

Time after Pentecost  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Malachi 4:1-2a; Psalm 98;  
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Life in Thessalonica was not going as anticipated. What the people expected, was that Jesus would return. Soon. Like, before lunch. Or dinner. But definitely before this weekend. Because He said He would. Paul said Jesus would return. Soon. So why work? It's not going to matter. And so we get the first recorded instance of couch potatoes.

Apparently there were a bunch of folks there in Thessalonica who felt that since Jesus was returning, they didn't need to work, they didn't need to help out, or basically assist in any way. The toilet's broken? Why bother? Jesus is coming! You lost your job? Why bother? Jesus is coming! Somebody needs to go to market to get fresh food for dinner? Why bother? Jesus is coming!

The difficulty arose, however, in that Jesus didn't come back quite so quickly as they thought. And, so that little OOPS was a rather disturbing fact in life as they knew it. I think though, when read Second Thessalonians we tend to get bogged down in our protestant work ethic and we overlook some of the other messages of this letter. Now, we can probably all relate very well to that amazing phrase, that wonderful verse, "if you don't work, you don't eat".

On the one hand it might seem a rather blatant message, but on the other hand, we can tell that there are some subtler messages going on; that subtler message of everybody needs to pull their own weight. What's perhaps not so obvious is that in pulling our own weight, that means there are all kinds of jobs that need to get done, all kinds of tasks within the body of faith that have to be accomplished. There are the glamour jobs – you know, the apostles, the teachers, the chief cook and bottle washer. But then there are also those which are not quite so glamorous – the fellow who has to empty out the chamber pots of the older folk who are too feeble to be able to move more than a few feet from bed. Or the people who had to clean up the worship space after everybody was done celebrating the meal (and in the first century it was a meal, it wasn't just a little wafer and sip of wine). Or the widow in charge of all the orphans who wanted to run like maniacs or who had to get up for at 3 o'clock in the morning for feeding.

What we run into is the fact that both of those sets of jobs, the glamorous and the non-glamorous, need to get accomplished. But far too often, we want to be the ones doing the glamorous jobs. . . and the thankless ones we just want to leave for somebody else. In a different part of the New Testament, Paul writes about all believers working together as being "the body of Christ". Some are the eyes, some are the nose, some are the hands. We can't all be eyes, because then how would we smell. We can't all be the nose. We can't all be the hands, because then how would we walk? If you have ever stood naked in front of a mirror (please – no visuals!), you can see that your hands and your eyes and your nose really don't take up a whole lot of percentage of your total body mass. We've got a whole lot more intestines and lungs and muscles and bones,

which are all equally important. If you don't believe me, talk to someone who has lost a leg. Paul says that Christ said we have all got to work together. Regardless of when Jesus comes back, we are called to work together to proclaim the gospel of Christ.

A couple of examples, a positive one and a negative one. I'm going to start with the positive one. Some of you will get the mental image right away when I say "20 Mule Team Borax" soap. You'll get that image, maybe you used that soap as a kid growing up. My in-laws have a wonderful little powder thing with a picture of a 20 mule team in their bathroom. Borax is a chemical that is used in cleaning, and in the late 1800's a large deposit of the ore that borax comes from was discovered in northern California and in Nevada; specifically in Death Valley. Now the primary problem with it being there in Death Valley was how do you get it from Death Valley to the nearest train station which was a couple of hundred miles away, when you've got to cross the desert and go up and over the mountains?

William Coleman, the founder of Harmony Borax Works near Furnace Creek in Death Valley, came up with a solution. He had wagons specially designed. They were made in sets of three; the first two wagons would hold the borax ore, and the third wagon (remember, they had to cross the desert) would be the one filled with water. Now together, those three wagons when they were stocked, when they were filled up, weighed over 73,000 pounds – that's more than 36 tons. How do you move something that weighs that much? Twenty teams of mules. So to quote from the U.S. Borax website, the mules were chosen for their intelligence and their ability to lead other mules. The first two mules were called the "leaders"; the next ten mules were known as the "swing team", they were the basic workers who did not need any special training beyond responding to commands such as "stop" and "pull". Following the swing teams came the "pointers", the "sixes" and the "eights". These mules were specially trained to leap over a chain that ran from the very front team of mules all the way back to the end of the water wagon. I'll explain a little bit more about that in just a minute. After the pointers, the sixes, and the eights, came the "wheelers". The wheelers were sometimes draft horses, not mules, because they had to be the largest and strongest of all the pack animals.

