

## **Occasional: Stewardship**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

November 15, 2020

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The New Testament consists of 27 books. Twenty-two of them are letters. Five titles in the New Testament are *not* letters. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts. Everything else is a letter. And a letter, if you think about it, is something that is written from one party to another party when they can't be together.

The oldest book of the New Testament is a letter. Scholars think that the first writing, the oldest writing that survived and came to be part of our New Testament is Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. In this morning's first reading, Paul laments that he wanted to come in person, to be present in person. But he could not. Because Satan blocked his way.

It's eleven days until Thanksgiving. And I know some of you will be able to sit down to dinner with your loved ones. But many of us, most of us, will experienced a vastly diminished Thanksgiving. Some of us will be experiencing the first solitary Thanksgiving of our lives. All alone. At home. With a turkey sandwich. For reasons that we cannot control. For reasons which we may not fully understand. So when Paul says that he can't come to the Thessalonians in person, because Satan blocked his way— the King James version translates it at *hindered*, Satan *hindered*— some of us this year can really appreciate these words maybe for the first time ever. Satan keeps putting up barriers that keep us apart. And the isolation is taking a toll.

But Paul says, in this oldest original book of the New Testament, that we are separated in person, not in heart. Have you heard anyone make the distinction between *social* distancing and *physical* distancing? We don't need to be less social right now. We need to be more social. It's *physical* distancing that will protect us from Covid, they say. Social distancing will only make us more afraid and depressed. Paul was already on to this when he wrote the first and oldest book of the New Testament. We are separated in person, not in heart. Satan keeps us apart in person, Paul says. But he can't keep us apart in heart.

I think it's profound when we recognize that much of the New Testament was written BY people TO people that they could not be with. What you and I are experiencing, with the Covid pandemic, is brand new for us. But for the Church, the capital-C Church, what you and I are experiencing is nothing new. Separation and isolation are written into most of the pages of the New Testament.

So the mission, the enterprise of our congregation is clearer today than it has been in many years. We have to help people get through this crisis. We have to give them hope. And keep them connected. And then we have to be able to ramp up when the crisis begins to end. We have to minister *today* with people and shine a light in the community *today*, and prevent the spread of virus *today*. *And* still be here, ready to resume a more normal life, as this thing begins to wind down, eight months from now, twelve months from now. My mental image is this footbridge over this huge chasm. It's narrow, and people can only cross it single file. And if you fall off the bridge, it's two thousand feet down. And the wind howls, and the bridge sways and creaks. And the Church has to get people safely across this bridge. *And* has to be there for them when they get to the other side. That's our mission right now.

Some businesses are able to scale back. When there is less going on, their costs go lower. But other businesses have fixed costs. So even when the traffic flow of customers drops, the bills all stay the same. Dove of Peace is one of those businesses with fixed costs. Just because some of our regular events like Jazz Under the Stars did not happen does not mean that our costs have gone down. In fact, if you look at the cost of our live stream video service, that's an endeavor that costs \$15,000 on an annual basis. So that's a new expense, an additional expense, that we didn't have before. But we've got to get people across the bridge. Remember, that's our mission, our ministry, our work right now.

A year ago, we had one of our most successful stewardship campaigns in many years. That means a significant number of people made a financial commitment, or made a higher financial commitment. And that is part of what saved us this year. Because I'd crudely estimate that our contributions fell by 20%, mostly from people who don't give systematically. They give if they're in church. Perhaps a little more if they like the hymns that day. Perhaps a little less if they don't like the sermon. But not at all if they're not in the pews. For them, it's sort of "out of sight, out of mind." We appreciate any generosity from any soul. But we would be in much worse shape today, had not so many good people stepped up and made a commitment last year.

We will finish the year 2020, I think, having received about three large, unpredicted, unrequested, one-time financial contributions. For which we thank God. That, combined with the *committed* generosity on the part of so many means that we have not suffered any significant impairment to our ministry, and we are in no danger of going under. The little gym where I had my membership and occasionally sweated out a treadmill session closed after about two weeks. They didn't have the resources, they didn't have the support. We are blessed, indeed, and we are grateful, to be an altogether different kind of institution. But it's a sobering thought that those large, unanticipated gifts will not recur in 2021. So as a congregation, we really need to repeat last year's success. Because although 2021 is going to be a better year in every way, it's going to be challenging.

In this little letter to the Thessalonians, in this little piece we have before us this morning, Paul says, "*You are our glory and joy!*" He means the members of that congregation. In another letter, Paul says, "*My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown.*" It's funny,

because you'd think Paul would say that *Jesus* is his joy, Jesus is his glory, Jesus is his crown. But Paul sees the efforts of the local congregation as his glory and joy. Satan may hinder us. That footbridge may sway and creak in the wind. We may be isolated from one another. But we are separated in person, not in heart. We have a physical distance of space, not a social distance of the heart. And the health and the purpose of this little community are our glory and our joy.

So we have three things for everyone to consider. Everyone within the sound of my voice. Near or far. Member or non-member. First, please think seriously about making a commitment to this congregation for 2021. It does not have to be a large commitment to be a meaningful commitment. But this congregation is here and open and alive right now because of committed givers.

Second, we want to send everyone a Dove of Peace ornament for your home. Regardless of whether you make that commitment this year. It will be a little ornament, almost like a medallion, that you can hang on your tree, or hang in a window. It's not just for Christmas. It's a daily reminder that you are not alone on the footbridge.

And third, we want you to take a picture of that ornament, hopefully with yourself and your family. Whether hanging on a tree, or over a doorway, or in a window, or on the refrigerator. Take a photo. Or even a video! Some of you Lutherans post videos all the time on Facebook. Of your cute pet. Or of your parachuting out of an airplane. If you can do that, you can make a video of yourself and your ornament saying hello to your church, wishing others the best. And then we will gather all of those photos and videos into something we can all share and watch. So even though we are physically distant, we are not socially distant. Or as Paul tells the Thessalonians: Even though we are separated in person, we are not separated in heart.

So: thank you for all you've done this year. The many sacrifices, the many unwelcome changes, the anxieties, the loneliness. You've done well through all of it. You've been generous. You've been kind. You've been the salt of the earth and the light in the darkness. And you are truly the joy and the glory of Dove of Peace Lutheran Church, and you are joy and glory of the Master whom this church seeks to serve. Amen.