

Sermon: “Stand Firm and Hold Fast”

The fledgling church that Paul helped establish in Thessaloniki, Macedonia, Greece was convinced that the Day of the Lord, or the second coming of Jesus Christ was going to occur very soon. Perhaps, that altered their behavior a bit. Paul, or more likely one of his disciples, wrote in chapter 3: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” And “we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.” Well, at least we don’t have that problem. I mean seriously, this is a working congregation. There may not be many of us on Sunday, but most everybody is doing something, and some of you are knocking yourself out on flower beds, church pews, and budgets. And I want you to know I appreciate it and I expect that God does too.

So you can eat, if and when Robin and Company organizes another chow down event. Talk about a working group – that back row!

Unfortunately, we also have fiscal needs. Yes, there are salary checks to write, utilities to keep on, and those mission folks, always needing help.

Paul, or this writer, says appropriately, “We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, beloved by the Lord.” So thank you for all you are doing and have done for the Lord’s work. Then the writer of 2 Thessalonians makes an interesting point. He writes, “because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation...” Now, yes, Thessaloniki was one of the first or earliest Christian churches. But I was working on this stewardship idea, and I came across the fact that in the Old Testament, the first fruits were the first 10 percent portion of the harvested crop, usually wheat, or the herd, which was then given over to God in the form of a burnt sacrifice, a thanksgiving to God, from whom all blessings and crops and herds flow. This ten percent of the harvest became known as the “tithe.” Later these first fruits, or tithes, were offered for the work of the priests and the temple. By Jesus’ time, people could do this giving with money. Remember the story of the poor widow who gave all the money she had.

So to Paul and Thessalonica, the first fruits were the people sanctified by the Holy Spirit who believed in the truth – the Gospel. That’s how you were called says Paul, through “our proclamation of the good news.” That’s how you were graced with the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then he says, something I think we need to hear. He says, “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us.”

Now in Paul’s time and place, those traditions included things we have dropped, like women keeping their heads covered in worship. Remember that in Catholic practice up through the 1960’s? Not now, now even the nuns go heads uncovered, for the most part.

What traditions of faith or worship were you taught? Dress up for worship. Memorize the Lord’s Prayer or the Apostles’ Creed? Be quiet in church? We could stand to get rid of that one, I think.

For many, if not most of us raised in the faith traditions of this country, giving of your time and your talents (meaning your income) was a vital part of one’s worship life. Everybody was to put something in the offering plate when I was growing up, even if it was a penny or a nickel. And we took up offerings in Sunday school and youth group too.

Then there was pledging. I grew up in the Christian church. I started pledging an annual amount to God at 12 years old. It was not the amount, it was the act, a loving act of stewardship of what God had given us and should be returned in thanksgiving in part.

When Paul says “hold fast to the traditions” he means keep the teachings that guide you in living an authentic Christian life. The Presbyterian Book of Order, in its Directory of Worship, (W-2.5001) says, “The Christian life is an offering of one’s self to God. In worship the people are presented with the costly self-offering of Jesus Christ, are claimed and set free by him, and are led to respond by offering to him their lives, their particular gifts and abilities, and their material goods.”

“Worship should always offer opportunities to respond to Christ’s call to become disciples by professing faith, by uniting with the church, and by taking up the mission of the people of God, as well as opportunities for disciples to renew the commitment of their lives to Jesus Christ and his mission in the world. As the Holy Spirit has graced each member with particular gifts for strengthening the body of Christ for mission, so worship should provide opportunities to recognize these gifts and to offer them to serve Christ in the church and in the world.”

For those of you who have never heard a stewardship sermon, this is one. I am not making this up. It’s in our book. And if you are an Officer, Minister or a member, you promised God and these witnesses, to keep the traditions of the Book, including the Bible and the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church(USA).

Karl Travis, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Ft. Worth, Texas, near where they just played and lost a World Series, says in his recent article entitled “Why we Give” in the Presbyterians Today magazine, September 2010 issue:

“It’s not because God needs our money – it’s because giving helps us grow as Christians.” Stewardship giving, pledging is a spiritual discipline. It helps us grow in Christ. Giving is right up there with praying, Bible reading, and worshipping God regularly as expressions of our spiritual self-discipline.

Again, the Book of Order says in the Directory of Worship (5.5004), “Giving has always been a mark of Christian commitment and discipleship. The ways in which a believer uses God’s gifts of material goods, personal abilities, and time should reflect a faithful response to God’s self-giving in Jesus Christ and Christ’s call to minister to and share with others in the world. Tithing is a primary expression of the Christian discipline of stewardship.”

Next time one of our members or an officer, heaven forbid, says to me, “We don’t like to talk about stewardship here....blah, blah.....”

Rev. Travis suggests three things to do to exercise our spiritual discipline of stewardship. **One, make a promise**, make a pledge to yourself, to God and to this Church.

Travis tells the story of a church member who objected to pledge cards and insisted to his pastor, “I don’t pledge.” The pastor asked, “do you have a mortgage?” “Yes.” “do you make car payments?” “Yes,” said the man. “Well, it seems to me that you make lots of pledges,” the pastor concluded. **“Is God worthy of one?”**

A pledge card is a promissory prayer. It is also a prayer. When you get home, look at the card we mailed to you this week. It reads, “Grateful for God’s Love in Jesus Christ, I (we) make the following commitment to support the mission of the church through our congregation, presbytery, synod and General Assembly.” That is a prayer. And a promise. Not a contract, but a promise, and we guard its secrecy, only two people at best know its contents, and I am not one of them.

Two, share in proportion to your resources. Give what you prayerfully can. Pledging a tithe or tenth may be impossible for you. But give yourself a goal for God’s giving. We may begin with one or two percent of our income and set a goal of increasing it annually, as we can.

Three, be persistent in giving. Giving is a self-confirming discipline. You will know what you are pledging. God will know. Just like prayer, persistence pays. We must keep at it.

Stand firm, hold fast to the traditions we taught you. Be firm in your faith, strong in your discipline as disciples. Be generous and cheerful in your giving, for God loves a cheerful giver.

I would like to close as we go to the Lord's Supper, where we remember the greatest gift God ever gave you and me, with a prayer I found again this week, that came out of one of my many books. It's a prayer by Marian Wright Edelman, who undertakes a tremendous ministry on behalf of America's children every day. It helped me a low moment this week – may it help you as well:

Let us pray:

Lord, help me to persist although I want to give up.

Lord, help me to keep trying although I can't see what good it does.

Lord, help me to keep praying although I am not sure you hear me.

Lord, help me to keep living in ways that seek to please you.

Lord, help me to know when to lead and when to follow.

Lord, help me to know when to speak and when to remain silent.

Lord, help me to know when to act and when to wait. Amen.