

“Living the Resurrection”, 1 Thessalonians
It’s Complicated
5.12.19
1 Thessalonians 1



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“Paul said that the believers in Thessalonica were actually a ‘model’ (example) for believers everywhere. Did you have someone whom you believe modeled the life of Jesus well for you? Share your story with the group. Offer some of the character qualities about the individual that were most impressive for you.”

“If you were raised in a faith community, what were you taught concerning the future? How did it encourage you to live, as a result?”

“What do you think it means to ‘live in the present as if the future has already arrived?’” (Interestingly, the grammatical tense used in prophetic writings is such that it is offered in the present as if it has already come true)

“As you live in the tension of the ‘already’ and ‘not yet’, where is there gratitude? (For what are you able to say ‘thanks’?) Where is there groaning?” (Where is there grieving over something for which you long, but has yet to be fulfilled?)

“Where do you find yourself faith-fully engaging your culture? (e.g. a relationship, a commitment to community participation, prayerful posture, etc.) Where do you see yourself attempting to escape?”

“Take time to dialogue about some of the responses which characterize each of the postures offered in Jesus prayer in John 17”:

In, but out of the world (disengaged)
In, but of the world (distinctiveness)
In, but not of the world (disarming)

Teaching Notes...

When we first moved to the PNW (Lake Wenatchee area), a couple invited us to their home. It was accessible, but a bit remote. In the absence of clarity provided by *Google Maps* or even street signs, we were offered a series of landmarks to indicate that we were heading the right direction. But, they advised, there would come a time when we were to simply “pull over” and they would have to come and get us and accompany us home.

I am often reminded how those instructions seem to parallel my **eschatology** (study of the last things): in the absence of absolute clarity, we move forward, looking for signposts which would suggest that we are successfully moving toward our destination. But, at some point, Jesus is simply going to have to “come back for us”, in order to make our way home with him.

As I use a word like, “eschatology”, I need to say, again, that this Story only makes sense as it is being told as the epic climax of the Jewish Messianic story. Context is critical (e.g. I have said before, without the Civil Rights Movement, Rosa Parks is just another woman utilizing public transit).

Christianity is a decidedly Jewish story which included (3) essential convictions:

- ▶ The belief in One, True Creator-God. This God was distinct from his creation, but remained actively involved in it. He could be ‘identified with’ his creation, but not ‘identified by’ it.
- ▶ The belief that they were chosen by God to reflect his presence and his purposes in the world (image-bearers), and that when he did act to restore order and eliminate evil, he would do so in cooperation with them.
- ▶ The belief that history was moving toward a purposed-end; a time when their God would come and be King and his desires would be the rule of the day: “the Kingdom come”.

Since the resurrection of Jesus, belief in his imminent return has characterized the faith of his followers. Such a vision for life demands that we not only admit how much of the Story remains unfulfilled, but that we live as if the promise has already come true. It allows us to say, rather paradoxically, we are both “grateful” and “groaning”.

In the middle of the first century, there was a Jewish rabbi named Paul who was traversing the landscape preaching what he calls “the gospel”. It is inclusive of, but not limited to, the declaration that Jesus, formerly known as “dead”, is now alive and has somehow confronted all the disorder and death associated with “sin” (the human and divine dilemma) and has actually, in his resurrection, inaugurated a “new creation”

where humanity is being invited, once again, to live and function on the earth under the loving rule of God. The "Kingdom has come", Jesus said. Where God's will is done. Where love is the rule (not as some sloppy sentiment) and love always establishes "justice" and "righteousness" (relationships, systems, etc.)

Paul has a vision of someone from Macedonia (Acts 16:9) requesting that he come, and he goes. On his journeys, he established several "faith-communities" (churches). 1 Thessalonians is a letter written to a group of Jesus followers, in Thessalonica, who are trying to make sense out of how to live now, in light of the "already" and the "not yet"? *How do I live now, with intentionality and meaning? Do I quit my job?*

Christianity is offered to us as a "prophetic" faith, in that it always seeks to 'engage' rather than 'escape' the prevailing culture.

