

Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)
1 Thessalonians 1.1-10
October 19, 2008
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

If you parked in the municipal lot or on Osborn Avenue, and walked through Fellowship Hall on your way in, you may not have seen the verse posted on our sign board on the front lawn. It says:

“We give thanks to God for your labor of love.”

It comes from this weekend’s lesson from St. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. St. Paul wrote that letter in about 50 A.D., and addressed it to the members of the church he had planted in Thessalonika. The Holy Spirit addresses that same letter to us, and to the people in our community who will drive, walk or bike by and read that beautiful and so-true verse:

“We give thanks to God for your labor of love.”

Last week I met with someone who’s not a member of our church family, who thanked me for spending time with her in the midst of my busy schedule. I told her that the Lord’s flock is much larger than the names on our church rolls. The ministry of our Holy Trinity family includes recognizing and trumpeting the acts of faith, courage, generosity and compassion we see around us, not just teaching and leading our own people in being faithful, courageous, generous and compassionate.

“We give thanks to God for your labor of love.”

I hope the nurses and support staff who work at the Visiting Nurse Association half a block down read that message and take it to heart. One of them visited Mark after his most recent hospitalization; she was an earth angel who appeared and blessed him regularly. I hope those who hang the yellow ribbons in town to remind us to pray for our armed forces serving in harm’s way saw our message and know it refers to them. I hope the teachers at the preschool and elementary and high schools here in Manasquan and throughout and beyond this district

recognize their jobs as ministry, and know that we thank God for them. The message is addressed to Pastor Joe and his flock at First Baptist who are collecting men's winter coats for the needy, to Pastor Davis and the deacons at First Pres who administer our ecumenical food pantry, to Deacon Dennis Saake and the people of St. Mark's who have a tutoring program and many other forms of outreach to those who speak Spanish in our community. To these and countless others we erect our front yard greeting card and announce,

“We give thanks to God for your labor of love.”

The Christians of Thessalonika to whom Paul originally wrote those words of appreciation and encouragement, were beleaguered but brave, persecuted but proud, fallible but faithful. Thessalonika (the modern city called Salonika) is in Macedonia, just north of Greece, literally on the highway between Rome and Constantinople, which were the two most important cities in the world of Paul's time. Thessalonika was a wealthy, cosmopolitan city, proud of its independence (Roman soldiers had never been stationed in it). In the first century it had about 70,000 inhabitants, a diverse group of folks who worshiped an assortment of gods, including Greek, Roman, and Egyptian deities. People were usually tolerant of others' beliefs. However, religion governed the social and cultural clubs they joined. Many people were not comfortable with the Christians' insistence that their members must not belong to those groups, because membership entailed worship of idols. They saw Christians as unnecessarily exclusive in their beliefs, an attitude they saw as divisive of the larger community and a threat to the delicate balance of their relationship with Rome; Thessalonians therefore persecuted Christians. Paul was in Thessalonika a very short time, because the Christians there were afraid for his life if he stayed and continued to preach.

We don't know exact what the “labor of love” was, for which Paul praised the Thessalonian church, other than that it included preaching and living out the Good News. He thought they did such a tremendous job of it, that he devoted a full third to half of his letter to

giving thanks. That's unusual. Paul didn't say what he didn't mean. (His letter to the Galatians, with whom he was upset, doesn't include a single sentence of thanksgiving) In the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, verse 3, Paul gives thanks for three things in particular: the community's faith, hope and love (which reminds us of his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, the hymn to love, in which he says, "Faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love" – 1 Cor. 13.13). He speaks about:

- Your work of **faith**
- Your labor of **love**
- Your steadfastness of **hope**

I give thanks to God for **you** and not just for the people who pass by and read our signboard, because I see daily evidence of **your** work inspired by faith, **your** labor born of love, **your** endurance grounded in hope. One of the great blessings of this little community of ours is that so many give of their time and talent, sweat and creativity, broad vision and practical skills that Cynthia spoke about in her temple talk. I know that sometimes when we are tired or disappointed we can fleetingly feel like we are among the few who do the lion's share of the work. From my vantage point of full-time ministry, though, I can tell you that many are putting their hand to the plough here. More workers would be welcomed, of course! But many already pour into the fields. When more find their niche, identify the gift they can joyfully give, the existing laborers will be reinvigorated and the ministry will be that much more fruitful.

Part of **work** being **inspired by faith** (rather than human ambition) is entrusting the outcome of ministry to God, and remembering that God judges differently than we do. I remember a conversation with my preaching prof, Dr. James Forbes, who taught at Union and later became senior minister of Riverside Church in NYC. I was expressing my deep and paralyzing fear that my pen would never produce another sermon worth preaching, and he riveted me with his piercing blue eyes and declared, "Mary, God asks for faithfulness, not

perfection.” When our work is inspired by faith, we remember that: God asks for faithfulness, not perfection. We’re freed from the fear we’ll make a mistake, and freed for partnership in God’s work in this world.

Similarly, when our **labor** is **born of love**, we realize God isn’t obsessed with numbers but with nurture (*New Interpreter’s Bible, Thessalonians*, p. 690). Numbers are not the **only** or even the **most important** indicator of whether we are faithfully nurturing the children, youth, families and singles among us. “God isn’t concerned with statistics but with stability.” Are we predictably preaching and living out the Gospel? Are we **enduring in hope**, both in lean and fat years? Or does a downturn in the economy paralyze us, make us circle the wagons and forget that we are blessed to be a blessing, that we are here for those who aren’t here yet? And does an upturn in the economy mean we’re more apt to pursue the good life rather than a life which is good? In all times, does the Word of God, Word of life, provide us with a center that holds? If so, others will be able to say of us, too:

“We give thanks to God for your labor of love.”

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham