SEVENTHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*In the Power and the Holy Spirit* 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

*In 1973, scholar and Jesuit priest Michel de Certeau wrote that he was “feeling the Christian ground on which I thought I was walking disappear, seeing the messengers of an ending, long time under way, approach.” These melancholy lines capture a feeling as widespread 50 years ago as it is today: the Christian West is fading away, “destined to lose itself in history,” as Certeau says.*

So begins a recently published article in a journal called *The Christian Century.* The writer goes on to say that melancholy *“was not an unreasonable feeling for a French Catholic to have in the 1970s”* because the world was changing and very rapidly. Certeau was seeing and acknowledging the way the common and exalted place the church had held in the west for almost two thousand years was beginning to lose its position of prominence.

In France, the government had formally declared the country a secular republic just twelve years earlier. A few years after that, between 1962 through 1965, Vatican II developed new policy and decreed that from then on the Church would adapt to the *world* instead of the world to the *Church*.

The good news about this is that this has made the Church listen more intently to the voices of prophets and other minority voices it might once have ignored or left behind unnoticed. As the leadership of the church has confronted its decline in membership and importance it has been forced into a self-reflection that it might not have otherwise engaged. This is a good thing.

Instead of guarding our position—but make no mistake: there has been a lot of that, too—however, instead of *exclusively* guarding our *status* in the world, the Church’s changing position in the world has also forced it to face some of the many ways in which it has become too much like the world; the many ways in which manners and prejudice had flourished; even the way it had responded to complex problems with easy answers.

And so it began to earnestly address, even struggle, with questions about the role of women and openly gay people in ordained ministry; the health or illness of race relations and the church’s role in that history, and the continuing definition of what it means to do the work of justice and peace. That is: the work of Christ.

Each of these struggles acknowledges that the Church’s voice began as a minority voice. The Church is supposed to be “a voice crying in the wilderness,” calling people out and away from their everyday life so that we might seek out and find the essential and life-giving way of Christ.

So, the Church, when it is faithful, does not vie for prominence and power in the traditional, or worldly, sense of the word. Rather, the Church insists on an absolute faithfulness to the One who loved the world so much that he gave up his place on it for a place on a cross.

We, the Church, are those who leave safe surroundings in order to go in search of the Christ who abandoned not the earth, or the people, but death and the tomb. Christ left the tomb empty and went ahead and he calls us to come and find his Spirit out the world.

Such a Church is one in which the light that looks like it is receding does not leave us in darkness. Instead, what we find is that it is moving. And because the Christ light is moving we may have to “break camp” so to speak and follow it. We may have to dislodge ourselves from the familiar crevice in which we have settled and go forth into an unknown future.

To do that, we are going to require a renewed sense of adventure and a deep respect (even love) for creativity and possibility. We are going to have to get comfortable in uncomfortable surroundings—in places and among people who find us increasingly *un*like them. Indeed, we are going to have to become more and more like the people to whom Paul was writing in the passage we just heard from his first letter to the people in the Thessalonian church.

At this point, I always like to remind myself that these letters were *not* written *to* us. However, they were written *for* us. And so when we listen to Paul’s words of encouragement and hear the pleasure he is finding in a people who are continuing to love and live the message of Christ, we are allowed to feel a burst of pride and gladness when we, too, can point to those places in our own life together where we, too, have responded to the world around us like the Thessalonian church did.

Theirs was a congregation that knew what it was like to live and move in a community with whom they were out of step. Specifically, the church Paul founded was in the busy city of Thessalonica, which was a port town on the banks of the Aegean Sea, and the Roman capitol of Macedonia in northern Greece. We read about Paul’s work in this town in the Book of Acts, in chapter 17.

Paul and Silas had gathered followers after Paul had preached at a synagogue in Thessalonica for several weeks. Unfortunately, opposition developed to his message about Christ, and he left the synagogue to develop a congregation composed primarily of Gentiles.

