



The Places Jesus Shows Up

TEXT
1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

October 21, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

We turn again to Paul as we consider the Strategic Framework for our ministry. I shared last week that the Session has approved a framework to guide and challenge us in our ministry. There are seven words included in this framework that focus on our planning. This summer Rodger preached on the four words that we call “expectations”: to be invitational, magnetic, formational and attentive to leadership.

In this series, I am teaching the three theological values of this framework. Last week we explored the importance of being incarnational in our ministry. Next week we will consider our call to be missional. Today I want to talk about relationship. So, of course, I am thinking of Paul’s conversation about love. Paul liked to talk about love.

“Love is patient; love is kind; it is not arrogant or boastful or rude.” All I have to do is mention those words, and the mind travels to a place of long dresses and guys in shoes that look like motor oil, lots of candles and a flower girl or

two. “Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.”

That’s what Paul says in Corinthians. But Corinthians came later in Paul’s ministry. Paul’s first word on love comes from our reading today from Thessalonians. This is the first word on love in the New Testament, and while Paul may speak of love as patient and kind in Corinthians, in Thessalonians he says love is a labor. “I thank God for your work of faith and your labor of love.” Do you think of love as a labor?

It makes sense to me. Here’s why. In Christian faith, love is not just something we feel. I think the cultural understanding of love is that it is first a feeling. Understandably, because we know the feeling of love is powerful. But love is not just something we feel. It is, in the words of that great theologian Clint Black, something that we do. Love is something we practice.

That’s why we say in our Strategic Framework that we endeavor to be relational in our ministry. You might wonder, what is the alternative? Good question.

My friend Dan McKnight is pastor of the Kaw Prairie Com-

munity Church here in town. He told me of a time when he got a call from a younger member of their church family. The guy said, “Dan, I wonder if you might have time to talk to me about what our church believes.”

“Sure, of course,” said Dan. “I would enjoy that.”

Then Dan asked, “So, you have been part of this church for a while. What is prompting this question now?”

He said, “Well, I was talking to my dad yesterday. He wanted to know what we believe. No one else has ever asked me that. When I talk with my friends, they just want to know what we do.”

You hear the difference? For a long time, I fear the church has suggested that following Christ was about getting our thoughts right. Now, don’t misunderstand me. I think theology is important. We know that faith engages the whole person, so being a good steward of the mind is faithful. Faith is too important to live it with casual thought.

When I was in college, I had a friend named Julie. Julie was one of the funniest human beings I knew. We were eating lunch in our college cafeteria,

and I asked her, “Would you like my apple? I don’t think I’m going to eat my apple.”

She said, “No, I don’t eat apples.”

“You don’t like apples?”

“Oh, I love them, but I don’t eat them. You know, Adam and Eve and all, shouldn’t eat apples.”

“What?”

“It’s right there. God said, ‘Don’t eat the apple.’”

“You think this is a story about fruit?”

“Say what you want,” she said, “I’m not eating the apple.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that actually apples are not mentioned. It just says, “Don’t eat of the tree.” I didn’t want to tell her that for fear she would swear off plums and oranges too.

I’m not advocating that to be faithful you check your brain at the door. There is nothing about Christian faith that invites us to be intellectually lazy. But faith is more than simply something that we think.

For a long time, I fear the church — and maybe particularly the Presbyterian Church — has mistakenly implied that the most important thing about following Jesus is to get our thoughts right. Get your doctrine straight. It is important, but it is not the most important. The most important thing about following Christ is to get our relationships right. The place that Jesus shows up is not just in your head, and Jesus doesn’t simply show up in your heart. The place the risen Christ is

most easily seen is in your relationships.

So, are you good at friendship? The answer might be yes, but I have learned friendship is not as easy as we might think. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t need friends. The truth is, there is a lot of loneliness in our culture. The AARP has reported that 35 percent of adults 45 or older report being chronically lonely.

