**1 Thessalonians 5:16-24** December 13, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Advent 3

*1 Thessalonians 5:16Be joyful always; 17pray continually; 18give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*

*19Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; 20do not treat prophecies with contempt. 21Test everything. Hold on to the good. 22Avoid every kind of evil.*

*23May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

If 2020 were a ship, what ship would it be? The *Titanic,* *Noah’s Ark*? How about 2020 as a canoe? If you have ever stepped into a canoe, the thing you most surely remember is how tippy they are.

I had a summer job up in Alaska one year. Before going to work one day, I took a hike by myself and found a canoe on the shores of Grant Lake. The waterfalls tumbling off the snow-clad mountain on the other side of the lake called. I got into the canoe and rowed the half mile across the lake. The mountainside plunged into the lake and I got close enough to touch it with my paddle. I got the shivers. How deep was this lake? Hundreds of feet? How cold? Cold enough to induce hypothermic shock in a couple minutes! It could be days before the next human would visit the lake. One false tip in a tippy canoe and, life preserver or not, there would be zero chance of survival. The shiver became something just short of terror. Which, of course, was silly, because I had never tipped over the dozens of times I had paddled a canoe. But…

Sometimes life feels an unsteady canoe. The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to people who were finding out what it felt like to sail in the boat called The Christian Church. It felt kind of tippy. They were doing okay, as far as that goes, but that didn’t change how unsteady their lives felt. Today’s Scripture reading highlights Paul’s advice to them of

**How to Keep an Even Keel**

***OR Don’t Capsize the Canoe***

Paul’s letter to them, we call it First Thessalonians. It has that funny name because it was the first of Paul’s two letters of Christian counsel to Christians in the Greek city of Thessalonica (pronounced Thessalŏ’nika or Thessalonī’ka). It is probably the first book of the New Testament, which hints that Paul was writing to a group of new Christians. Let’s get to know these passengers in a canoe, these Thessalonians.

The book of Acts, chapter 17, tells us a little about Paul’s visit to Thessalonica. As soon as he arrived, he began speaking the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Several people came to faith. He taught them for about three weeks and then some troublemakers stirred up a riot. At that moment the rioters couldn’t find Paul, but they did find several recent Christian converts. They had them arrested on trumped up charges. The Christians quickly posted bond, found Paul, and as soon as the sun set, got him and his traveling companions out of Dodge (Acts 17:1-10).

Paul had had only three weeks to get that church up and going. As he trekked toward safety in Athens a couple hundred miles south, his thoughts frequently returned to Thessalonica. He wondered what had become of those Christians. Did they survive? Did they still believe? Or did they think, “This just isn’t worth it!”? Did they dismiss their moment of dabbling in the Christian message as a flash in the pan – a fleeting fascination of no lasting consequence? Paul couldn’t forget them. So, he sent a young man, Timothy, back to Thessalonica to see what had happened. Timothy went. A couple weeks later he reported back to Paul, “Those Christians, their enemies are still causing them problems day in and day out. But they’re still there, they still believe, they’re still gathering!”

Just imagine that! They’d had Paul’s guidance for only three weeks, were now being challenged in the courts, menaced by community, but they just couldn’t leave this Christian faith. They would keep on meeting, keep on learning and teaching. What joy Paul felt! How much does it take for some to not make it to church on a Sunday? A little rain? A sore ankle? A chance at time-and-a-half? These guys were serious!

Paul wanted to help these courageous Christians, his spiritual children, however he could. He quickly sat down and wrote to them. That response is this letter of First Thessalonians. Our reading is some of the last words of that letter. In the rest of the letter he had addressed questions and discussed details. Here at the end he summarizes with a broad brush things about how to keep that even keel, to keep from capsizing, to realize the stability they had in Jesus. Paul wrote a list of eight commands—which is the problem.

My wife is convinced that I have a two item limit. If she sends me to the store to buy three things, she is sure that I will come back, smile on my face, mission accomplished, and she will look in the grocery bag and say, “What about the green peppers?” So if it is a list of three things, she *writes* me a list. I think she underestimates me. I would contend that she doesn’t need to write a list unless it is four things, not three.

But that’s the problem with lists. Whether going to the grocery store or the hardware store or the Hallmark store, if the list gets too long, you can’t keep it up here (*point to head*). Not only is remembering the list a problem, but the longer the list, the less focused you are, and the more easily distracted by things that don’t matter.

In our reading we have eight commands. And that is just too many to remember. For example: ***“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances…”*** When I hear that, I haven’t even processed the first command and I have missed the second and third.

Maybe a better way of organizing the eight commands of our reading about **How to Keep an Even Keel** is to group God’s advice into three parts: (1) Your Outlook, (2) Your Guidance, and (3) Your Look to God.

