



A Place for Boldness

TEXT
1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

October 28, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

For a third week, we are learning about the theological values that form our strategic framework here at Village. We have learned that, in our ministry, we want to be incarnational; that every aspect of our lives and of this world matters to God. We learned that Village will prioritize relationship; that Village will be a church that practices holy friendship. And today we remind ourselves that, in our ministry, Village will be missional.

What does that mean?

I could talk about the folks from the Village family who spent the day yesterday at the Kansas City Care Clinic. It's a place where folks who lack insurance can find access to the basics of health care at a price they can afford. That's mission.

I could speak about the folks who gathered Friday evening to eat with friends from the Neema Church as together we supported our mission in Thwake, Kenya. That's mission.

I could mention the folks who took a morning this week to read with children from Operation Breakthrough. That's mission.

I could talk about the concert that will take place next Sunday

afternoon, with a retiring offering to support Frontera de Cristo Border Ministry. That's mission.

I could remind you of the "Be the Church" event that happened last Sunday at our Mission and Antioch campuses. That's mission.

I could go on.

Mission is where our faith engages the world. And I am informed by Paul, as Paul says, "I thank God for your steadfastness of hope." When we say, "We at Village want to be missional in our ministry," I think we are saying, "We will not lose hope."

Paul sees that hope is work. It is work because the content of our hope does not come from us; it comes from God. Paul uses the words "steadfastness in hope" because he knows it is a labor.

Why is that? I think it is because hope requires that we make decisions today that are informed by a tomorrow we have yet to see.

I was almost 18 years old, with hair to my shoulders and bell-bottom jeans. Youth Choir rehearsal at my church had just ended. I had a guitar in one hand and a chemistry book in the other, neither of which I knew what to do with. Mrs. Rosselot, a woman who worked at my

church, said, "Hey, Tom, where are you going to school next year?"

"I don't know," I said — which was unfortunate because it was February of my senior year, and I had not filled out the first application for college.

She said, "You know you can't go back to high school, right?" After my face clearly registered that this was a new thought to me, she said, "Come in here." She sat me down in her office, pulled a few college catalogues off her shelf, and we started filling out an application to Presbyterian College.

Now, had she not taken a couple of hours that afternoon, I probably would have found another way to get to college. But the truth is, I found my way to school through her office.

I learned this: If you want to go to school in some tomorrow, you better do something about it today. I think that's what *hope* looks like. It is living today for a tomorrow you have yet to see.

The Constitution of the United States was drafted in 1787. Two hundred years later, in 1987, the country engaged in a bicentennial celebration of the Constitution. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall — who twenty years earlier, in

1967, became the first African American to sit on our highest court — offered a cautionary word at the Constitution’s bicentennial. He advised that we be wary of what he called the “flag-waving fervor” surrounding the bicentennial.

“The focus of this celebration invites a belief that the vision of the founding fathers yielded the ‘more perfect Union’ it is said we now enjoy.” But Marshall disagreed. “The government the Framers devised,” he explained, “was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation” to better realize the promise of a more just society. Credit for the Constitution in its present meaning belonged not to the Framers, Marshall concluded, but “to those who refused to acquiesce in outdated notions of ‘liberty,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘equality’ and who strived to better them.”¹

Marshall believed in America, but he could only do so because he knew that America was still becoming. The nation cannot be defined by some yesterday, not even our grand ones. No, if America is to be America, we must be defined by a tomorrow we have yet to see.

I think that is what Paul is talking about. “I thank God for your steadfastness of hope.” Hope like that takes work.

One reason hope takes work is because of the way the world is. A man with an automatic weapon shoots up a synagogue in Pennsylvania, leaving 11 dead. Someone shoots up Oak Park Mall. Pipe bombs are sent

through the mail. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change tells us that time is running out, and the problem is not going to fix itself.

And that’s just this week.

In a world like ours, living in hope is work, and it is bold — because the content of our hope comes not from ourselves, but from God. And it calls us to live toward a day we have yet to see. And living toward that day is what it means to be missional.

