

“That Paul and This Paul: On Being a Minister”
1 Thess. 1:1-10, 2:3-13, 3:11-13
Rev. Paul E. Capetz
Christ Church by the Sea (United Methodist), Newport Beach
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I stand before you in humility and with gratitude for the awesome responsibility entrusted to me by the bishop and his cabinet who have appointed me to be your next minister at Christ Church by the Sea. Before I commence to preach my first sermon from this pulpit, I ask you to join your hearts together with mine in prayer for my ministry and yours in this place and time:

PRAYER: Gracious God, you have established the church through Jesus Christ and called us into the ministry of the gospel. We who are assembled here seek to respond to your call to be Christians and to serve your world through the mission of this congregation. To this end, we ask that you give us faith that we may preach the gospel with integrity, intelligence that we may interpret the Bible so as to teach others, and love that we may ever appreciate the value that each one of us has in your eyes. Amen.

Last month I attended a workshop for all ministers who were moving to a new church. That’s where I met your former pastor Joy Price, who was very gracious and helpful in orienting me to this congregation. At the workshop the bishop suggested that, by way of introducing ourselves, we share our vision of the ministry with our congregations. Taking up his suggestion, I want to use the opportunity presented by my first sermon among you to say something about what I think it means to be a minister. And to do so, I am going to reflect upon a text written by my namesake in the New Testament, the apostle Paul. You see, when the bishop made his suggestion, I immediately knew which text from the Bible I was going to preach on since Paul addresses this very question of what it means to be a minister in his First Letter to the Thessalonians. Ever since I was in seminary, I have been captivated by the person and theology

of Paul and my study of him over the years has played a major role in shaping my understanding of the gospel, Christian faith, and the church's ministry. Hence, this Paul wants to share with you some of what I have learned as a result of my dialogue with that other Paul whose letters occupy such a large place in our New Testament. After all, this is how we Christians read the Bible. It is not a mere history book about people who lived a long time ago. We read it, rather, by reading ourselves into it. Clearly, some passages speak more directly to us than other passages and this, of course, varies from person to person, so that what speaks most powerfully to me may not speak in the same way to you and vice-versa. But regardless of where you and I find ourselves most directly addressed in the pages of the Bible, whether in Paul or John or Mathew, Mark, and Luke, our reading of the Bible in the church is based on our belief that the Bible is about those of us who are living today and not only about people who lived way back then. So, when I read the letters of Paul, I not only try to understand him in his historical context almost two thousand years ago, but I also try to understand myself in my present context. That's what I mean by "dialogue" as the mode of reading the Bible that I believe is most appropriate. I approach the Bible with my questions and I let the Bible approach me with its questions. Since this approach to reading the Bible is dialogical, it is more accurate to say that I am not preaching *on* Paul so much as I am preaching the gospel *with* Paul, in dialogue with him. This Paul wants to ask what that Paul would say if he were standing here today in the pulpit at Christ Church by the Sea. While there are obviously differences between us and the biblical writers, between their situation and ours, there are also important similarities. Hence, our task as interpreters of the Bible is to sort out who we are as Christians by engaging in this sort of back-and-forth dialogue with those first Christians who came before us and to whom we owe our reception of the gospel.

Paul is the first Christian writer of whom we have any knowledge. His letters are the earliest writings found in the New Testament, earlier even than the four gospels. That's why all serious historical study of the New Testament has to begin with Paul. Moreover, the text on which our sermon this morning is based, First Thessalonians, is the earliest of all Paul's letters which we possess. By going back to First Thessalonians, we are going as far back as the literary evidence permits to the earliest written expression of Christian faith. Among New Testament writers, it doesn't get any earlier than Paul; and among Paul's writings, it doesn't get any earlier than First Thessalonians. This morning we are thus interrogating the oldest document in the New Testament. This Paul's first sermon is based on that Paul's first letter.