Dr. John Cacioppo is the Director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago. His research reveals what he calls an epidemic of loneliness. He reports that when we are lonely, there are elevated levels of epinephrine, a stress hormone, in the body, and that white blood cell counts are altered. Loneliness even penetrates our cells. He writes, “When you are lonely, your whole body is lonely.”¹

We speak of love in the Christian faith, and a simple way to think of that is we need to be about the practice of friendship. And that takes work. It is a labor of love. What I have come to realize is that relationships are not something that just happen; they are practiced. Or as Paul says, sometimes love is a labor, a discipline.

This is why we have said, here at Village, that we want to be relational in our ministry. We want to be a place that practices holy friendship. Now I hope you see what I see. I hope you see that we are already good at loving one another.

I hope you see that. We hold up this value not because it is foreign to us, but because we think it is important.

Let me suggest three things that I believe nourish holy friendships. They are probably things you are already doing, but let me suggest three things.

First, friendship needs to have time. Let your calendar reflect your practice of friendship. I was not very good at this for a lot of my life. I would just let connection happen whenever, however. But I learned it was easy for me to let relationships, even important ones, slip. I have learned that like a lot of things in my life, if they don’t show up on my calendar, they won’t show up in my life.

Second, the practice of friendship requires conversation. You can talk about recipes and ball games; that’s good. But for meaningful friendships, you will want to talk about things that matter. A survey was done in 1985, asking the American public this question: Do you have at least one person to discuss important matters with? Ten percent responded that they had no one. That survey was repeated in 2004, and the number had increased to 25 percent; 25 percent had no one to talk to.² There is a lot of loneliness.

At Village, we want to be a place where people can talk about things that matter. Yesterday, our Social Witness Task Force held a conversation on gun violence. People came, holding a variety of perspectives on guns. But no one wants

our cities and towns to continue to be ripped apart by gun violence. No one wants that. But when it comes to talking about important things in our world, something has happened to us: We tend to talk about important matters with people who see it the same way we do. When that happens, we have let the issues determine who our friends are. So, we can talk about climate or taxes or what's the best BBQ in Kansas City, and everyone we talk with is, "Oh yeah, I agree." And when that is the case, what we lose is the art of conversation. We lose the skill to converse in a fashion that St. Augustine described, "seeking to understand before being understood."

I think the labor of love that Paul speaks of is the art of investing in friendship so that issues do not determine who our friends are, but friendship determines how we talk about the issues.

So, friendship requires time. Friendship requires conversation about real things.

Third, pray for your friends. I have a prayer list. On it are people I know who are going through a hard time of grief or heartbreak or difficult circumstance. But I also keep a list of friends — people who have loved me; people who have taught me how to be Christian. I carry their names on a slip of paper in my wallet. It is with me now. It encourages me. But I can also tell you, because I pray for these people on this list, because I engage in that discipline, it has

made me a better friend. It has made me more attentive. Pray for your friends, not just when they need you to, but simply because they are your friends.

One of the names on my list is KC. He was a pastor and mentor for me. He was a thoughtful preacher and good leader, but he was an amazing pastor. He has been known to tell a joke or two that would never be appropriate in a sermon, and when he laughed, he laughed with his whole body, just a seizure of joy. He died too young, but cancer doesn't care.

I called KC in 2004. I had only been with you a couple months. I said, "KC, I need to come see you. I don't know what I'm doing. I need to come see you before everyone else figures out I don't know what I'm doing."

He said, "Come on." I spent a whole day with him, just learning about ministry.

As the day was ending, I said, "KC, there's so much more I want to ask you. I still have so many questions."

He said, "Forget that. That's not why you are here."

"It's not? I think it is!"

"No, it's not. The only thing you need to know is when the wheels come off — and they will; when things fall apart — and they will; when you feel lost and wonder if you can find your way again — when that moment comes, I'm your first call. I've got your back. You are not alone."

In that moment, with new understanding, I understood

what Paul meant when he said, "I thank God for your labor of love."

Village, you are good at this. You are good at friendship. And it matters, because the place the world most clearly sees the risen Christ in our lives is in our relationships. So, it is something we continue to practice.

¹*The Atlantic*, May 2012

²*The Atlantic*, May 2012, "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?"

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>.