

WE LIVE IF YOU STAND FIRM

1 Thessalonians 3:6–13

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

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It is doubtless the case that the most important person in the New Testament – beyond Christ – is the Apostle Paul. Though his sometimes fiery personality and certain of his writings about the role of women in the church have drawn a varied reception throughout the centuries, more than any other historical figure, Paul was responsible for taking the small but dedicated movement that grew up around the belief that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead and was indeed the long-expected Messiah and for spreading that movement from its base in Judaism into the language, geography, and thought-forms of the Greco-Roman world. Paul thus positioned Christianity to become the worldwide religion it is today.

As we read Paul’s letters, more as a reflection of the story of his life than the doctrines to which they have given birth, we become aware that he knew – from personal experience – that not all human relationships can be mended, not all conflicts resolved, not all divisions healed, even those relationships that begin in a common faith.

To use one example quite obscure: A follower named *Demas* signed up for the Christian movement with initial enthusiasm and commitment.

- The first time Paul was imprisoned in Rome, Demas stood by, along with Luke the Physician, sufficiently loyal that when Paul wrote the Colossians, he conveyed greetings from Demas and Luke.¹
- Demas also stood with Paul as Paul implored Philemon to welcome the fugitive slave Onesimus back – “no longer as a slave but... [as] a beloved brother.”²
- But by the time Paul was nearing the end of his life, again imprisoned in Rome,³ Paul wrote Timothy that Demas – “in love with the present world” – had “deserted” him,⁴ leaving Paul virtually alone and

¹ Colossians 4:14.

² Philemon 24.

³ II Timothy 1:8; 2:9; Romans 1:16-17.

⁴ II Timothy 4:10.

leading him to ask Timothy to “come” visit him in prison.⁵ “Come before winter,”⁶ Paul wrote, likely knowing, but not wanting to say, that he might not survive the impending season of cold in the prison block that had become his home and to which Demas had ceased his visits. “Come before winter.”

Paul was aware, that not all human relationships ended in reconciliation, peace, forgiveness, healing. He knew the power and persistence of human division.

I.

This context makes Paul’s words to the Thessalonians that are found in our epistle for this morning more significant than they might seem upon our first hearing or reading them. These words are written with awareness of the human propensity for division, but also with a hope and a pathway toward something better.

- Paul has a close relationship with the small congregation he had founded in Thessalonica, but after he had moved on to Athens and then Corinth, he became aware that the Thessalonians had become “shaken” in their faith “by the persecutions” they had seen and by which they were threatened.⁷ Paul feared that his labor among them had been “in vain.”⁸
- Paul had dispatched Timothy to “strengthen and encourage” the Thessalonians “for the sake of their faith.”
- Timothy had returned with “good news” of their “faith and of their love,” presumably both for God and for Paul. Timothy also reported that they were anxious for Paul to visit them again that they might see one another “face to face.”
- There is nothing like good news received in a prison cell. Paul could not wait to grab pen in hand and scrawl across parchment in his own handwriting: “For we now live if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.”

The aging apostle and prisoner drew life from how well his former charges the Thessalonians flourished, both as human beings and as people of faith. “For now we live” he said, “if you...stand firm in the Lord.”

II.

There is a secular applicability within the structure and movement of Paul’s words.

I need not remind you that in the human communities in which we live and work, we are increasingly beset with and marked by division with which few of us are happy:

- Friendships
- Marriages
- Families
- Neighborhood and condo associations
- Schools
- PTAs
- College and professional sports

⁵ II Timothy 4:9.

⁶ II Timothy 21.

⁷ I Thessalonians 3:3.

⁸ I Thessalonians 3:5.

- Churches and synagogues
- Political parties
- Faculties and law firms and medical practices and trade associations and government relation offices and think tanks.

An opinion piece in yesterday's Wall Street Journal is entitled: "America Is Addicted To Outrage. Is There A Cure?"⁹

Yet as human beings, in the midst of division and outrage, we still have the capacity to draw life when others flourish:

- When our spouses are doing well
- When our children are doing well
- When our fellow students or teachers are doing well
- When our colleagues are doing well
- When the most significant people in our lives are living up to their best and happiest potential.

We live. We live when others are doing well.

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What is true *within* the culture of our nation is true *beyond* our borders as well. To the extent that other nations and peoples flourish:

- With enough food
- With shelter
- With freedom from disease
- With freedom from tyranny and oppression and torture and abuse

We – in our nation, in our land – flourish as well. We live as others have life.

Again, the Apostle Paul knew that not all divisions can be solved; not all conflicts can be reconciled; not all people can live in peace with one another; but that knowledge did not stop him for living toward what he wrote, namely, that we live because others flourish as well.

III.

But Paul is not simply a *secular* thinker. His actual words to the Thessalonians were: "We live because you continue to stand firm in faith."

I never want to assume that everyone sitting in these pews – nor in this chancel – has faith that is never beset by weakness, doubt, challenge, division. I know that I do not always stand firm in faith, and I doubt Patrick and Whitney always do either. We are all of us subject to challenge in our faith.