Since we have no exact dates for any of our biblical writings, we have to estimate as best we can. The best scholarly estimate for the writing of First Thessalonians is around the year 50, which would date it approximately 15 or 20 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. In this letter Paul is writing to a congregation of Christians he founded in the city Thessalonica of Macedonia. This congregation was made up of former pagans, that is, polytheists. Remember that Jesus and all of his original followers were Jews. So too was Paul. For Jews, polytheism was a false religion, since Judaism teaches that there is only one God (monotheism). To the extent that the Jews understood themselves as having a mission to non-Jews (or Gentiles), it consisted in leading them away from their worship of many gods and bringing them to faith in the one God who, being invisible, cannot be depicted in images (idols) and who, as the creator of the world, has an absolute claim on all people. Although Paul was a Jew who abhorred pagan polytheism and idolatry, he nevertheless reached across the divide separating Jews from Gentiles by becoming a missionary to Gentiles. In this letter he reminds these former pagans who are now Christian converts of their conversion: "you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true

God.” Hence, we can learn from Paul that, whatever else the new Christian faith was all about, it included a robust affirmation of the one God to whom the Jews have always borne witness. Yet there is more to Christian faith than belief in one God. There is also that which distinguishes Christians from non-Christian Jews, for Christians believe that Jesus is the one God’s anointed emissary, which is why we call him “Christ” (messiah). Paul reminds the Thessalonians that, in addition to coming to believe in one God, they also embraced Jesus as God’s authorized messenger who will act in God’s stead to judge the world for its failure to acknowledge God who is its creator. Hence, these former pagans not only turned from idols, fictitious and imaginary gods, to serve the one real God but also, as Paul says, “to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (I Th. 1:9-10).

In this highly compressed statement, we glimpse the outlines of Paul’s understanding of the gospel and what he thinks is at stake in it. There is a difference between true and false religion and it corresponds to the distinction between worship of the one God (“a living and true God”) and worship of many deities that are, by comparison, dead and false. Connected with this belief, moreover, is the conviction that human beings have a responsibility as to how we shall conduct our lives in the world. Because of this responsibility, we shall have to answer to God for the quality and character of our lives. That’s what Paul means by “the wrath to come” or, in traditional language, the last judgment. Since human life has an eternal destiny, even death does not allow us to escape from our accountability before God. That’s the reason Paul mentions the resurrection from the dead. The good news, which is what the word “gospel” means, is that the true or authentic meaning of our lives is disclosed by God’s commissioned representative, Jesus, which is why Paul calls him “[God’s] Son.” By preaching the Jewish message of monotheism along with the distinctively Christian message about Jesus as God’s appointed deputy, Paul

summoned these former pagans not only to acknowledge the reality of the one God who is their creator and ours, but also to accept the distinctive moral responsibility that comes with being human since we can choose whether to acknowledge the reality of God or to seek in vain to deny and ignore God as though our lives were not finally in God's hands. To accept this responsibility is to recognize God not only as our creator but also as our judge. Sin is denial of God as God, which leads to judgment by God. But repentance or conversion, the "turning" of which Paul speaks, allows us to call God our redeemer or savior as well as our creator and judge. The good news is that God, our creator and judge, is also our savior who offers to redeem us from our self-destructive ways so as to turn us back to the path to true life, to that authentic existence, for which we were created in the first place. For God loves human beings and wants our fulfillment.

Thus, the first thing we can learn about Paul is that he was a preacher of the gospel. His first preaching was that of a missionary engaged in evangelism; but now that he has formed a Christian congregation of former pagans for whom he continues to care, his preaching serves to remind them anew of what the gospel is and what it means for them in their everyday affairs so that he may nurture and guide them in their pursuit of the Christian life. In place of the original preaching appropriate to evangelism designed to win converts, there is now the preaching of an ongoing congregation that meets regularly as a church for worship like ours this morning.

The second thing we can say about Paul is that he was a teacher of theology and ethics. He realized that a good preacher of the gospel has to be prepared to be a good teacher of the gospel because people have questions about it, about what it means, what it entails for how we are to think and live, and whether it is true. Here I am talking about the questions of converts as well as potential converts or even scoffers. A responsible preacher of the gospel has to be ready to answer people's genuine questions about the gospel. Paul was fully up to this task and we see

