

Thanksgiving – A New Work Ethic
Lessons: Luke 21:5-19, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Before we read the lesson, there is an understanding that Paul has about the congregation in Thessalonica that we have to keep in mind. If we do not come to the passage with the context in mind, then we miss what Paul is saying.

We have to see the primary difference between the early churches and the churches today, the kinds of communities that Paul was trying to form, and the kinds of churches we keep trying to re-form all these years later. What those communities were then and what churches are now are very different things.

Paul assumes that the church is the center of life for the people who are a part of it. He has a foundation understanding that the gathered followers are the body of Christ, and the head of the body directs how they will live in the world – in every part of their world. The church does not affect their daily living. It is not there to help them with their personal struggles or their problems. The church is there to determine their living, to decide their lifestyles and shape their behaviors. Paul understands being “called out” in the ekklesia as a way of life.

For them, the church is not one of the groups on their list of involvements, it is the primary place they lived. In short, they did not come to church for support or help or friends or because it was what they had always done on Sunday. The church was the way of life that decided what other groups, activities, work they would do, and how they would do it. Christ was the head and the church was heart of living, and the community of believers was accountable to each other for the other places they went and the other things they did.

This sounds a bit grim to us. We expect to be free from anything more than suggestions at church. We don't think other people should be telling us what to do at all, and each person should mind his or her own business and leave us alone. We come to church to get help with our lives, to ask for guidance from God about hard situations, to re-charge our batteries. But the thought that someone we call a brother or sister in Christ would tell us that we need to change something about ourselves is stepping over the line. “Mutual accountability” that is in vogue with a few churches these days is just not the general idea these days.

But in churches of Paul's time, accountability to each other for commitment to live the example of Christ and to live in the community as the defining center of life was the way of life. Remember Paul's message: Because Christ had died for their old life, and by his resurrection he had given them the gift of a new life, they were supposed to respond by living this new life – his life within them – until they looked and acted like him enough that other people saw the risen Lord when they looked at this community. The question for us from the pattern of Paul's churches is pretty clear: Do we see participation at Northwood as a way of life, or just one of the places we are involved, ...and maybe committed.

Now we are ready to listen to Paul's advice about a particular problem in the community of followers at Thessalonica...

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13: “Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to

imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Paul is not giving general advice for the economy. He is not making a political statement about capitalism – that other religion that turns the Christian calendar from Christmas to shopping days. If our minds jump to thinking that Paul is endorsing some American hard-work, no welfare ethic, then we have already betrayed ourselves. We have to confess that our center may be more cultural than Christian. Paul has no interest in economy or the culture, though he knows work and money are ways to serve Christ. ...Because everything is a way to serve Christ. You see, Paul did not ignore the economy. He just lived with it differently, and it was less important to him than Christ was.

Paul is interested serving Christ in the community. Paul is giving advice to some problems with work ethic within the Christian community. Remember: the primary place these followers lived was in the community. So the way people are working or not, in the world and in the community, changes the health of the community.

Common practice in the early churches was to make sure that there was enough food for everyone, by sharing food. It was a “co-op.” Some of the believers were “living in idleness” in their responsibility to the community. Paul warns the followers to “keep away” from these “slackers” – not as enemies, but to “warn” them that if they don't work in the community, they are not part of the community. This “idleness” was about breaking covenant with the community.

Paul's admonition is not about laziness in general, it is about how some do not live up to their responsibilities to each other by doing their part – by at least doing something for the sake of each other and the sake of all. To Paul, why some are receiving without giving is not the issue. Some are taking without paying, and the goal is that no one would be a drain on everyone.

Paul's measure of health in a church is pretty clear: people keep only what they need, give the surplus to the community, and others who are in need get what they need. So Paul gives the community of believers a moral principle: “Anyone unwilling to work (for the sake of the community) should not eat.” People who do not contribute to the needs of others in the community are “slackers.”

We may not hear Paul's advice the way he says it, because Paul assumes something else that we know and sometimes forget. Paul assumes that the body of Christ is givers and not getters. And the beginning and end of our giving is thanks.

Paul lives out of this astounding sense of gratitude for what Christ has given him, and thanks is always giving. The problem in the community is some people have forgotten what they have been given, what they have, and how thanks gives back because that is what thanks is.

