



This Is the Place to Love

TEXT
1 Thessalonians 1:1–3

October 14, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This text begins: “To the Church at Thessalonica.” It’s also to Village Church.

1st Thessalonians is the first letter that Paul wrote. At least, of the letters that we have from Paul, it is the first. And of all the writings of the New Testament, Paul’s letters were written before any of the rest; before the Gospels or Acts or the other letters.

So, this is the first time someone sat down and put pen to paper to write the word *church*. “To the church,” Paul writes, “I thank God for your faith, hope and love.” I want us to spend a few weeks with these earliest words to the church.

Last year, the Session approved a new strategic framework to guide and challenge us in our ministry. The framework has seven words that are touchstones for us. This past summer, Rev. Rodger preached a wonderful series on the four expectations we have set before us: to be invitational, magnetic, formational and attentive to leadership. If you missed those sermons you should watch them on the website.

Those four expectations partner with three theological values that are serving as our guiding star. In this series, I want to teach

you about these three theological values. They are: incarnational, relational and missional. As we explore these, I think you will find resonance. In other words, they will describe who we are already. But because theology works the way it does, at the same time these values paint a picture of who we are called to be: incarnational, relational and missional.

Now relationship, you understand that. And mission, you know that well. But what do we mean by incarnational? To explain incarnation, let me tell you a story. It’s a story you know well.

There was a young couple who lived a long time ago. They were getting married, perhaps because their families had made that arrangement. They were nervous about it all. Getting married would be enough to cause some nervousness, but the real source of their anxiety was God. God sent to them a messenger who told this young woman that she would have a child who would be God’s own son.

And it happened just that way. This young, bewildered couple made their way to the old town of Bethlehem, the city of his ancestors. While they were there, in an out-of-the-way place,

unnoticed by almost everyone, the baby came. And when he did, his mother put him in a manger to sleep, and all of heaven sang him a lullaby.

You know the story. Some wonder how such a thing could happen — or how it could happen in the way it is told to us. It’s worth asking. But there is a more important question and that is *why*? Why would God choose to come to this world — this world, with all its beauty, but also its brokenness; this world, captured by political powers and economic divisions; this world, where so many feel helpless and passed by? Why would God choose to become a human being? Why is it not enough that God knows someday God will gather us all up to live with him, but that God decided to condescend and live with us?

The best explanation I have for why God made this choice: God simply couldn’t bear to stay away. God’s choice to live where we live is the incarnation.

Life in this world is cherished by God. So, for our ministry to be shaped by the life of Christ, we too must cherish life in this world. The essence of our faith is to love the place that we are, because it is already loved by God.

When Paul writes for the first time to the church, he gives thanks for the faith of the church — but not just faith, for your *work* of faith. Faith is not just something we think or believe. Faith is something we live, and it is work.

In Sue Monk Kidd's book *The Secret Life of Bees*, Lily finds herself living with some sisters, all named after the warmer months, with August being the matriarch and May being the most in need. Lily, a 14-year-old runaway, is welcomed into the home of these wonderful women. The house is pink, and one day Lily asks August, "How come if your favorite color is blue, you painted your house so pink?"

[August] laughed. "That was May's doing. She was with me the day I went to the paint store to pick out the color. I had a nice tan color in mind, but May latched on to this sample called Caribbean Pink. She said it made her feel like dancing a Spanish flamenco. I thought, "Well, this is the tackiest color I've ever seen ... but if it can lift May's heart like that, I guess she ought to live inside it."

She laughed again. "You know, some things don't matter that much, Lily. Like the color of a house. How big is that in the overall scheme of life? But lifting a person's heart — now, that matters. The whole problem with people is..."

"They don't know what matters and what doesn't," Lily said.

"I was gonna say, the problem is they *know* what matters, but they don't *choose* it. You know how hard that is, Lily? I

love May, but it was still so hard to choose Caribbean Pink. The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters."¹

It's hard to choose what matters, which is why Paul knows that faith is work.