in his letters how he answered the various questions put to him by members of his congregations and by his opponents. Indeed, Paul's greatness consists in the fact that he was concerned not only to bring the gospel to people through his preaching but also to bring intellectual clarity to the gospel through his teaching. Often this teaching takes the form of argument, whether for the sake of instructing converts to think theologically for themselves or for the sake of polemics against false understandings of the gospel preached by others. Sometimes he asks rhetorical questions designed to lead his hearers or readers to come up with the correct answer themselves. So, for example, he asks in another letter: "Is God the God of the Jews only? Is God not the God of Gentiles also?" When the question is stated in this way, the answer, of course, is obvious since Paul expects everyone to be able to draw the correct conclusion: "Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one," that is, because there is only one God who is creator, judge, and redeemer of all, God is not merely the God of the Jews alone (Rom. 3:29-30). At other times, Paul is fiercely polemical against what he considers to be distorted interpretations of the gospel. In yet another letter he warns his converts against embracing what he decries as "a different gospel" preached by those who "want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:6-7) and elsewhere he warns against "another Jesus than the one we preached" (2 Cor. 11:4). Returning to First Thessalonians, Paul writes that he does not want his congregation to be ignorant or uninformed about a particular question they have asked him regarding the fate of those Christians in their midst who have already died. He then goes on to explain that the dead are not lost to God and he assures them that "you need not grieve as others do who have no hope," referring to the non-Christian pagans who believe that death is the ultimate annihilation of human life (1 Th. 4:13). Teaching plays an essential role in Paul's ministry and what he teaches is of direct existential or pastoral concern to those in his congregation as they seek to understand and to live their lives in the light of a correct

and sound grasp of the gospel. Hence, after instructing them on how they should think about death in answer to their inquiry about it, he can say to them, “comfort one another with these words” (1 Th. 4:18). Although his former pagan converts embraced the gospel as a message that dramatically changed their lives, this didn’t mean that they no longer had any questions or that there weren’t things they were confused about. It’s one thing to proclaim the gospel persuasively; it’s another thing to interpret it intelligently so as to answer the questions that both Christians and non-Christians may ask about what it means and how we can be sure it is true. Paul was no anti-intellectual Christian, as so many Christians are today. Indeed, every reader of his letters has to be impressed with the caliber of his intellect and with his firm resolve to put his intellect to full use in the service of the gospel. Paul the teacher wanted his congregations to understand the gospel they had embraced upon hearing Paul the preacher. Preaching and teaching thus form a unity and as such they belong together in Paul’s understanding of his ministerial responsibility.

The third thing we can say is that Paul was a pastor. He nurtured his congregations and was concerned for each individual member. He cared about the people under his charge and sought their well-being. In his role as a pastor he likened himself to a father and to a nursemaid. He supported them in their endeavor to live an authentically Christian life: “like a father with his children, we exhorted each of one of you and encouraged you...to lead a life worthy of God” (1 Th. 2:11-12). He was considerate of them: “we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children” (1 Th. 2:7). Realizing that genuine pastoral care can only be undertaken by persons of real moral integrity, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that his ministry among them was motivated neither by “greed” nor by aspirations for “glory,” and that he never engaged in “deceit” or “flattery” (I Th. 2:3-6). Furthermore, he described his own conduct as “blameless,”

explaining that he did “not [want to] burden any” of them (1 Th. 2:9). In an especially revealing remark, he writes, “being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also *our very own selves*, because you had become dear to us” (1 Th.2:8). In another letter he makes this same point about giving himself to others even more poignantly: “I will not be a burden, for I seek *not what is yours but you*.... I will gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (2 Cor. 12:14-15). Paul the pastor does not ask anything of his congregation except that they share themselves with him and let him share himself with them.

As a result of my dialogue with Paul, I have learned that a minister is a preacher, a teacher, and a pastor.

Like that other Paul, this Paul intends to proclaim the gospel to you who are members of this congregation as well as to those who are not members of this congregation or of any congregation. To those of you who have already embraced the gospel and who come here every Sunday morning to hear it anew and ever afresh, I promise to take my responsibility as your preacher with utter seriousness, always being prepared to make the texts of the Bible come alive through serious dialogue with them. To those who are non-Christians because they have never really heard the gospel as good news, I will be an evangelist announcing the glad tidings of God’s love for all people. To those who are seeking meaning in life but despair of ever finding it, I will be Christ’s ambassador delivering the message that life’s authentic meaning is not an achievement to be sought after since it is a free gift from God to be received with open hands.

