



Life Together: Encouraging

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

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Over the past 5 weeks, in our *Life Together* worship series, we've been looking at how we might share in more open, honest, and vulnerable relationships with one another. It's clear that our nation has come to a point where we are so insular, isolated, and individual, that we've lost the ability to have meaningful relationships with others – especially others outside our own limited political, racial, or religious perspectives.

We've narrowed our echo chambers to such an extent, that, for many – or for most – we aren't even willing to consider someone else's experience to be true, especially if their experience indicates our own experience might be incomplete, or worse, our experience might be part of the reason their experience has been one of oppression. The continual retreat from the discomfort of authentic engagement in a culture in which disparity is infused limits our ability to form authentic connections across varying perspectives, and this perpetuates the disparity that exists.ⁱ

So we're looking at some of the keys to more open, honest, and vulnerable relationships that invite us to a greater faithfulness as God's people. Such relationships allow us to more faithfully represent God's love in the world. So far, we've considered the need for gratitude, attentiveness, single-tasking, and honest self-reflection. Today, we're looking at *encouragement*.

The word *courage* comes from the root word, *cor*, which is Latin for "heart." To have *courage* is **not** to have *no fear* in the face of danger or hardships, it is to have the heart to *face the fear* which may accompany dangers or hardships. To *en-courage* another is to help another have such courage as to overcome the fear that may limit their willingness to take on such dangers or hardships. Encouragement is the verbal and nonverbal support others need to have a strengthened heart – to have courage – in difficult or challenging situations.

Our text in 1 Thessalonians 5 names the faithful need for such encouragement among the Body of Christ – and Paul teaches the need for encouragement by offering it in this text.

Paul is writing this letter – the first of the two letters to the Thessalonians – to the church in Thessalonica shortly after its foundation. This is believed to be one of Paul's first letters to the early churches of new Christian believers. The early churches existed in this liminal time between Christ's ascension, when Christ returned to be seated at God's right hand, and what they believed to be a soon to follow return of Christ, when God would usher in the eternal heavenly kingdom and Christ would come again.

Among the early churches, there was this palpable belief that Christ's return was imminent. Having such a strong conviction in the impending return of Christ, the early churches had a sense of immediacy for getting their lives in right and faithful order. This obsession of Christ's return had become something of an issue for the Thessalonian church, and so Paul is intent on addressing the concern in this early letter.

He begins in verse 1 of our text, "Now concerning the times and the seasons ..."

Without question, Paul would have known this was a topic of discussion for the church. Pretty much all of Paul's letters are addressing real and present concerns within the life of the church community, or are addressing the church's engagement and response to the events and culture of the surrounding world. When Paul begins by saying, "concerning the times and the seasons," the early church would have known well and good that Paul was addressing the topic of the timing of Christ's return.

Paul continues, "Concerning the times, you do not need to have anything written to you."

Paul knows the conversation is taking place, but says up front, I'm not going to waste my pen on addressing this issue. Why? "Because you, yourselves, know very well the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."

Paul doesn't need to address the timing of Christ's return, because the reality is, no one knows when Christ will return. Paul has no intention to spend his time on a theoretical argument concerning the timing, because, the reality is, and Paul puts it back on the church, you are already aware that Christ's return will happen at an unknown time – it will happen like a thief in the night.

In my neighborhood, we have, from time to time over the past few years, had issues with thieves coming at night and stealing items out of people's cars. We've had people lose cell-phone cables, gift cards, and loose money that was visible in their unlocked cars. For a while, I thought I had figured out the thief's modus operandi. I thought that the thief came anytime we had a major rain or a thunder storm, which provided a noise cover to help hide their activity. And then, we'd hear a report of a stolen item on a perfectly clear night – and my theory was ruined. The reality is, there is no way to predict when the thief will come. We have to remember to lock the cars every night, because, as we have found out, the thief might come on any night.

Paul says, the timing is not something with which you should be concerned.

Neither, says Paul, can you prevent the thief from coming. Paul offers in verse 3, "When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. There is no escape!"

Not only do we not know the timing, but we can be assured, the return is guaranteed. We cannot escape its truth.

Paul then exhibits the encouragement he will teach is necessary.

Beginning in verse 4, Paul writes, “You, beloved, are not in the darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief. You are children of the light – children of the day. So, do not fall asleep as others do; do not get drunk at night; but instead, let us claim the breastplate of faith and love; and let us wear the helmet of salvation.”

I went to college in Southwest Virginia at one of Virginia Methodist Conference supported schools – Ferrum College. It was a 20 minute drive to the nearest town of Rocky Mount, and an hour south of Roanoke (the “big” city). Being removed from the lights of the urban or suburban areas, Ferrum got **dark** at night. We used to go up to the practice sports fields at night, and lay under the stars. You could see every star in the sky. Living in Alexandria, we sometimes forget how dark it really gets at night – there’s just too much light. For Paul, there was no greater disparity than that of light and dark – of night and day. There were no street lights or headlights to pollute the darkness of the night. Like that which God created, the light and the dark stood in opposition to the other.

