

Series: The Ultimate Challenge
Today: The Ultimate Church-Its Virtues and Values
Text: I Thessalonians 1

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

A few years ago the decision was made to move my office to the third floor of the Esbenshade Building. I had just celebrated my 60th birthday, and I think that moving another flight of stairs higher had an implied message in it. *When you can't make it to the third floor, it may be time to leave.*

If you have the stamina to make it to the third floor, there is a framed calligraphy in my office that I would like you to see. It means a great deal to me because it was given to me twelve years ago this week when I came to be the pastor of this church. The words are from one of my favorite writers, Frederick Buechner, and it reads: *"Vocation—It comes from the Latin "vocare" which means to call. The place where God calls you to is the place where your great gladness and the world's great hunger meet."*

Where is God calling you? Where is God calling us as the body of Christ? This is the theme we want to explore during the next five weeks in a series of sermons on the first letter of Paul to the Christians in Thessalonica. For the last 18 months we have been living into our Vision Statement of *Discovering the Heart of Christ in the Heart of the City*, and we are hopeful that this series will offer yet another perspective on that vision.

We are calling the series *The Ultimate Challenge* because Paul did challenge the Thessalonians to think about their vocation as followers of the way of Jesus; the only name which the church had when Paul wrote his letter. He is reminding them of their vocation; to think about where God is calling them to practice their faith at the intersection of their deep gladness and where the world's great hunger meet.

Why did we choose Thessalonians? First, it is a letter to a city church just like us. Thessalonica was a key city on the trade route between Rome and Constantinople. It was a city which served as a bridge between the East and the West. People going to or coming from either Rome or Constantinople would stop in Thessalonica. So it was a key city in which to establish a strong church as part of a missionary strategy to spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the Middle East.

Paul had visited this city on his first missionary journey, but he had only stayed for about three weeks. He was impressed by the responsiveness of the community of faith which he had helped to establish. His message was that the Kingdom of God was at hand; that the risen Christ would soon come again to establish his reign on the earth. However, without his leadership, that community was beginning to show signs of strain.

The Christians in Thessalonica had taken seriously the urgency of Paul's message about the second coming of Christ. Many of them had quit their jobs sure that they didn't need to work because Christ would surely come at any moment. Many others had given up their normal pursuits. There was a tendency to defy the civil authorities, disobey the civil law because why obey the civil rulers when the Kingdom of God was at hand? There was an attitude of eat, drink, and be merry which led to the danger of immorality because in the minds of the people there was nothing to lose.

So Paul wrote two letters to help strengthen the church in Thessalonica. His goal was to get them to think about the future and who God was calling them to be and what God was calling them to do. This morning we will use chapter 1 of the first letter to look at *the values and the virtue of the Ultimate Church*. Paul affirms the values of Faith, Hope and Love, and he affirms the virtue of imitating Christ.

Their Practice of Faith, Hope and Love

In verse three, Paul makes clear the values which he wants to encourage as values of the church: “*We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (NIV) This is not the only letter in which he affirms such a value.

Most of us have heard the Love chapter of I Corinthians 13 at weddings when we are thinking about the love between the bride and the groom. “*So abide these three: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.*” This is what Paul praises in the lives of the Thessalonians: their work of faith, their labor of love, and their patience in hope. These are the trail markers of the Christian life.

Any of you who have been backpacking know that it is important to mark the trail you are hiking in order to find your way back home. Sometimes our way is clear and the route is obvious, but there are times when we are uncertain and we need trail markers to find our way, and when we take our bearings from these three, we cannot stray too far from God’s good way.

On Thursday I was privileged to take Dan Snyder to visit my alma mater of Princeton Theological Seminary. It was a trip down memory lane. Princeton was not only a place of great growth for me, it was also the place where I met my wife, Cherie. So I had lots of memories to share. I am afraid that Dan got the tour offered by the Admissions Office, and he got the “Riggs Tour” offered by me replete with stories from nearly 40 years ago when I was a student there.

On the tour I pointed out places of personal interest (where I lived, where Cherie lived, where I had asked her to marry me) along with faculty houses and the home of

Albert Einstein. Then, as I was doing research for this sermon, I came across a book by someone some of you may remember: Kim Engelmann. Kim was on our staff for a short time when I first became your pastor 12 years ago.

Kim's father was Dr. James Loder who was a professor at Princeton Seminary and he taught both Cherie and me. Kim told the story of the change that came in her father's life due to a freak accident. He pulled the car off the road one day to help a woman change a flat tire. While he was lying under her car, another vehicle accidentally swerved to the shoulder, and in the collision the car Dr. Loder was under was shoved onto his chest. Five of his ribs were broken, and his left lung was pierced and began filling with blood.

His wife, who is barely five-feet-tall, placed her hands on the bumper of the car and prayed, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," and lifted the car off his chest so he could be dragged out. (Some weeks later she found out that she broke a vertebra in the effort). Kim's father was in a state of shock as he was taken to the hospital. Doctors prepared him for emergency surgery. Kim says his survival was iffy.

