, the ones who help those in need, who raise your children and grandchildren to love and serve the Lord.

You are the examples, just like the church people in Thessalonica that Paul was writing to. Today, we give thanks to God for you and for your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.

I'd like to end with another story, one about a mother cleaning her house and tripping over her little 4-year old son every time she turned around. To get him out from under her feet, she kept saying, "Why don't you go out and play?" or "Wouldn't you like to go swing on the new swing set?"

Finally, she asked him why he was under foot all the time. His answer, "In Sunday School my teacher told me to walk in Jesus' footsteps. But I can't see Jesus, so I'm walking in yours."

That's what it's all about, isn't it? Role models still count. After 2000 years of Christianity, worthy examples still make a difference. I wonder, if the Church at Thessalonica all those years ago had not been faithful under hardship—setting examples of sacrificial love for their neighbors—would you and I even be here as a part of our faith community today?

I used to think Paul was more than a little melodramatic when he says... *"grace and peace to you. I give thanks for you constantly!"* But now, in the 8th week of being physically separated from my congregation, hoping to spread a little hope through a You Tube channel, I can't begin to tell you how much I relate to Paul in this moment. I too feel like a "Pen Pal Pastor!"

Simply put, I miss you people, and I love you.

And I'm proud of how brave you have been in handling your own disappointments and grief.

And I'm thrilled at your willingness to think outside the box on how we can become a church with a stronger virtual presence, knowing that it will take some of us a while to return to community.

And I appreciate your willingness to welcome and make space for all people.

And I'm touched at your kindness towards one another, and the grace with which our members and friends have reached out to one another.

And I'd also tell you how much your voice in our community still matters.

Thanks for that. And God bless you, Amen.