



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Work Generated By Faith

SCRIPTURE:
1 Thessalonians
1:1-5

November 7, 2021 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In August of 2003, I stood in the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church in Batesburg, South Carolina. I was leading the service bearing witness to the resurrection for my grandfather. Just six weeks before, I had stood in that same spot to lead the service for his wife, my grandmother. They were married for 67 years and died six weeks apart and those two facts are the most romantic things I can say about them.

The church is small. It is a congregation of peach farmers, a shopkeeper or two, a handful of teachers, and the rest are folks who chose to stay when the town's future moved to the city. It is also the church where my father grew up. It is where he learned Bible stories on flannel board. It is where he was presented for baptism and where he took his first communion when his confirmation class of three or four promised that Jesus Christ was Lord and Savior. As a child, I worshiped in that sanctuary on summer Sundays and occasionally after Thanksgiving. I attended VBS there one summer and brought home the craft project, which was a cutting board decorated as a University of South Carolina Gamecock. (Not sure what Bible lesson we were supposed to be learning.) My grandfather served as an elder for about 150 years. My grandmother was one of about ten who sang in the choir for longer than that. Before my grandparents died, I would occasionally get an invitation to preach. Worshiping in the First Presbyterian Church in Batesburg felt a little bit like trying to fit back into my Boy Scout uniform. It was familiar but now felt out of date and no longer fit. Worship was simple and predictable. Learning anything would almost certainly get in the way.

I stood before them knowing it didn't matter what I said. I was welcome there. I belonged because they knew those who had come before me.

I don't think I realized—before I led the services for my grandparents all those years ago—the significance of that church for me. The faith I claim started there. The relationship I value with these old texts traces back to those flannel-board classrooms. My father's streams of courage in 1960s Mississippi began as the waters of baptism streamed down his forehead in First Church Batesburg. Any witness in my own life that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior was conceived in the prayers of those people and the praise of a ten-voice choir. As I stood there in 2003, as clearly as I have ever understood it before, I realized that faith has roots. Faith has history.

Faith has roots. We discover our own expression of faith, and we live our faith in our own time with our own lives, but we don't invent faith. It has history. I am mindful of this today because we read from Thessalonians. For all of us, the faith we hold traces back to this small, fragile community in Thessalonica. I say this because of all the writings in the New Testament, 1 Thessalonians is the earliest. If the books and letters were placed in chronological order, the New Testament would begin not with Matthew, but with 1 Thessalonians. This is the first gospel word. First Thessalonians draws us back to a congregation before Constantine and before Nicea, before disputes over the meaning of the trinity, before Christianity became a distinct faith rather than one more sect within the Judaisms of the first century.

There is much we may not recognize about them, and even more they would not recognize about us, but we have come from them. The history of our faith traces back to them.

The first word in this first letter, in these first moments of the church, was a word of thanksgiving. And what Paul is grateful for is the faith, love and hope of the church. Over the next three weeks, we

will reflect on the faith, love and hope of Christian people.

Paul thanks God for the faith, love, and hope but it's not just faith, love, and hope but rather their *work* of faith, their *labor* of love, and *steadfastness* of hope. Already in the first writings we hear a theme: The practice of Christian faith requires work. Persistence even.

And I don't know about you, but it seems to me that a lot of folks are weary. Weary of work. Weary of the cultural spirit and lack of civility. Weary of how life can be so hard for so many. Weary of the problems we face and the lack of communal will to address them—or even acknowledge them. To be a person of faith in such a world requires persistence. It's work.

Why does Paul point this out? Because Paul knows that from the beginning, faith has never been limited to our beliefs. I'm using the word "belief" the way we use the word today. When we speak of what we believe, we are usually speaking about what we think. We believe forgiveness is holy and that love is faithful and that God loves it when we worship, for example. But in Paul's day, to speak of belief was not limited to thought; it included choices. One who believes in forgiveness, for example, not only *thinks* it's a good idea, but actually forgives. Faith is work because it shows up in our choices.

