

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.

As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. *

Sharing our Very Selves - October 25, 2020

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

There is no question that the hardest part of the Covid-19 crisis has been how much our contact with each other has been so severely limited. Here at church, we are going on over six months of online worship. A number of you have told me that although you know in your head that we have to strictly limit our personal contact with each other, visiting on the screen is not much of a substitute. I frankly am impressed and proud of the fact that we have been able to maintain and even increase our online attendance in worship during this period. Nevertheless, no matter what we do via Zoom, it is just not the same.

As most of you know, I work during the day at an elementary school in a special education classroom. In my district, Cherry Hill, we are currently doing virtual classes from 9 to 1. It used to be 9 to 3, but many parents expressed concern that their children were getting too much screen time and wanted them to get away from the electronics. I hope they are, but some of the more cynical among us think some kids are just swapping online learning for video games — not really what the parents had in mind!

The students I work with are in what is called the Behavioral and Emotional Support classroom. Some of our kids have very difficult home lives. Some receive medication but don't always get it. But all of them absolutely need human contact, and under this setup, they aren't getting it. When I look on my video screen at our students, I see many of them looking sad and frustrated. When we have breaks, they still keep their cameras on and use the video chat to see if we're on and listening because they need attention. Working with kids who have behavioral issues on a TV screen is difficult, to say the least, and leaves us teachers frustrated and sad because we can't do more for them.

Let's admit to ourselves and to each other that part of being human is our inborn and very natural need to personally be with each other. Now I know there are those of us who are extraverts — people who thrive on being around others. There are introverts — people who need a lot of "alone time" to recharge and reflect. Nonetheless, whether you are an extravert or an introvert, life these days seems very much like wandering by yourself in a hot desert with nobody or nothing to share it with. We can see each other on our screens, we had hear each other through the speakers and headphones, but they just don't compare to being in physical proximity to each other.

Now imagine living 2000 years ago. No internet, no computers, no video, no telephones. There were only two ways of communicating, face-to-face and via letter. Both were very protracted ways of interacting with each other. Unless you lived a few miles or less from your friend or family member, there was no way you talk with them on a daily basis. No car or bike. Perhaps you could ride a horse or donkey, but that was awkward and expensive. Live further away? Travel was a long, slow process.

Mostly, you travelled on foot slogging through all kinds of weather and putting up with dangerous roads and carrying your own food and supplies with you. A few who had to go long distances travelled by ship — ships that were poorly designed and operated by sailors who knew almost nothing about how to navigate from one point to another.

All this background is to say that sending and receiving letters was the primary method of long distance communication back then and of course the process of corresponding was agonizingly slow. Months, even years could pass between an exchange of letters, of ideas, of simple interactions. For most of human history, people had no choice but to work and somehow co-exist with those individuals living maybe at most a mile away from them.

Now if you got along with your neighbors, who most likely were part of your extended family, all well and good. If you didn't like them, too bad. Your only solution would be to move away. For most of the history of the world, close personal constant interaction was the norm. And I won't even go into how closely packed most people lived together in their homes!

It is with that background that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, and poured out his great love for them, a love so great that he “shared himself” with them.

Think about the apostle Paul, the man called by Jesus in a vision to spread the gospel to the gentiles — in other words to most of the known world. Paul traveled. He had to. The book of Acts is a summary of how extensively Paul moved around the middle east. Yet, while Paul moved around to many places, he also stayed for long periods, weeks and even months, once he arrived.

Consider how he operated. When Paul came to a new town, he would find where the Jews were living and make a point of worshipping and preaching in their synagogue. He would tell them that the long-anticipated Messiah had indeed come and his name was Jesus. Paul would tell about Jesus' life and try to prove that Jesus was the Messiah because he fulfilled everything the scriptures predicted about him.

When Paul finished sharing the gospel, someone in the community would always invite him to stay in their home in order to hear more about Jesus. Frequently, his host would be a woman, often a widow, with a larger home. From her house, Paul would start to form a church, preaching and teaching. He'd even operate his professional trade, that of a tentmaker, from the home in order to support himself.

