

When I was a young, I visited my aunt and uncle who lived in Ewing, NJ, near Trenton. My uncle took me to the Quarry Swim Club in Hopewell. There was a high ledge where people could jump into the quarry. I was probably 12 at the time and he allowed me to go off the high jump. It seemed like it was 200’ high, but it might have been 20’. I remember that feeling of putting my toes over the edge and thinking about turning back.

We gather each week as a church looking forward, imagining what God calls us to be. We sing about our faith, lift our voices in prayer, and hear God’s word read and proclaimed. We stand with our toes over the edge, ready to jump into the future—knowing that we jump in faith. God is with us, leading and guiding. And, as we gather today, looking ahead, we read from the oldest preserved Christian document, 1 Thessalonians. It predates the gospels and the rest of the New Testament. It probably comes from 50 or 51 CE, during Paul’s second missionary journey, after the Jerusalem Council depicted in Acts 15.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the letter, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of things they already know. This is similar to the way we revisit familiar stories in the Bible. We talk about moral behavior, Christian ethics, and justice, not once, but repeatedly. We do not revisit topics because we are incapable of remembering or understanding them. We do so because we need to hear the message again. We are not Pharisees who live by a list of rules, where we can memorize that list and then check each action, each day against that list. We are transformed in Christ into new beings.

Transformation allows us to approach life and react to what we encounter. Life is not like a person following the Ikea directions, in which we simply need to follow the steps in order so that the outcome will be what we expect. Living is about transformation. The stories, lessons, songs, and prayers are part of our journey. They are about Jesus Christ, not a random historical character named Jesus, but our “ultimate concern.”<sup>2</sup> As followers of Christ, we do not live in nostalgia, but celebrate Jesus Christ in the present.<sup>3</sup>

Paul Tillich writes, “Without the manifestation of God in humanity, the question of God and faith in God are not possible. There is no faith without participation.”<sup>4</sup> Our Christian lives involve action. None of us are along for the ride. We all have a part to play. In this earliest Christian document, we find active participation on the part of the recipients of the letter and on the sender. Paul says, “We worked night and day... you are [ lit.] μαρτυρες (Gk: witnesses; by analogy, a “martyr”).” Encountering Christ changes us. We participate, live out our faith, come to worship, experience transformation, and reflect Christ.

For the Thessalonians, they embarked on a radical journey of transformation. The Gentiles went from polytheism to monotheism, belief in one God. And, they did not just believe in any god, but they believed in the God of Israel who was also the creator of everything, Jesus Christ is the redeemer, and with the Holy Spirit, they are a triune God—three-in-one and one-in-three.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the gospel is not transactional.<sup>5</sup> Instead of giving the good news in exchange for payment, Paul and his missionary partners shared God's grace for free. They worked as some sort of laborers to pay their way. Money did not cloud the message of the gospel. Liberated from the distraction of paying Paul's operational expenses, listeners could focus on hearing about God's grace. But, they did not have the joy of financially participating in God's work.

Even though this is an early document, Paul is writing to a body of believers, a new church. And, God's church offers something special. It contains divine knowledge. We participate in something special, something divine. The apostolic succession from Paul's church in Thessalonica to the writing of the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament and even to today is unbroken. Sure, there are various strains in the Christian tradition. Yes, some Christians do not speak to others. And, we certainly do not see eye-to-eye with every sister or brother in Christ. Pope John Paul II writes, "The knowledge which the church offers to [humanity] has its origin not in any speculation of her own word, however sublime, but in the word of God which she has received in faith."<sup>6</sup>

What we share, what we sing about, what we read is not our own, no matter how clever or wonderful it is. What we share, sing about, and read is divine. It is of God.

The good news that Paul preaches is nothing less than 'the [revealing] word of God' working to bring about faith and keep it alive... The heart of the apostolic preaching remains the message of the crucified Christ's resurrection, the already achieved climax of divine revelation to which believers look back and to which, in faith, they here and now continue to respond.<sup>7</sup>

We work for God when we respond, when we participate in the Christian life. But, we have to be careful that *our* work does not replace God's work. Dostoevsky's story of the Grand Inquisitor is about someone who let his work replace his calling in God. In the story, Jesus returns to Earth in bodily form and goes to Seville, Spain, in the sixteenth century, the most terrible time of the Inquisition. Jesus walks among the people, and in his mercy, he performs miracles with a gentle smile and infinite compassion. He heals one person when they touch his garment, reminiscent of the woman in Mark 5. He gives sight to a blind man, like Bartimaeus in Mark 10. The people of Seville recognize Jesus and they adore him.

The Grand Inquisitor has Jesus arrested and sentences him to be burned the following day. Then, the Grand Inquisitor visits Jesus in his cell. He is an old man, maybe 90 years old, He points his frail finger at Jesus and says, "Is it you? You? Don't answer; be silent. For what can you say? I know too well what you would say, and you have no right to add anything to what you said in the Bible. Why did you come to hinder us?"

That's how the Grand Inquisitor sees Jesus, as a hindrance. Jesus gets in the way of the world the Grand Inquisitor has worked to make. Jesus gets in the way of social

expectations. Jesus gest in the way of *our* work. The Grand Inquisitor would celebrate our coming together each week as long as we kept Jesus Christ out of it.

There is something special in church, something divine. Our participation reflects our faith. Paul urges, encourages, and pleads with the Thessalonians to live a life worthy of God. When we read these earliest Christian words, and make them our own, Paul speaks the same message to us.

I jumped off the ledge of that quarry in New Jersey and I remember the feeling of freedom as I fell. We can have that freedom in Christ. We can step out in faith, leave the safety of the ledge, and trust that God goes with us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, ed. David N. Freedman, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 457.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), 112.

<sup>3</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*, trans. Patrick Hughes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980), 206.

<sup>4</sup> Tillich, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Aaron Tennant, "Tillich and the Wild Things: Evil and Transformative Soteriology," *North American Paul Tillich Society Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Fides Et Ratio: On the Relationship between Faith and Reason* (Boston: Pauline, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Gerald O'Collins, *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 106.