Paul is a guy who gives up a good life with a promising future, commits himself to a new way of life, tells people he is better off with less, does not seem to complain about bad situations, does not blame or judge the people who abuse him, and sings praise to God from a prison cell. Looking at him from our 21st century point of view, we say the guy was nuts.

And for these early Christians seeing what Christ had done to change their lives from old living to new, they could not possibly give enough. Christ gave all in all, and when they gave their all to each other, learned how little they needed instead of how much they wanted, ...well, they still couldn't give all. Christ kept giving. Their fellow followers kept giving. Looking at them from our 21st century point of view, we say they were hopelessly idealistic.

Here's the question: How's our 21st century way of looking things working for us so far? It's working for us beneath the appearances. Are we part of the culture of getters? Have we helped build a culture of "slackers"? Are we so worried about what might happen to us that we ignore what is happening all around us?

More importantly, how is working for Christ so far? We have an overwhelming body of evidence that the way the world works with its selfishness and getting and greed isn't working so well. I have a suspicion that blaming and judging others only helps us ignore our own defects and excuse our own irresponsibility. I have a conviction that a culture that measures happiness by getting and hoarding will always run on the fear that someone is trying to take something away from us. I have a fear that when a culture is focused on selfishness and self-centeredness and getting, we can't find much reason to give thanks.

In the 21st century, Thanksgiving is losing out to Christmas. In our culture it has been happening for a long time. Oh, we take a day to gather and give thanks for all our getting, and to remember the pilgrims, and to look at the astounding surplus of food on the table. And maybe we say thanks for all our getting. Before and after the day, too many of us (and I mean "us" even in the body of Christ) live in a world worrying about getting when we already have too much.

If you think Paul was nuts and the early Christians were hopelessly idealistic, try this one on: the culture has turned the celebration of the coming of the Savior of the world and owned virtually nothing into an orgy of surplus that measures the happiness of the day and life by what we get. We've come a long way from the hopeless idealism of sharing and caring. But you have to admit we must be a little nuts. Add up what you spend on Christmas and compare it to what you give to the church.

Here's the truth. When we are in the middle of giving thanks, we are not thinking about the getting. We are thinking about how much we have, and we want to give out of what we have so that others will have, ...and have reasons to give thanks. Here's the truth: it's just better to give than to receive.

This week, we at Northwood have a promise to make to our community of faith – our body of Christ. You are receiving a letter and a card in the mail asking for your promise. It asks if you will promise to live here in worship and learning, if you will give beyond what you need so that others can have what they need, if you will serve rather than be served. What will you give to do your part in the coming year? You can stare at the card or ignore it, or just fill it out quickly. But maybe it would be good to pray some prayers of thanksgiving before you start thinking about

what the church needs or who caused the problems or how much you are getting from the church.

Remember? Paul was not thinking about the economy; it is based on markets and needs and getting. Paul was thinking about the community and Christ and giving, and about the “immeasurable riches of grace in Christ Jesus that he has lavished upon us.” He said that we need to shun everything and everyone who is living for getting, because we all have what we need once we start giving thanks for what we have. His advice may or may not work for the world, but it sure works for the church. It has kept the church going for 20 centuries, precisely because the church has ultimately rejected the wisdom of the world’s self-interest, and been more interested in the foolishness of the cross and resurrection. I have a suspicion about who is going to win that one in the end. There seems to be an overwhelming body of evidence of long-term wins in the body of Christ at work in the world.

Northwood’s best strategy is to live in thanksgiving as the body of Christ, for each of us to give to the community by putting Christ at the center and letting our commitment to Christ decide our priorities in living. If we cultivate a season of thanksgiving for what Christ has given us, we will see how much we have and how much we have to give to Christ. Northwood will do just fine, no matter what happens, especially if one of our favorite hymns is “Now thank we all our God, with heart and hand and voices.”

The little group of people who started a new thing long ago gave thanks when they did not have many of the things we give thanks for. Something was more important to them than most of the things that we give thanks for. Someone was at the center of their living that changed the things on their thanksgiving list. There was so much good work out of giving thanks that we might even spend all of Advent in thanks more than giving, and come the day after Christmas Day we will still be celebrating Thanksgiving Day.