

**Pentecost 25 – Year C**  
**18 November 2007**  
**Saint Anne’s Episcopal Church**  
**Lee’s Summit, Missouri**

**1 Thessalonians 3:6-13**

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.*

One of the worst things about preaching from a lectionary is that sometimes you are forced to deal with passages of scripture that you would rather not deal with.

One of the best things about preaching from a lectionary is that sometimes you are forced to deal with passages of scripture that you would rather not deal with.

Preaching from a lectionary – or an assigned set of texts from scripture, as we do in the Episcopal Church – is pretty much like most things. The worst thing about it is also the best thing about it.

The text from the Second Letter to the church in Thessalonica is certainly one of those texts that I might not choose to preach on. I especially don’t think it’s something I’d choose as the text for the sermon to preach on the day of our Annual Parish meeting.

However, this text is one of the assigned texts for today. So, I have been forced to think about. And, as I’ve studied this somewhat unusual portion of scripture over the last couple of weeks, I think there may be something in this text for us, here today at St. Anne’s.

**Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.**

Did I hear that right?

**Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.**

Could these words have actually been written by someone who was a follower of the one who said,

**I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...just as you have done it unto one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.**

On the surface, I just can't square these two readings – the first from the writer of the Second Letter to the Thessalonians and the second from Matthew as he recorded the words of Jesus.

**Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.**

On the surface, it's just plain shocking.

Well, surface readings can be dangerous and context is everything to good interpretation, isn't it?

So, what is the context of this passage from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians? Can understanding the context help us see what possibly might be going on here?

In Chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke wrote about Paul's preaching and teaching in Thessalonica – a prosperous seaport on the Aegean Sea. The capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, thoroughly devoted to the imperial cult and its worship of the Emperor. But also a city thoroughly influenced by Greek culture.

Paul was the person who brought word of the Christ, Jesus as Messiah, to this city. It was here that Paul founded one of the first two churches in what we now know as Europe.

According to scholars, the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is the oldest of Paul's letters that we have in our current Bible. In fact, it is the oldest book in the Christian scriptures.

And in that first Letter, Paul had written to this church that he founded about the return of the Messiah. The coming of Christ, not as a baby in a manger but coming in power and glory to gather up those who believe to be with the Lord forever.

But by the time of the writing of the Second Letter – the one from which we read today, it appears that some members of the Thessalonian Church may have taken the idea of Christ's coming, the day of the Lord, a step or two further than Paul had ever intended in his teaching and writing.

You see some of these Christian converts, in the midst of persecution and trial, were saying that the day of the Lord was imminent - about to happen at any moment - or perhaps it had already come. And, therefore, they were totally focused on watching, waiting, talking about the impending return of Christ...and refusing to work and carry their weight in the community.

Ah, there's the context. Our reading today isn't talking about withholding food from people who are hungry and need to eat. No, it is a warning to those who have been distracted by an event that they cannot possibly predict and have forgotten their duty to be faithful day to day, every day, however long it is until Christ returns.

And, what was Paul's counsel to these distracted Christians?

**Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.**

Actually, I like the King James Version – **Be not weary in well-doing.**

Don't give up. Don't allow yourselves to get worn out by doing good. Be faithful, no matter what the circumstance or situation in which you find yourselves. Don't be distracted by things you cannot predict.

Now, for me, I have been able to make sense of this text once I understood what the context was. But, you're saying, what in the world does this have to do with us here at St. Anne's on November 18, 2007?

Well, for me, context has been a whole lot of my focus since July 9<sup>th</sup> when I joined you. Because, at first, after interviewing with the Search Committee and after interviewing with the Vestry and even after accepting your call to come here, I had a pretty superficial reading of who St. Anne's was.

Since July 9<sup>th</sup>, I have been seeking to understand the context. Because otherwise, I could be in very dangerous territory.

Now, I'm sure I still haven't learned all I will learn about you and the context in which I now find myself, but here's some of what I think I've learned.

Those of you who are St. Anne's Church, those of you who sat here at your Annual Parish Meeting last year, could not possibly have predicted what things would happen in the twelve months to follow.

Yet, as the year unfolded with all its joys and all its challenges, you have been faithful in the moments, day to day, every day, as they happened. Not distracted by things you never could have predicted, not weary in doing what was right.

I think I know this because I have come to know you better and better and that's who you are. I also know this because I know that we would not all be where we are today, if you had not been faithful in those moments, if you had become weary and given up.

You have relied on God and each other for strength; meeting challenges with prayer and the grace of God and effort; giving of your time, talent, and treasure; not losing hope. Some of you taking on critical roles as leaders, and others supporting these leaders in so many important ways.

And, today I say, "Thanks be to God" for your faithfulness, for your focus on what is important, and for your reliance on God's grace to get you, to get St. Anne's, through the past year.

Now, it's Annual Meeting time again, and we face a new year. And, just like last year, we cannot possibly predict what will happen. Together, we will face joys and challenges. Once again, God has things in store for us that we cannot even imagine.

God continues to call us to join in the mission of bringing in God's kingdom. At our graduation from seminary last May, our Presiding Bishop reminded us that we, all the baptized, have been invited to this task. And, as Bishop Katherine said on that day, since it appears that the Kingdom

of God has not yet arrived in all its fullness, we are unlikely to work ourselves out of a job any time soon.

And, even though our context is different from the one we read about in today's lectionary reading, I think the counsel for us, at this time, in this place, is the same.

**Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.**

**Be not weary in well-doing.**

Don't give up. Don't allow yourselves to get worn out by doing good. Be faithful, no matter what the circumstance or situation in which you find yourselves. Don't be distracted by things you cannot predict.

In the letter I sent to each of you when I accepted your call, I quoted one of my favorite prayers. It was written by Father Mychal Judge, a Roman Catholic priest and NYC Fire Department Chaplain, who died serving at the site of the World Trade Center on 9/11. It continues to be my prayer as I serve God and you in this place. May it be a prayer for all of us, as we begin a new year together.

**Lord, tell me where You want me to go,**

**Let me meet who You want me to meet,**

**Tell me what You want me to say,**

**And keep me out of Your way.**

**AMEN.**