

"Imitators in the Image of God"

October 18, 2020; 10:00 am

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters[Ⓜ] beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶**And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers** in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸For the word of the Lord **has sounded forth from you** not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions[Ⓜ] report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Background—The story of I Thessalonians

Before the Letter to the Philippians, which we've been exploring these past couple weeks, was Paul's first epistle: The "Letter to the Thessalonians."

Even more than the church at Philippi, if that was even possible, this infant church had not started in the best of circumstances. We will explore more of those early days and challenging ways in next week's message about courage in the face of adversity—dare we say—multiple pandemics?

Back to Thessalonica. Times were tough. Rome had them under its thumb—an incredibly oppressive regime. Christians in this baby faith were "suspect." This Epistle, written in CE 51, was the first Letter written to churches Paul was founding, as he traveled around. It was written before the Gospels were even put to parchment. Tricky to keep that in mind when we study scripture in the New Testament!

They didn't have Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to refer to—they didn't have the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, and all Jesus' teachings written down to give them guidelines for *how* to Follow in the Way of Jesus. How to live out the Great Commandments of Love God with all your heart, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself!

It was all oral tradition at that point—much of "living the Faith" was from Paul and the apostles' *own* experience. What had *they* known in their hearts and lives to be true? What was Paul's experience of the

Holy? His truth, his “knowing in the depths of his being” that he was trying to convey to them—trying to share what “I want to *know Christ, deep in my heart and the core of my being,*” meant for him.

So, we have this nugget—this core of what living the Gospel means: “become imitators of Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit.”

And, what does “being an imitator of Christ” mean? For them? For us? Now, especially, in this world of troubled times too?

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To the Congregational church of Buena Vista, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
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²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters^a beloved by God, that he has chosen you:

A. To be imaginary and creative.

God expects us to use our imagination—the creativity and compassion that God has placed in each one of us. In all our thinking, communing, living in faith and community together.

And Covid is calling that out in wholly new ways! We can’t just “be the Church” the same ways we always have—for decades! For Centuries!
What do you imagine today?

For your own life? For our congregation? For our community? Our country? Our World?
How do we think globally and act locally with imagination?

God gives us amazing minds—and hearts—full of “the sky’s the limit” creativity and imagination.
And God expects us to use what we’ve been given!

Janet Steiner is the first person who comes to mind in our church of someone who does this daily! She is an endless fount of creativity—even when she *thinks* she’s feeling less than brilliant or lacking ideas ☺.

But she’s not the only one! Jacy, Thomas, Matthew, Merilee—our Virtual Worship Team. Betsy, Donna, Bowie—all the education group too—having and leading Conversations that Matter.

The Strategic Planning Team—led by VM Mark Wolters—now *there’s* a group using their God-given brain cells and creative “thinking outside the box, or the sanctuary, or the ways we’ve always done church before!”

The Church Council, full of excellent leaders, is thinking very creatively about how we Be the Church and lead together in healthy and imaginative ways into a vital and thriving future.

B. To be imaginary imitators of God—always.

For, what else are we called to be as followers, imitators of Jesus Christ, and as a beloved community, but “Imaginative Imitators of God?”

What are we called to Ask, but: What would Jesus do—in every situation? Every decision. Every tough moment? Yes, even in an election! What would Jesus call us to be lovers of humanity? How would Jesus vote? For the least of these? For the dignity and upholding of the Image of God in every person, or just some?

EVEN the ones we don't like are made in the image and likeness of God. We don't want to challenge that innate personhood. Their being as children of God. But, we can challenge behaviors and harmful acts challenge that for others, then the right and faithful thing to do is stand up and speak out about the wrong.

What decisions will we all make in the coming weeks that best uphold our Christian belief that *every soul* is a beloved child of God and has the image of God within them?

What is one thing you can commit to doing this week that looks for someone that might have been cast off or told they were not made in the image of God and don't measure up. Not as equal as other equals. Or maybe they weren't told this to their face, but systems were put into place—perhaps long ago—policies and decisions made that trickled down unfairly and unjustly to them? Systemic denial of the innate, inborn image of God in every soul is alive and well in our world—sadly.

We counter that by being an imitator of Christ. *Namaste*—we say it every week.

The Celtic Version is this:
The Christ in me greets the Christ in you.

C. God's Image in ourselves—Be Imitators of that!

Rev. In Kee Kim, reminds us that we also must remember that it starts with ourselves before it can spread to others.

“When we understand that we are created in God's image, the way we treat each other *changes*. We'll treat others with respect and affirm their dignity with our mouth, with our behavior, with our attitude. We treat *each* person with dignity. That's what we do. Jesus came to this world to *restore* the image of God in each person. Saint Paul told us to be the imitators of God. In other words, being imitators of God, means to find God's image within us.

You have to *know* that you have God's image within you. As we *accept* that we are God's beloved children, our Imago Dei is restored within us. When we deeply experience God's love within us, then we can see the beautiful image of God within us [and everyone around us.]