Prophetic, in its most basic understanding, means that we are speaking from the perspective of another--- God's. The prophetic nature of our faith being encapsulated in the oft repeated phrase, "*I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from other people*" (Lev. 20:24). I'm a different kind of God. You should be a different kind of people. It's hard to be unique.

The church fails to live into its prophetic calling when...

... it no longer offers the prevailing culture an identifiable and repeatable vision of human flourishing [meaning, we seem to be 'similarly stuck' in approaches to life which look much like the world's, except we carve some God-time in our schedule]

... it proves impotent to restore broken things (relationships, structures, religious systems, etc.) and address human disorder, and

... its resolve diminishes and we simply retreat into seclusion. We either lose our voice or we have nothing left to say.

Historically, followers of Jesus have displayed a variety of unhealthy responses to the cultures in which they found themselves. In John 17, Jesus' prayer seems to offer the postures available and his heart for us:

In, but out of the world (disengaged)

In, but of the world (distinctiveness)

In, but not of the world (disarming)

In, but out of the world

The **Essenes**: the biblical equivalent of "Doomsday Preppers". Stockpile a cold-cellar full of canned goods and gold bars and wait for the "mothership" to return (aka, Second Coming of Jesus).

I suppose we could place the **Pharisees** in this category, as well. They were the, “*Make Israel Great Again!*”, sect. The “opposition” party. We need clearly defined lines and tighter religious border controls.

In, but of the world

Sadducees: ‘old money aristocracy’ in Jerusalem. They assumed a ‘pseudo-distinctiveness’ which permitted them to take advantage of select opportunities in the very culture they were decrying.

“Assimilation”. “Enculturation”. We become so anxious to fit in that instead of identifying with our culture, we become identified by our culture. We begin to subtly adopt its values and ethics and we become indistinguishable.

In, but not of the world

“I’m not asking that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one.” Establishing a faithful presence requires a decisive “being with” where our faith becomes fully functional and fully relational. With this posture, our *“lights shine before humanity and bring glory to God...”* (Matthew 5:16)

This is what Paul is hearing about the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica. *“You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia...”* (1:7) This church was so healthy, that it served as a “prototype” for who we were supposed to be and how we were meant to function, with one another, and in our community. *What would it be like to become a “model follower” of Jesus? Or, a “model community of faith”?*

How do we live with an ‘eschatological vision’?

Realize that the resolution is not a renewed commitment to “law-keeping”. That simply makes us even more harsh, judgmental, and demanding.

The resolution was the mystery of the “*new heart*” (‘born from above’, John 3; Ezekiel 36-37; Jeremiah 32) from which our loving-obedience would most naturally proceed.

You will have to be honest about the fact that much of the Kingdom vision remains unfulfilled: the world is broken; we are broken.

But, instead of ignoring it or making excuses for it, you will decidedly and compassionately enter into it, experiencing your own healing and bringing a bit of restoration to your own ‘world’, while you await the “kingdom coming”.

We will need to stop waiting for our ‘theology’ to change our community.

There’s no such thing as a “*safe distance*” from the world. It’s the point of the Incarnation. It demands proximity.

It's not enough for the church to simply make "position statements". Our challenges to the disorder of the prevailing culture cannot be reduced to 'angry demands for justice', because justice is ever and only the by-product of "love"! Love forms us into communities of people where we see each other, notice each other, care for each other. The inescapable outcome of that kind of loving-interdependence is "justice".

Instead, we need to find ways to distribute grace and establish justice (rightness) in every nook and cranny of our world (e.g. coaching, mentoring, baby-sitting for a single mom, taking a place on the school board, etc.)

What the church does not need is a good PR person, but "practitioners"--- people who are experiencing the tangible goodness of God and are able to portray it in their vocation, their neighborhood, and their friendships.

God doesn't need us to 'defend' him or to 'argue for him', but to "reflect" him.

Tell the story of your own life-from-death experience and make resurrection happen wherever we go.