I told you before of a family trip we took to the Grand Canyon several summers ago. I had never been there and would go back in a minute. The Grand Canyon is an amazing place. The views are breath-taking. But I was surprised by one thing. Do you know they have no guard rails at the Grand Canyon? In this culture of safety and OSHA and mandatory seat belts and "you need to be this tall to ride this ride," at the Grand Canyon National Park, you can walk right up to the edge and look hundreds of feet straight down. People were hanging their toes over the edge and looking down. I didn't do that. No, sir, I backed up, and held on to some shrubbery. You know why? Because I believe in gravity. I have a high degree of confidence in gravity; I trust gravity and my belief shapes my choices. It shows up in how I live.

Faith is like gravity. It shapes our choices, and that's why Paul says it's work. And because faith is work, I am grateful that faith also has a history;

faith has roots. We are in a strange time and I think the community needs us. I think we need each other now in a new way. That's the work that is ours to do. But this moment has history, which means we are not alone.

I was speaking to my friend, Jean Francisco, last week. Jean is our last remaining Village Church charter member. She was among the 282 folks who met in the chapel here at 67th and Mission in 1949. They pledged themselves to be the church together. The last time we spoke she told me, "I am so proud to be a member of Village. I am so proud of our church."

Jean turned 100 years old a few weeks ago and is still as sharp and gracious as she can be. And since I know she is watching us from Lakeview today, I'll say, "Happy belated birthday, Jean! We love you!"

Several years ago, she spoke briefly to us. Actually, several of you did. We took some time to remember the roots of our faith here at Village. To remember some of our own history. To recite what our work of faith looks like. Jane McKim talked to us about Better By Sunday. It was a week when more than 800 people volunteered in mission; we had over 100 volunteers every day that week. Helen Taliaferro talked about the ministry and the fellowship of Mission Sewing. Dave Lillard spoke of the more than 50 houses built with the Tuesday/Thursday Habitat for Humanity group. Carol Cowden reminded us how you opened your hearts and homes to folks devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Betty Crooker spoke of her friends in Ivanhoe through the ministry of Front Porch Alliance. Henry Sewing spoke of being the first African American family to move into our community and how Village opened our doors. Chuck Hitchcock told us how being a Stephen Minister had changed his life and Jennie Clark spoke of how we saved lives by making Rose Brooks one of our earliest signature missions.

And then Jean said, "When we started back in 1949, it wasn't possible to know all that God would do." We are in a new season as a church. And Jean is right. We never know everything that God has in store for us, but I know this: The work of faith is as important today as ever.

We are in a new season. We are crawling out of the COVID pandemic—rebuilding and renewing as a church family. This long, weighty season has raised up in many a sense of evaluation or reevaluation as

to what our life is for, what we want to be about, how we wish to fill our days. We are in a season where we need to choose the patterns and practices we will adopt to build a life that matters.

It's true for us at Village as well. We are reenergized as we search for a new site pastor at Antioch. The days ahead of us there are bright. We, as a church, have engaged the big questions in our culture about climate, violence, racism and poverty and we have committed ourselves to that work of faith. Now that we are returning to one another, we are doubling down on our commitment to be a community that loves one another. The community needs a place where we at least remember that everyone needs some kindness in their life. We will regard each other not based on the meritocratic value of

production, but based on the gospel value of love.

We promise to be a church where our children and youth can learn that they are loved by God and by us. We are endeavoring to be a community that makes Kansas City, and more than a few places around the world, kinder and more just.

And maybe, just like Paul did thousands of years ago, Paul, now in heaven, will thank God for Village, for your work of faith.

Let us choose, in these unusual days, to let the life of Christ shape our choices. Let us trust in him like we trust in gravity. It takes persistence and it's demanding and I don't know of a time in my life when it has been more important. But I know this: There are no people I would rather share this work with than you.