But I also know that the more people who are close to me experience growth, renewal, strength in their faith, the more my faith begins to heal, find restoration, grow into strength. When I look out and see you all nod in recognition, smile quietly at something I have said, write and tell me something you got out of a sermon or push

⁹ Lance Morrow, "America is Addicted to Outrage. Is There A Cure?" *The Wall Street Journal* 12/1/2018, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-is-addicted-to-outrage-is-there-a-cure-1543620811?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>.

back, the coming to life your response represents brings me back to life. I experience life in faith in the life I see in your faith. “We live,” said Paul, “when you continue to stand firm in faith.”

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This sermon has been a little more abstract than mine usually are. There have been no stories or poems, no passages from Hemingway or Dostoevsky.

Part of the reason is that I did not start writing until after the Officer Training session we had yesterday. My tardiness arose, as some of you know, from the fact that after a wonderful four days in Cleveland over Thanksgiving with sixteen members of Maggie’s extended family – all younger than us except her mother, her mother, Mary Elizabeth Ellis, passed away unexpectedly Friday morning. She was 98 and a-half, and in the family lottery I had predicted she would live to be 100, but I was wrong.

In a family that four generations back includes Presbyterian ministers and missionaries, it has fallen my lot as the most nearby preacher who (believe it or not) can preach her funeral sermon with the fewest tears, I have been selected to be such preacher this coming Tuesday. I have chosen this non-funeral passage from Paul on which to preach, and this is part of what I plan to say:

- Mary Elizabeth Johnsten was born in Canton, Ohio, in 1920.
- She was baptized in a large Presbyterian Church that now struggles with just a handful of members.
- Her father died when she was sixteen – prior to Social Security – leaving her mother to support Mary Elizabeth and her brother and sister by taking boarders into their home.
- Mary Elizabeth managed to attend The College of Wooster, a nearby Presbyterian college, where she met Paul Ellis, a child of the mission field in what was then Persia who had also enrolled at Wooster. They married and moved to Chicago where he attended McCormick Theological Seminary.
- After graduation, they moved to Conch, New Mexico, where Paul was pastor of a Presbyterian church on an Indian Reservation; then to Ashtabula, Ohio; Wichita Falls, Texas; and ultimately El Paso, where he organized a church filled with young military families, many of whom worked at the White Sands Missile Range, and where he served for over twenty-five years.
- Along the way, they gave birth to four children, the youngest of whom is my wife Maggie.
- A defining moment in all their lives occurred when their oldest child Judy, who had graduated from Julliard and was teaching voice at the University of Illinois, was found at age 30 to have a brain tumor. Surgery at Massachusetts General Hospital saved her life following a seizure, but she emerged with significant cognitive and speech impairment.
- Mary Elizabeth and Paul took Judy and her two pre-school daughters into their home in El Paso, raised the daughters, cared for Judy for most of the next thirty years until her death in 2004.

Mary Elizabeth thus raised her four children, her oldest child twice, her oldest child’s two daughters, and played a significant role in raising Maggie’s three children for the ten years she lived with her.

Over time, Mary Elizabeth became the matriarch of a large family spread all over the country.

- When she turned ninety, she hosted an East Coast birthday party in Cleveland and a West Coast party in Modesto, California. Well over sixty people attended each, with little duplication.
- When she turned ninety five, there were 65 family members plus some longtime friends celebrating in Cleveland.
- She had ten grandchildren, seventeen great grandchildren, as well as numerous cousins and nieces and nephews on both sides.

Within her extended family are many strands of accomplishment, change, and tragedy that our nation has seen during the near century of her lifetime.

- Her family has contained a nuclear physicist, a prep school headmaster, ministers and missionaries, physicians, artists, a CIA officer and countless teachers.
- There have been a drowning and a likely suicide.
- There has been addiction.
- There have been divorces.
- Religiously, there have been dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterians, evangelicals, fundamentalists, and many who wrestle with Atheism both Old and New.
- Politically, they are as divided as we are as a nation, and the Thanksgiving after the 2016 Presidential election left no words unspoken at the dinner table over which Mary Elizabeth presided, with only a few spoken softly, few rationally, but none throwing her for a loop.

At some point, nearly all in her family have migrated toward her to celebrate one of her birthdays, to look at old photographs, to regale her with stories or to be regaled by stories from her. And they have turned to her for the Solomonic wisdom she possessed.

The reason I have chosen this passage from which to preach on Tuesday is that like the Apostle Paul, Mary Elizabeth Ellis has drawn life as others around her have flourished.

When that flourishing was of the secular variety, it brought her life; when it was a flourishing in faith, it brought to her dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterianism even more “dyed-in-the-wool” ness.

No matter what changes were occurring among members of her family, people were always welcome at her table, always striving to stay up as late as she would stay up for conversation. At 98 1/2, she had her eyesight, some of her hearing, all of her mental faculties. She never stopped drawing life from others, as they flourished in life, in faith, or both.

I know that the Apostle Paul is not someone with whom, if we read him closely, most of us will always agree. I did not always agree with my mother-in-law, and certainly her youngest daughter, my wife, did not always agree her. But it was an honor to know her. It was an honor to become part of her family. It will be an honor to preach her service. Like the Apostle for whom her husband and son are named, she is one of the people in the world who have helped me see that we truly live when we see others flourish in life and in faith. Amen.