Paul speaks of the dark and the light as a way to offer encouragement, saying, you are not children of the dark – you are children of the light – so why does the timing matter? So long as you maintain your living in the light of God, you have nothing to fear!

Yet, Paul’s words are not quite so subtle. In offering these words of encouragement to the faithful members of the church, Paul is also addressing some of the underlying concerns regarding the timing of Christ’s return.

His initial jab in verse 3 at the promise of ‘peace and security’ is not so subtle. If you look at the Biblical text, you’ll usually find this phrase, ‘peace and security’ in quotation marks. This phrase hints at the veiled promise of the Roman Empire.

The Roman empire charged taxes of those who lived in its occupied lands. They charged taxes with the promise that they would provide this desired ‘peace and security’ from the other imperialistic empires of the region, who sought to own more land through destructive force. The promise of the Romans was that the waging of war by the other empires in the region would never be a problem for the tenants of the land, because the tenants were protected by the Romans.

Paul picks up this concern again, taking another jab at the fear of safety, offering, “put on your breastplate of faith and the helmet of salvation.”

It seems that, though Paul was outwardly addressing the timing of Christ’s return, he is inwardly addressing the concern of safety – or protection.

And he does this all in the framework of encouragement.

Encouragement comes in many forms. We have the ability to encourage another by offering affirmation. Paul does this by calling the Thessalonians children of the light – he affirms that they are Children of God. By offering this word of affirmation, he is giving them courage to not fear the timing of Christ’s return. So too, should we, offer encouragement to one another through affirmation.

And yet, sometimes we should *not* be affirmed. At times, it is wrong to receive praise for what we think, say, or do – because what we think, say, or do is not worthy of affirmation. We can do the wrong thing in all vigilance, and it might seem worthy of affirmation because it is done with such strong conviction. And yet, not all things that are possible are beneficial. Sometimes, our encouragement needs **not** to show up as affirmation, but to show up in the form of exhortation, where we are encouraging others to live more faithfully.

While Paul offers encouragement through affirmation in the midst of the Thessalonians’ fear of Christ’s return, Paul offers encouragement through exhortation by naming their fears regarding safety. It seems that some, or many in the church, have put their trust in the power of the Roman sword, and have begun to expect that such brute force would be sufficient to offer them ‘peace and security.’ Paul’s exhortation to the community calls them to a greater understanding of faithfulness.

No amount of preparation, no amount of physical force, will save them from the truth of God’s return. Their thinking is faulty. So Paul offers this word of encouragement: put on the breastplate of faith and love, wear the helmet of the hope of salvation – these three – faith, hope, and love – are what you need for ‘peace and security.’

Paul finishes this text through summary, writing, “For God has designated us not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

The work of the faithful is not easy. I am so grateful that we are doing some heavy work – that we, at Washington Street United Methodist, have responded in the midst of this challenging season of life to not only provide additional food for the community, that we have offered an additional day of Open Table, that we have partnered with local businesses and non-profits to help manifest God’s love for those who often receive no love. I want to affirm that you are children of the light.

But let us not think so highly of ourselves that we cannot also hear the call of exhortation from the apostle. Our safety does not come from the veiled belief of prosperity. Our protection does not come from failing to name the realities of sin that pervade our lives and our nation. Just because something isn’t tested or publicly named, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Our call is not to believe in the visible reality simply because it is what has been offered to us – we are not

children of the dark, we see more clearly when we see with the eyes of Christ. With the eyes of Christ, we see that which lay hidden in the dark – we see the oppression that is stowed away in cages – we see the manipulation that is funded in the halls of government – we see the injustices of the legal system – and we see more clearly our own fear and desire for peace and security. We cannot act like we do not see, for we are children of the light.

To name the realities of sin in life is not an easy task. Like the rich young ruler, who was asked to give it all away – sometimes the ask induces fear. It's requires a change we may not be ready for. It incites self-reflection that we may not desire to see.

But God is speaking, "Fear not; do not be afraid." These encouraging words are uttered time and time again in our Holy Scriptures. Fear not, for by following in the steps of the Lord – for being Children of the Light – we do not need to rely on the peace and security of the world, the frailty of a broken system – for we have the peace of Christ's love, the hope of eternal salvation, and the security of faith that God will restore and redeem us.

And so we ask, Almighty God, encourage us, and lead us to encourage one another, that through affirmation and exhortation, we might share in the joy of your blessed creation. Amen, and Amen.

ⁱ Robin DiAngelo. *White Fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2018.