As they placed him on the operating table, suddenly, spontaneously, Dr. Loder's skin changed from ashen to pink. He experienced a miraculous healing. He invited a surprised surgical team to join him in singing "Fairest Lord Jesus." They did not even bother to hook him up to oxygen. He did not find out until later that this was the precise moment his father-in-law, who was a pastor, had his congregation start to pray for him.

Dr. Loder was never one to try and explain away the mystery of faith. What his daughter says about him was that his life was not only saved, it was changed that very day. Until then, although he taught at a seminary, God had been mostly an abstract idea to him. Now Jesus became a living Presence. She remembers that from that moment on

her father's heart grew so tender that he became known at Princeton as "the weeping professor." Those of us who had him in class will never forget him.

He was a man of deep faith. Every class began with a prayer, and his prayers were not just empty words. He was talking to the One who had saved him. He was a man who inspired hope. Whenever any of his students became discouraged, he always made time to help them think through their options. That is why I remembered his home on the tour because a few months after I had asked Cherie to marry me, I had cold feet. Our marriage of almost 39 years is due, in part, to his counsel, and in large part to the patience of my wife. Finally, he was a man of deep love. Those of us who had classes from him may not remember what he taught, but we do remember the way we were treated. He was one of those professors who seemed to care deeply about us as students preparing for the ministry. He loved us, and we knew it. So we always wanted to give our best back to him.

These are the values that Paul praises in the Thessalonians. It is an integrated faith which expresses itself in patient hope and love based on their experience of the saving love of Jesus Christ.

Their Imitation of Jesus

The virtue I want to lift up for us this morning is the one which Paul praised in the lives of the Thessalonians: their Imitation of Jesus Christ. It began by them imitating what they had seen in Paul and Timothy. Then it became a habit that led them closer and closer to Christ himself. Eventually, they incorporated that virtue into their lives as a part of who they were, and their impact on all of Macedonia was profound. In vv. 6-8 he writes: *6You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 7And so you became a model*

to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.

This is the normal and healthy progression of faith which is maturing. First, we borrow the faith of others until we can incorporate it as our own, and then we share what we have experienced with others.

Yesterday I attended the installation of Tim Mentzer, the new pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. The preacher of the day reminded us that our lives were the only Gospel some people would read. He told us that people who don't go to church and who don't have much use for the Bible won't be impressed by what is said here this morning, but they will be impressed by the way you live the Gospel in your every day life. He urged us to remember that some of those with whom we have contact will experience the Gospel for the very first time through us, and if we are privileged to be there when someone dies, they may experience the Gospel for the very last time through us. If we can keep that in mind, it may make a difference in the way we live the gospel in the context of our daily lives.

I also walked for about six hours in the Relay for Life to benefit cancer research this weekend. What I love about doing that, besides the fact that I am fighting the disease of cancer, is the conversations I have on the track with members of this church and friends from the community. During this year's relay I had two long conversations with members of this church about how to cope with overwhelming circumstances in life. Both have children who have chronic diseases, and both gave testimony to what it means for them to be part of this church where they get to observe others who are living with children who have disabilities. They told of how they observed the way these parents handle the challenge of disabled children and exhibit their faith through it all.

Now I am certain that if I asked the parents of those disabled children, they would have no idea about the witness they have been to the rest of us. They are simply men and women of faith who accept what God has brought their way; find a way to be grateful for what they have and what their disabled child has taught them about the necessity of faith, the patience of hope and the power of love. However, the point is that we are influencing each other all the time. We are witnessing to our faith or our lack of it all the time, and make no mistake. People are watching us, and they are imitating us.

All of us have had mentors in our faith who have helped us take the first steps of belief. If we are lucky, we get to pass on what has been taught to us by mentoring someone else. This morning I want to give witness to a few of the people who were influential in the early stages of my journey. I do so in hopes that you may recall someone who has influenced you and give thanks for them—or to them if they are still alive.

My grandmother whom we called “Nana” was one of the first to plant seeds of faith in my life. Her name was Georgia Riggs. I regret that I never told her how much of an influence she had in my faith development. She was a Christian Science practitioner, and when I made my commitment to Christ I was under the influence of some who belittled her faith as something less than mine because it was not evangelical enough. However, Nana allowed my sister and me to experience the power of prayer and its impact in the lives of others who depended on her.

Howard Lawson was a real estate agent who nurtured those seeds of faith in a 9th grade Bible Study in his home every Monday evening. He took us in and loved us, allowed us to have the questions that 9th graders are prone to have and did not judge us.

His care for youth kept me close to the church, and his willingness to take our questions seriously is a witness to youth ministry to this day.

I also want to give testimony to Dr. Louis H. Evans, Jr. who helped give birth to my Christian faith, and the Rev. Walter James who helped me see that faith without works is dead, but it begins with faith. They were both role models for me in what it means to be a pastor, and their faith and commitment lives on in me to this day.

These are but a few of the people whom I imitated until I found a faith of my own which sustains me to this day. How about you? Who were the shaping influences in your life, and have you thanked them for what they mean to you.

So here again are the values of Paul: faith, hope and love. Use them as your path markers and you won't stray far from God. The virtue Paul holds up: Imitate each other, Imitate Christ, Incorporate these into your life, and witness to the Gospel.

What are people saying about you? What are people saying about our church?
What kinds of example are we setting that inspire faith in others?