

Every Good Resolve

Lessons: Luke 19:1-10; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Scholarship the last half-century has seen a few problems with what we call “2nd Thessalonians.” The verses assigned for the reading today try to avoid one of these problems and just get to the “meat” of the message without having to deal with the bones that can be discarded. But that may be a bit more difficult for us Presbyterians than for others. We have always called ourselves “People of the Book,” meaning we take scripture very seriously. We don’t take a little verse or phrase as the inspirational thought for the day. We look at the whole text, and today we are basically looking at one long sentence. Verses 3-12 are one sentence, so it seems we ought to read the whole sentence.

[Read 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12]

Paul and Timothy give thanks that the faith of the church is growing and their love for one another is increasing in spite of the persecutions and afflictions they are enduring. They continue to pray that God will *keep them faithful to their call and give them power to fulfill every good resolve and work of faith.*

So what is the trouble with the text? The sticky part is the part the assignment wants to leave out: the part about how God will repay the afflictions they suffer for the faith when Jesus returns with mighty angels, inflicting vengeance on those who do not obey the gospel. They are the ones who will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and his glory. It is to that end of being found faithful and worthy of the calling that Paul and Timothy write to encourage them in every good resolve and work of faith.

So the question we face when we do not ignore the hard part of the text is pretty simple: What happens when the fires of hell and smell of sulfur seen distant? When the destruction of sin does not appear to be coming quickly and the new rule of love over the whole cosmos by the return of Jesus Christ does not seem to be as imminent as Paul and Timothy thought? Do we change our ideas of keeping faithful to the call?

Presbyterians were born out of the last Renaissance and Reformation. It began officially with Luther’s 95 Statements of Needed Change tacked on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517. Jean Calvin was a French Catholic lawyer when law and church were under the same roof of the church. He published a new way to look at faith and the world in 1539 called “The Institutes of the Christian Religion.” We remember these two giants, and sing their hymns today, but Reformations are really seasons of change with lots of movers of change, and lots of shakers of chaos. We Presbyterians also remember John Knox, a hot-tempered Scot who was trained in Calvin’s Geneva. Knox railed against sin in high places head-on and called the Queen a whore. We grumble when the church speaks to rulers like John Knox did, but we have named lots of churches after him (and wear kilts from time to time).

The Reformation really began more than 150 years before with Wycliffe in England translating scripture into the people’s language and Jan Hus the Prussian preaching change and purification. On the last Sunday in October, we celebrate the great sea of change born out of the last Renaissance and Reformation. But we have to admit that the Christian world did not begin in 1517, nor did it become all truth and purity in the naming of what was wrong before. And let’s face it. 500 years is a long time even for great eras of history. And let’s face it: The people we

honor in every age – the Paul’s and John’s, the Augustine’s and Aquinas’s, the Luther’s and Calvin’s were the people who looked forward to transformation more than the people who were dismissing the newcomers and looking back.

One reason we are having so many troubles in the world today is that we are already past the dawn of the next great Renaissance and Reformation. It has really been going on for more than half a century already. Changes in the way change is coming make it hard for us to cope with differences and new realities. The new world is coming faster than we can handle – especially because our culture has more investment in old Renaissance and Reformation that is quickly becoming past history.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) motto is “Reformed, and always being reformed.” or, “Reformed, and always reforming.” Take your pick. The old Latin on the seal can be translated both ways. The point is that we 20th century Presbyterians affirm that re-forming, re-shaping, re-imagining, re-newing is not just an event at one time or a date on the calendar or even a season or an era. “Re-forming” is task for life in each day and every century. The task of our new Reformation is to learn how to live together in a world that is constantly re-forming and will never settle down.

One way we look toward reforming is by writing Mission Statements. They help bridge the present to the future. They give us guidance for the directions and decisions we need to make so that we make the right changes in a changing world. We at Northwood have said that we will “care for God’s world” by “loving and worshiping Jesus Christ as Lord.” Obviously, we think the world and we may be around for awhile, and we might need each other.

So how do we “care for God’s world” as our mission statement says, when we know that Jesus may not be coming back soon to do it for us? How do we use the great strengths of Presbyterian identity to guide us into an unknown future? How do we embrace the new truths and new duties of a new time in ways that honor the beginnings of faith and faithfulness? How do we continue the same task that Paul and Timothy charged the followers in Thessalonica to keep?

“...to stay faithful to our call and use Christ’s power to fulfill every good resolve and work of faith.”

We already have a clue in the problem with the text today. We read the old text with new insights, and we read it differently that people did not that long ago.

Welcoming better understanding about the texts of the documents in the Bible leads to better faithfulness in living the Christian faith. New visions of Jesus’ ministry in the 1st century give us new mission in our own 21st century.

Paul knew the Torah and Prophets, but after he met Jesus he read them differently. In every age of the church, we have seen Jesus a bit differently through the focus we needed on the times. But our image of Christ in the time must be true to the reality of Jesus in his time. Our mission has to be true to his mission in the ways we see it through our own eyes.