**A.** Let’s start with our outlook. The stable outlook is ***“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances.”***

The words ***always***, ***continually***, and ***in all circumstances*** stick out. I’m all for being joyful sometimes, but always? I pray before meals, but continually? We thank God at Thanksgiving, but in all circumstances? This is an outlook on life. An “outlook on life” is not how we are feeling at a given moment, but an overall approach to life that doesn’t change much whether good times or bad. It is an attitude that is bigger than anything that happens to us.

The first item is ***joy***. Paul suggests to these persecuted Christians that it is possible to be joyful always. Notice that it does not say, “Be happy always.” Happiness is dependent on what is going on around us. Joy is something deep in the heart. For the Christian—not for others, but for the Christian—our joy is not based on our income, our health, or even personal relationships. The joy of the Christian is first and foremost about our relationship with God. Problems bigger than life itself have been resolved in Jesus Christ. He has conquered sin, death and the devil, and eternity is ours! We have joy, always.

The second part of an even-keeled outlook is ***“Pray continually.”*** Paul was not a monk living in a cell who could spend every waking moment in prayer. He was the opposite. He traveled the world. He talked to every stranger he met. He had a trade that he worked at on the side to make a living. He was always busy. Then how can he say, ***“Pray continually”***? To be sure, there will be times and places to drop all else and concentrate on prayer. Continual prayer, however, is directing all the moments of our life to God and his will. We remember that someone once asked Jesus how to pray, and Jesus told him the Lord’s Prayer. He told us that God-pleasing prayer is mostly about us conforming to God, not God giving us what we want. Prayer is much more about spiritual things than earthly things. Continual prayer is using every moment to understand what God is doing (such as we can), and what God would have us do, and committing that to him.

The third characteristic of a stable outlook is to ***“give thanks in all circumstances.”*** The little word “in” is important. The week before Thanksgiving I made a goof on the marquee in front of church. I asked the question, “Are you thankful *for* 2020?” The Scriptural question would have been, “Are you thankful *in* 2020?” The Thessalonians are not told to “Give thanks for all things” but to ***“Give thanks in all things.”***

We can give thanks in all circumstances because we are confident of the promise that *“in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”* And so while some things that happen are downright awful, even evil, we know that even in that time God is guarding our eternal good.

The outlook that gives us balance in in tippy times is joyful, prayerful and thankful; not because we took a Norman Vincent Peele course on the power of positive thinking, but specifically because of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

**B.** Our Guidance is laid out in the next four verses: ***“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”*** Remember, this is written to committed Christians who had likely been believers for six months or less. How do newbies get good quality guidance to keep their faith in balance?

***“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.”*** Faith does not come from within us, but from the Holy Spirit. We are not to indulge in worldly pursuits or lusts. As the Word says elsewhere, these *“sinful desires war against your soul”* (1 Peter 2:11). Plunging ourselves into sin can finally extinguish the fire of the Spirit. Don’t do that.

That is the negative side. The positive side, though still stated negatively, is to find reliable guidance: ***“Do not treat prophecies with contempt.”*** Listen to the preaching and teaching of God’s word. Don’t hold them in contempt. Even if the pastor, the preacher, doesn’t connect well with you. Even if your intellect, your leadership, or any other virtue is superior, don’t let that bring disrepute on the thing you should be doing, which is gathering around God’s word. Yet God does not mandate an unquestioning acceptance of all that we hear: ***“Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”*** We test what we hear. In the gold rush days of the Old West, a miner’s find had to be tested at the assay office to see if it really was gold. And we, while we do not hold spiritual talk in contempt, we do weigh it against God’s Word. If it fails that test, it gets thrown away. That’s it. Done. If it passes, we hold on to it.

Our only reliable guidance comes from God’s word, so we cultivate a warm regard for God’s word, and frequent contact with it.

**C.** So we have a constant outlook and a stable guide. Finally, however, our assurance in turbulent times is not that we are going to get things right, but that ***“The one who calls you is faithful.”***

Our annual celebration of Christmas is an important reminder of that truth. God kept his promises and sent a Savior. And as that Savior once came to save us, he will come again to give us heaven. Our God is faithful.

For most of the Thessalonian Christians, I imagine that the most turbulent year of their lives was the year that the Apostle Paul walked into town and started preaching about the Son of God, their Savior Jesus Christ. It sounded like a good idea, but it brought problems. Yet even though it brought persecution and hardship, those Christians counted it a treasure. And by God’s grace, the Apostle Paul wrote and gave them the guidance to keep an even keel, to keep the canoe from tipping over, even in their turbulent waters.

Have a joyful, prayerful, thankful outlook. Look to the Holy Spirit’s guidance in the Word. And above all, trust God; he is faithful beyond all human measure. Amen.