It's hard nowadays to appreciate the incredible appeal Paul's message had for many, particularly women. Consider that society of that day. Men were everything. Women functioned to manage the household and bear and raise children. Legally, they had no status and in some places could even be killed by their husbands or fathers or brothers without repercussions. So when Paul came along and said that in Christ there is no male or female, that was a message women were overjoyed to hear. At

last, hear is someone teaching about a God who regarded them as fully equal with men. Not only that, Paul taught because Jew and Greek were equal, race and nationality made no difference to God. Paul taught that slaves were equal to slaves so social status made no difference to God. By extension, we are able to say that sexual orientation or skin color or even the way one lived in the past makes no difference to God. Anyone and everyone who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord is equal in the eyes of God and should be treated as such.

Now all of what Paul preached and taught was wonderful news. Is it any wonder that Christianity took off and spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire? Jesus' message of love and acceptance was so radical, so different from what people were used to that everyone who felt oppressed drank it in like an exhausted runner after a marathon. Of course men, especially men of power and privilege felt threatened by Jesus' message as proclaimed by Paul. But, the good news remains a threat to men of power and privilege even today in every nation — even here.

But Paul did not preach Christ like an academic lecture. He didn't just state his case to his listeners like a lawyer arguing in a courtroom. While such an approach might have won a few converts, it certainly would not have been enough. No, Paul offered his listeners wherever he went one other gift. Paul offered them the gift of himself.

Himself? What can that mean? Here is what he said to the Thessalonians, "We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

Now we have very little direct knowledge about Paul's methods and personality. All we know is that Paul was incredibly successful at sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. He was the first and greatest evangelist the church had. And, don't worry about that word, "evangelist." All it means is, "good news spreader." Paul was gifted. Of course, being called dramatically by Jesus doesn't hurt, either. However, Paul was able to reach and plant numerous Christian communities over the course of his ministry. The letters he wrote them demonstrate how much he cared for them while he was living among them and how much he continued to care for them once he left. Clearly, Paul's impact extended well beyond the gospel he shared. He offered his very self to the people.

Friends, the gospel of Jesus Christ is sometimes presented as a list of ideas about God and how God operates in the world. We say things like the Apostle's Creed when we baptize and the Nicene Creed when we have communion. Some may have been involved in a church school where they taught a "catechism" — a list of questions and answers about the Christian religion.

All that is well and good. If we say we believe in God and Jesus Christ is the Son of God, then we ought to be able to explain what that means.

However, Paul clearly took his message another step closer. Paul shared about Jesus, yes. But Paul also shared himself. Paul went out of his way to build intense personal relationships with the men and women he encountered on his travels. As I noted earlier, Paul would set up shop in a town to teach the good news, start a church, and train its leaders — a process that took a long time to complete. Therefore, he not help but being himself, his real, honest, human self with them. As the saying goes, “Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Paul cared deeply about the people he was training to be the church. He cared so much that he gave his very self to them. He built deep and strong relationships of trust with the people, relationships so deep that after he left the communities of faith he founded, he could continue to be in touch with them and know that his messages — messages of praise as well as messages of criticism — would be received by the people because they trusted and accepted each other.

My friends, we living 2000 years later are the successors to Paul and the army of men and women who have been proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ all over the world. The question I have for you is are you willing to be like Paul and share your very selves with the world?

Let us be honest. Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is not and has never been easy. Over the centuries, thousands upon thousands have lost their lives and so many more have suffered all kinds of punishments and hardships in the service of the Lord. Paul himself did not die comfortably in bed, but was executed in Rome after all the wonderful work he did for God.

Yet, we need to ask ourselves, this day and every day, why are we here today? Why are we taking time out of our busy Sunday to watch on this computer screen or sit inside a church to worship God? I mean most people are doing something very different that this right now. Can it be that deep down we truly believe that the good news of Jesus Christ is indeed more important, even the most important truth in our lives? Can it be that our faith in God really does make a profound difference in how we live, work, think, act, and love? Is it just possible that we know in our heart of hearts that Jesus and only Jesus has the best answers to address the issues we face in our personal lives, our community lives, our nation, and our world?

Well, if we can answer yes to these questions, if we can admit to ourselves that it is Jesus who is the source of our joy and the light of our lives, then shouldn't we also be imitating Paul and sharing our very selves with the world? Shouldn't we be talking to family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, about the love of God and the life-transforming difference Jesus makes for us — and will certainly make for them? Shouldn't we not be afraid to take some risks in sharing the good news with the world instead of keeping it all locked inside?

We can. I know we can. We can share with the world. We can make a difference. We can proclaim Jesus and know that Jesus will save us. That is real joy. That is real love. That is sharing ourselves.