We have to spend more time applying the obvious things that are true in Jesus’ commands about our behavior in every age instead of rejecting the obvious ways that we see things differently today because we know more today. It is nothing less than denial to read Genesis 1 as literal description of the details of creation in the face of the majesty and wonder of God’s

creating of the cosmos we know now. It is irresponsible of Reformed Christians to remain silent when textbook adoption gets co-opted by belligerent ignorance of well-meaning people who are in denial. Calvin would never have tolerated stupidity in Geneva, so why do we remain silent and let them do this to our children. We need to speak up for new truths that do not change eternal truths.

We live in an age where the greatest advances of our time have been made by people who have given up old ways of seeing the world that have proven inadequate and just plain wrong, and who asked honest questions about how we are to live and care for God's people and God's world. Look what happened to the world when Paul the Pharisee did that and became Paul the Apostle. Presbyterians can care for God's world when we are more interested in faithful questions about what we do not know than when we try to hang on to things we know are subject to question.

Asking new questions about what scripture was saying in the time of the first followers will lead us to confess the error of some of our ways, the silliness of some of our questions, and the obvious truths that lead us to good resolve and the work of faith for our time. Listening to scripture for what it says will keep us from using scripture to say what we already want to say.

The fact that Jesus may not be coming back as quickly as the early followers thought may be more reason for us to pay attention to what Jesus said we ought to be doing in the meantime.

In every age there have been those who decided a date when Jesus was coming back, so they sold out and gathered at some location in their white robes until long past sundown because they did not have a place to go back home.

We smile at those people, but we also have those in every age who can see clearly a mission or a task or a clear call of conscience before God, and then rationalize not doing what is required because we have to hold back for the long-haul. "These things take time." "We are not ready for integration, ...or for women pastors." "We have to change the society slowly or we will hurt the economy; we can't change the church that much or we'll lose contributions from our older members."

Knowing it's a marathon and not a sprint is not a justification for quitting the race and sitting down to watch others run with good resolve. Reading the whole text today reminds us about what ultimately happens to people who sit and do not obey.

The mission at Northwood in the 21st Century is to model the 1st century until Jesus come again – and worry about the *what* of the mission more than the *when* of the fulfillment. What are we called to do to care for the world? There are some obvious problems and tasks right in front of us that beg our resolve for reforming:

1. Jesus called people to respond to the needs of the world by love and sacrifice, and told people that selfishness and hoarding were a sin against God. A synagogue or temple or nation that treasured luxury and leisure would face destruction one way or another. In Jesus' commands, compassion and giving were the best road to eternal security. That is true whether or not Jesus is coming back tomorrow. Where we spend our money now needs to correspond to the needs Jesus saw then.

2. No matter what time frame you apply to the text, Jesus says that a major criteria in judging faithfulness is the priority we give to children as the ones who have first place in the rule of God's love. Re-forming the obvious in Jesus' command in this day means that the Reformed Tradition should speak advocacy for children's needs – like basic health and good education – and speak judgment to the disproportionate priority given to any other concern in the church's practice or a culture's priorities or a government's policy. A Re-forming church should tell a culture that children are a spiritual calling, not a political football. We are not experts in how to solve the problems, but we are a conscience to say that if things are getting worse for children, our society faces the judgment of God.
3. The world we are called to care for is the world we call "God's creation," so it is here for God's glory and not our taking. We do not have to look back very far into the 20th century to see how quickly you can cause havoc in the world when you think everything was put here for our pleasure and fun and greed and spoiling. We answer to God for the way we use and abuse the planet. It is a big place, but not big enough for neglect. In this century, we will either listen and ask questions and learn to live more humbly in God's creation, knowing our little place, or we will see the judgment of destruction on the horizon whether or not Jesus comes again.
4. Whether it was an outcast tax collector like Zacchaeus or a Sanhedrin Pharisee like Nicodemus, Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Through the seeking eyes we have as Reformed Christians, it is time to say that many are lost in times of chaos and insanity, in places where people are in persecution and hardship. It is time to trust the power of the God who is still creating and redeeming and will not rest until this world becomes a place where the love we see in Jesus Christ rules in the resolve of all people and the world of all. In this age, we may need to re-imagine what it means for God to be "in control," but we can be sure that sin and death and self-centeredness and evil are no longer in control. The Jewish carpenter who said he was Messiah turned the world upside down and right side up. Our task now is to expose the insanity of our depravity and put the world right side up by the good resolve and works of faith that make Christ's love real in our time.

The Reformed tradition has always seen its mission as transforming the world. "Caring for God's world" means we work at the changes that make the world more like God's world. We are in a great tradition with lots of models to follow, but we have not vowed to follow them. We have made vows to follow the same Lord they all vowed to follow.

I find it amazingly hopeful that a Jewish comedian at a Rally to Restore Sanity on the Washington Mall yesterday closed the gathering with a message that is purely Presbyterian. Living in fear is not an option for us who trust that God is stronger than our fears. In spite of fear-mongers of chaos who really do not care about us at all, there is a Savior who died and rose again to tell us that God cares for the world and show us how to care for God's world. We have the work of faith that is a full time job – too important a work to take time away to talk of hate or to listen to false conspiracies of our demise. We have a good resolve that makes us change the channel of our living and sing the songs of hope and mission written for every age.

We have every good resolve required. The work that faith needs us to do is the obvious task Christ has put in front of us – even if it means hardship and persecution. We trust God with the outcome that is Christ's victory. We know it will come sooner, ... and probably later.