Let me give you just one example. This letter of First Thessalonians is the first written expression of Christian faith that we have in the Bible. This is the first time that Paul sat down to write the word *church*. And in this first word to the church, Paul says our lives are defined by hope.

The first word at Village was also a word of hope. You may remember, when Village was first formed in 1949, in our first congregational meeting, we made a decision to support the formation of another new church. We weren’t eight minutes old, and we were already committing to start a new congregation. That was mission.

So, when a handful of folks from the former Stanley Church approached us and requested that we launch a satellite in their building, we had to say yes. It was courageous of them because they didn’t ask us just to fund them to keep on being Stanley; they asked us to be Village in that place. And it was courageous of you because it takes work to build a church. It requires resources and sacrifice.

And it takes hope. And here is one reason it matters.

There are 95 congregations in Heartland Presbytery, a region that stretches from the Iowa line down to Osawatomie, and from Atchison to Warrensburg. And over the past five years, these 95 Presbyterian congregations have lost 20 percent of our collective membership. Here at Village, our membership is growing, and that’s true of a dozen other Presbyterian congregations in our presbytery. But the fact is, over the next 20 years, there will be numerous communities that no longer have a Presbyterian church to serve them. Their buildings will be turned into theatres or cafes or just empty shells.

That could have happened at Antioch. But at Village, we believe that communities are stronger when a church is there. We believe that people’s lives are enriched by the church. We believe that children and youth are more grounded by the love they find in a church. We believe that a ministry that lifts up a voice of God’s love for their neighbors, and practices friendship, is power in a community. So, we are giving all we have to ensure that there is a vibrant community of faith at Antioch.

And it may not turn the membership numbers around for Heartland Presbytery, but it is what we can do — because we are shaped by hope, and we are living toward a day we have yet to see. There is a promised tomorrow that is shaping our choices today — which means

hope requires that we take the long view.

In 1857, Rodger Taney, then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, penned the Dred Scott Decision. Mr. Scott was a slave who had traveled and lived in free states and territories. He appealed to the court that he should be a free man. Taney, writing for the court, stated that the Constitution did not allow for Scott's freedom, because as a slave, he was property, not a human being.

Twenty-seven years later, the court again heard cases addressing the civil rights of former slaves. In 1883, the Court revoked the Civil Rights Act of 1875, asserting that no person descending from slaves could ever be a citizen. Justice John Harlan found himself in a familiar spot, opposing the rest of the court, a lone dissenter as a voice for civil rights. But when it came time to write his dissent, he struggled to find the words. Months passed, and he found himself in a "quagmire of logic, precedent and law."

One Sunday morning while he was at church, his wife Malvina Harlan, retrieved an inkwell from the Court. She placed it and his writing pad at his desk. When he returned from church, she told him that there was an inkwell in his study that needed redemption. It needed to write words of freedom rather than slavery. And Justice Harlan sat down that Sunday afternoon to write his dissent, using the inkwell that Justice Taney, almost 30 years earlier, had used to enslave Dred Scott.²

Justice Harlan did not prevail that day, but he did not let the prevailing winds of his day destroy his hope. He did what he could to point us to a day when we would live like all people are created equal. To live in hope like that requires the long view.

So, do not lose hope, for the risen Christ is at work in his church, and we are living toward God's promised day — a day when justice rolls down like waters; a day when swords are beaten into plowshares because it makes more sense for us to feed one another than to shoot one another; a day when our children can grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed; a day when we are not obsessed with a person's race or nationality, not terrified by those who are not on my team, but a day when all of God's children are treated as God's children.

Village, do not be discouraged. Be courageous, for we have work to do because the world needs to change. We can't do it all, but it won't change unless we do what is ours to do today.

At Village, we will be missional, which is to say, we will not lose hope.

¹Michael J. Graetz and Linda Greenhouse, *The Burger Court and the Rise of the Judicial Right* (2016), p. 3

²Ruth Bader Ginsburg, *My Own Words* (2016), pp. 105–106

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>.