At Village, we want to be a voice in this community that declares that life here in this place matters to the God who fashioned heaven and earth. We want to love this community just as it is because God loves this community. For Village to be Village, Kansas City needs to be a better place because we are here. Otherwise, why would God put us here?

That's what it means to be incarnational: to know that what matters most is to love what God loves.

Friday I preached a memorial service for Joe Zimmerman. He is with his beloved Grace again, who died three years ago. They were faithful members of this church family. Joe served in World War II, where he suffered significant hearing loss from combat. The truth is, I don't know if Joe ever heard a sermon I preached. But he never missed worship.

Friday I was remembering when Hurricane Katrina blew through New Orleans. These storms keep getting worse and more destructive. It was the first Sunday in September 2005. I said that I needed housing for folks who were displaced by Katrina. There were 35 folks already on their way to Village. I didn't know how long it would take, but these folks needed our help. Joe and Grace and many others

of you walked from worship to Friendship Hall and said, "We've got room. We know nothing about them, but they are loved by God, so we have room." That's the work of faith.

In a few weeks, you will hear from Father Justin. He is the visionary behind Thelma's Kitchen. You helped make this a place where the city gathers. It's a pay-what-you-can-afford café. If you can afford \$10, they ask for that. If you can't, then you pay what you can. If you can't afford anything, you volunteer for 20 minutes, and then you can eat.

I ate lunch there last week. I saw Chuck from Village; he was volunteering. Mary Chris was in the serving line. She made sure I got dessert. There were five women from Village celebrating a birthday. But there were also business execs and homeless folks. Father Justin and I talked with a man who was doing his best to stay sober for the rest of the day. He asked if we would pray with him, and so I leaned over my lunch plate, we held hands and prayed. It's a place where you are welcomed as you are, because God loves this city.

At Village, we are committing ourselves to be incarnational in our ministry — to find delight and beauty in each other and in the world, because God loves it all. I think that is the work of faith that Paul speaks of. It is to love the world that God loves.

We have chosen the theological value *Incarnation* because it reveals that God simply could not bear to stay away from this world. It wasn't enough to know that someday we would all be

with God; God had to come be with us.

Frank is a friend of mine in a former church. Frank's mother lived out of town. I can't remember her name, but I know Frank didn't call her mother. He called her "smother." She was in her late 60s and still was very much his mother. Even though Frank had been married for almost 20 years to Barbara, and they had two sons of their own, he was still "little Franky."

She mothered him, even from 250 miles away. "Are you eating?" "What did you have for dinner?" "It's getting cooler here, be sure to get Barbara to pull down your sweaters. You get that one cleaned that I gave you for Christmas last year; it's your favorite." Frank, at 44 years old, still spent most of the conversation saying, "Yes, ma'am."

He wasn't sure exactly what to say when he called her this time. The doctor had found a little problem with his heart. He said it wasn't serious, but it was his heart. Barbara said, "You better call your mother."

"Mom, how you doing? She's fine, Mom. No, the weather's been fine here. I don't need a sweater yet. Listen, Mom, I need to talk to you about something. Pork chops, I think. Look, Mom, I'm just calling, you don't have to worry. I'll only be in the hospital a couple of days. I'll call when I get home."

He should have known, but still you could have knocked Frank over with a stick when his mother walked through the door of the hospital room. "Franky, they taking good care of you?"

"Mom, what are you doing?"

"Let me get you a blanket."

"Mom, why are you here?"

"I'd have been here sooner, but the plane was late."

"Mom, what are you doing?"

"What," she said, "my son's in the hospital, and I'm not supposed to come?"

"I told you it was nothing. You didn't have to come, Mom." I bet 20 times in the next 15 minutes, he said, "You didn't have to come."

But he was wrong about that, wasn't he? She had to be there. Love requires it. She couldn't bear to stay away.

The incarnation happened because God is like a mother who just can't bear to be away.

Now, I don't expect anyone outside of our church family to say, "Oh, you know Village Church. They are incarnational in their ministry."

But I do think we want this city to say, "Village Church, I thank God for your faith, because you are a people who love us."

¹Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), p. 146

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.