Choose Life

A group of religious folks, spanning a wide spectrum of beliefs, came out with a statement this week on this matter. They call themselves (and I added my name as well) “**PRO-LIFE EVANGELICALS,**” who:

BELIEVE A BIBLICALLY SHAPED COMMITMENT TO THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE COMPELS US TO A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE THAT AFFIRMS THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE FROM BEGINNING TO END.

“Many things that good political decisions could change *destroy* persons created in the **image of God** and violate the sanctity of human life. Poverty kills millions every year. So does lack of healthcare and smoking. Racism kills. Unless we quickly make major changes, devastating climate change will kill tens of millions. Poverty, lack of accessible health care services, smoking, racism and climate change are all pro-life issues.

In other words—to affirm life and the image of God in every person, is to affirm and support life in its fullness *throughout* one’s whole life.

In political terms it means a faithful Christian *can* be pro-life *and* pro-choice. I know I am! Why? Because there’s a “3rd Way.” That 3rd way is to provide and support programs of every kind that prevent abortion even needing to be a consideration. Of providing life-giving and life-supporting alternatives in our communal life together.

Rev. Jim Wallis, in *Racism is a Religious Issue*, says without apology or mincing words:

Made in the Image of God

When sorting our politics, I believe all Christians should go back to the Bible. In fact, the foundation for all our politics—as people of faith—is found in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible: In Genesis 1:26, our holy scriptures say that God created humankind in God’s image and likeness. That is the foundation

for **every** Christian decision: supporting what affirms the *imago dei*, the image of God, in others, and opposing what denies it.

Appeals to racial fear, grievance, and hate are assaults on the image of God in others. Therefore, every act of racialized police violence, every family separated at the border, every wink or appeasement to white supremacists, and every attempted suppression of even one vote because of skin color, is denying the image of God—*imago dei*.

Until white Christians understand that loving their neighbors as themselves means fighting unrelentingly for justice for Black and brown people and dismantling the oppressive structures of white supremacy, white American Christian claims to understand the heart of the gospel ring exceedingly hollow.

WORD HAS GOTTEN OUT ABOUT YOU! US!

Paul concludes this chapter to his Baby Church, which has been put down by the haters aplenty, that they are on the right track, and being noticed in good ways.

⁷⁻¹⁰ Do you know that all over the provinces of both Macedonia and Achaia believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master’s Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don’t even have to say anything anymore—you’re the message! People come up and tell us how you received us with open arms

HOW WE TREAT EACH OTHER MATTERS

How we treat each other—look upon one another—as the Image of God (or not) matters. In everything. How we consider a child in a cage at the border. A homeless person begging at the corner. A person who can’t easily get to a voting location due to disability or poverty. A political candidate that makes us cringe. A partisan issue that leads to a policy that oppresses our

neighbor, or belittles our brothers and sisters on the margins.

A senior with dementia sitting in the center of the room at the nursing home that makes us uncomfortable as we walk by.

I admit, I feel uncomfortable when people call out for help, when I'm not the one who can help them, especially when they cry ceaselessly out of confusion about where they are, and the home staff just tune them out.

Years ago, I used to take baby Rocky to the nursing home to visit my parishioners in Ft. Morgan. Some of the women would reach out, quite forcefully, wanting to grab him from my arms—so excited they were to see a baby!

Seeing others—all others—as being made in the image and likeness of God—no matter what age or stage of life and cognition—is a challenge. But it's one we are called to—not matter who, or where on life's journey.

How do we live, vote, interact, relate, read and pro-act if we fully believe and acknowledge that every creature is made in the image of God? That every being carries within them the spark of the Divine?

Will we act in ways that protect the vulnerable? Stand alongside the downtrodden? Lay down our lives, pour out ourselves like Jesus did?

This does not mean that we allow hurtful behaviors to continue unchecked. Seeing everyone as made in the

image and likeness of God also means calling out when that image gets skewed or the behaviors out of alignment with that innate core.

One person's dignity might be squelched by another's pride, and we show we are Christians by our love when we fight for the dignity and equal personhood of all, when the world is out of balance and harm is waged on the powerless by the powerful.

IMAGO DEI

Imago Dei, Imago Dei, born in the image of God are we.

Imago Dei, Imago Dei, called to compassion; born to be free.

1. How shall we live as images of God?
How best reflect the wonder of our Maker?
Humbly we will walk, with mercy respond
and know the Essence of Love is always with us. **(CHORUS)**
2. How shall we love the neighbor filled with greed?
How best respond to those consumed by hatred?
Look beyond the fear that keeps them from knowing
the Abundance of Love that's always with us. **(CHORUS)**
3. Then shall we see the images of Christ.
Then shall we know that God is in our neighbor.
Humbly we will walk, with mercy respond
and know the Essence of Love is always with us. **(CHORUS)**