The religious leaders then succeed in stirring up a mob demanding that Paul and Silas be expelled from the city. And city leaders extracted promises and bonds from Jason, a prominent member of the new church that Paul and Silas would not return. The apostles were then secreted away that night under cover of darkness.

The church that remained—and they did, indeed, remain—continued to practice the love of Christ, the way Paul had taught them to do. And so, in his letter to them, Paul begins by naming for the Thessalonians all they have done that causes him to react with and praise.

First, he is encouraged when he remembers their work of faith, their labor of love and their endurance of hope [1:3]. This is his first use of the triad of faith, love and hope, which will appear as a group again when he urges the Thessalonians to arm themselves with these virtues [5:8], and later in his famous discussion of love in 1 Corinthians 13.

Based on Paul’s response to Timothy’s report encapsulated in this letter, it does seem that the Thessalonians endured the hardships they faced so that their faith continued to work, and their love continued to bear fruit [4:10].

These virtues, however, are not evidence of the Thessalonians’ moral superiority. Rather, their work, labor and endurance are founded upon Jesus Christ their Lord and are directed toward God [1:3].

Paul’s thankfulness also arises because he is sure of their “election”—the special nature of their status in Christ. The proof is in the fact that the Thessalonians have not just responded to the gospel with lip service, but instead their lives show the evidence of God’s power, the Holy Spirit, and great assurance.

Paul proudly points to the way the Thessalonians have become imitators of Paul and of the Lord in the way that they react to tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit. The Thessalonians as imitators then become the imitated when they act as an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, key regions in Paul’s spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ westward.

Finally, Paul is thankful because the news of their faith toward God has gone out even beyond the regions of Macedonia and Achaia, causing the word of the Lord to ring out [1:8] among more and more people. Specifically, people tell of the Thessalonians’ hospitality toward Paul and his comrades, their turn from idols to serve the living and true God and their expectation of the return of Christ. These are not empty words of praise. The Thessalonians still have room to grow [4:10] and to learn [4:13], but their response to the gospel is certainly cause for Paul to be thankful.

Paul’s words, and the Thessalonians’ example are words of assurance and encouragement for us as we look toward our own future, and the future of the good news that is ours to carry forth. Indeed, I am going to risk the possibility of being prideful by suggesting that Paul would be very proud of us, too, and what we have accomplished in the Capital Campaign we are celebrating this morning.

I am not referring to the amount of money that has been pledged—although that is an amazing feat. And I am humbled at the time and effort that the Capital Campaign Team has given to this effort. I wish all of you could have seen and experienced the amount of thought and creativity that went into the last few months of work, prayer, and activity. I am also deeply humbled at your generous response to the work and faith that has been demonstrated by the Team.

However, even more than all of that, what fills my heart to overflowing is your faith in the future—*that* is what our pledges embody. Your pledges are a way of declaring that *God’s* mission in the world, and our part in that mission, is still important to you. They declare that it is important to us to follow the light of Christ out into a new future that only God can see, but which we believe in and embrace.

That is what we celebrate this morning: that like the Thessalonians, we will not be daunted or afraid that the world around us is different. We recognize that it is still populated by God’s beloved people, and because this is true, we are going to equip ourselves to minister to them by making this place a place of welcome, a place that will be useful in the building-up through the presence of the Spirit of openness and generosity.

Michel de Certeau, the man I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, did have melancholy words to offer us at first. However, what I want you to really know about him is that he only remained downhearted for a while, and then he remembered that Christ is always ahead of us. He remembered that the Spirit is visible to us in the way it inspires us to love and move forward as we follow Christ, as we are faithful to God’s mission.

Therefore, let us rejoice and be glad this morning. Let us give thanks for what we have promised and pledged. Let us celebrate together and with the guests who have come to share this time with us. And finally: let us go on in the power of God’s love, and with joy the Holy Spirit. Let this be so. Amen.