Okay, to get across the desert was probably not that difficult, other than the fact of no water, but they solved that with the water wagon. But in order to get over those winding mountain passes, though, you had twenty teams of mules pulling in a straight line, which made it kind of hard to make the turns. So with the chain that led from the lead mules back to the water wagon, the lead mules would go around the curve but in order to get the rest of the team and wagons to keep coming forward, the sixes, the pointers and eights, depending on which way the curve went, would jump over the chain so while the lead were pulling in this direction, the sixes the pointers and eights would continue to pull the wagon this way, so that they could make it around the curve, and then they would jump back over the chain to keep going straight and then jump to the other side to keep going around the next curve. It took specially trained teamsters, muleskinners they were called, to handle these animals. What I found to be really amazing is that in the close to twenty years they operated these twenty mule team wagons from Death Valley, they never lost a single load. That's how well trained the animals and men were; that's how amazingly they worked together to get across the desert and up and over the mountains.

Now we can't all be the lead mules. We're not all sixes or pointers or eights. And definitely not all of us are wheelers. However, just like in the mule team, all of those places were necessary and important, each of us are necessary and important in the body of Christ. And if we aren't pulling our own weight, if we're slacking off, if we're trying to buck the harness, the yoke of Christ, then all suffer the consequences.

A negative example. In East Dallas, Texas, there is an organization called the Trinity Foundation. It's been around for several decades, functioning variously as a church, a charitable foundation, a homeless shelter, a job corps for reformed crack addicts, but the two things I think the Trinity Foundation is best known for are the fact that they are the publisher of one of my favorite magazines called *The Wittenburg Door*, which is a self-proclaimed pretty much the world's only Christian satirical magazine (and yes it was named for the door made famous by Martin Luther and his 95 theses). But what the Trinity Foundation is also well known for is its persistent surveillance and diligent exposure of tele-evangelists, those folks who I believe are close to the epitome of non-Christian behavior. Through their dumpster diving and through their inside moles, the Trinity Foundation has been able to expose folks like Robert Tilton, C.W. Grant and others who target the elderly and the economically depressed. They go for those who are looking for answers to their fiscal prayers, promising financial rewards "if only your faith is strong enough".

These charlatans (the tele-evangelists not the Trinity Foundation) offer those who can least afford to part with any money, "in the name of God" to increase their own financial well-being. "Send me \$10 and God will reward you ten fold." "Send me \$100 and God will reward you 100 fold." All they ask, all they ask is that you send in that financial offering and God will answer your prayers – "if your faith is strong enough".

But what happens to those offerings and to those prayer requests? Thanks to the folks at the Trinity Foundation, we know that the offerings go straight into the bank accounts of those "not for profit" organizations, and the prayer requests get dumped into the garbage. Those seeking financial aid end up with less money, while the tele-evangelists continue to grow rich on those tax free "donations".

What would Paul say to them? That's a bunch of garbage! That theology is not a representation of Christ-like behavior. Such living is not working together the way that Christ calls us to. It's not being yoked together the way those borax mules are such an example.

But did you notice in the letter to the Thessalonians this morning, those slackers were not being tossed out of the church. Paul still calls them believers, but he also warns us to stay away from them. They are not the example that Christ calls us to. Those who would claim instant financial wealth and rewards for you are not the ones who are working together; they are not the ones pulling the load. They're the ones who are trying to get by on the backs of others. We are called as believers to live together in that harness that we call Christ. We are called to work together to proclaim the message of God. We are called to work together, some of us in the glamorous positions, some in the not so glamorous positions, but still we are called to work and use our talents and our gifts for the health of the church and the effectiveness of the ministry as we

express our Christianity in vital ways according to the spiritual work ethic that goes back to the apostles themselves. That is what we are called to follow.

“Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right.” It doesn’t say it’s going to be easy, it doesn’t say it’s going to be fun, never claims that it’s going to be glamorous, but do not weary in doing what is right, and together, yoked with Christ and one another, we can move the mission of the church forward.

Amen.