Like that other Paul, this Paul will be a teacher of theology and ethics, bringing intellectual clarity to the gospel in a time when there is much confusion, both within the churches and outside of them, regarding what Christian faith is really all about. If I have to be polemical at times when confronting distorted views of the gospel, so be it. Like the apostle, I will defend

the genuine article against those who preach “a different gospel” or “another Jesus.” To those sincerely asking questions, I will assist them to gain clarity about what confuses them. To those who want to learn more about the Bible and the church’s tradition, I will be a resource enabling them to develop their own theological and ethical thinking in conversation with these classical sources. To those who have doubts, they will have my complete attention and my thinking will be engaged as we ponder together the difficult existential questions in an open spirit of truth.

And, finally, like that other Paul, this Paul will seek to be a compassionate and gentle pastor, caring for the precious souls in this congregation with love and tenderness. I want everyone in this congregation to know that my door is always open to you when the challenges of your life have you weighed down and discouraged, or when the circumstances of your lives are causing grief and heartache. By the same token, I want to celebrate your joys and triumphs as well. Like the apostle, I believe that a pastor has to be a person of moral integrity whom others can trust and respect, so that no one ever has to fear being deceived or manipulated. As he said to the Thessalonians, so I say to you: I want to share with you not only the preaching and teaching of the gospel, but also my very self. And I hope that you also will share yourselves with me as we walk together on this road of life as Christians who seek to be faithful to God in the face of all the ups and downs of being human. Like that other Paul, I don’t want what is yours; I want you.

In short, for both that Paul and this Paul, being a minister requires great faith to preach, great intelligence to teach, and great love to pastor. Great faith, great intelligence, and great love, of course, are ideals and sometimes we don’t always live up to our own ideals. But it is important, nonetheless, to be clear as to what our ideals are so that we can direct our lives in accordance with them. I hope that my ministry among you will be characterized by these ideals.

When I met Joy Price at the bishop's workshop, she was glad to be able to report that this is a vital congregation. I could sense this myself when I was introduced to the members of the Leadership Team by the District Superintendent. Their love for this congregation was palpable. And their welcome of me was warm and genuine. In these respects, too, I am reminded of that other Paul's experience among the Thessalonians. He writes to them about the good reputation they have gained for themselves in other Christian congregations: "you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia" and "your faith in God has become known" to them (1 Th. 1:7-8). Even the news of his friendly reception by the Thessalonians was circulating in these other congregations: "they themselves report what a welcome we had among you" (1 Th. 1:9).

We can be grateful for the faith, intelligence, and love of the leaders and members of this congregation, both past and present. We can be thankful that God has entrusted us with the ministry of the gospel in this time and place. Looking with hope and confidence to the future, let us commit ourselves anew to the ministry of this congregation, praying that our faith, intelligence, and love be ever increased so that as servants of God we might be of service to all of God's people, as was Jesus himself. For that, after all, is what the words "minister" and "ministry" mean: servant and service. Of his own ministry, Jesus said that "[I] came not to be served but to serve" (Mk. 10:45). Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, our creator, judge, and redeemer:

Our lives are in your hands. It is from you that we have received our lives and it is to you that we shall give account of our lives.

Forgive us for all the times when we have turned away from you and refused to acknowledge our dependence on you.

We thank you for Jesus and the good news of our salvation with which you have entrusted your church.

We are particularly grateful for this congregation and its ministry as well as for the community of Newport Beach to which we have been called to proclaim the message of your love for all persons, as Jesus proclaimed your love in the villages of Galilee.

We pray for the sick in body, that they may be healed of their pain, as Jesus healed the sick.

We pray for those who are anguished in heart, mind, or spirit, that they may be relieved of their sadness, as Jesus cast out the demons that possessed the tormented.

We pray for the hungry and the homeless, for the oppressed and the marginalized, for the poor and the unemployed, for those who are lonely and without the warmth of human companionship, that the needs of all these precious persons may be met, as Jesus reached out to those in need.

We pray for our nation with its serious political divisions, that you would reconcile its citizens to one another, renewing in us that original vision of liberty and justice for all on which our nation was founded, as Jesus called Israel called his nation back to the vision of Israel's prophets.

We pray for our world, with its many cultural and religious differences, with its pressing problems and dangerous threats of war, famine, and ecological devastation; grant that all peoples may work together for peace and justice in a harmonious and sustainable global community, as Jesus announced the coming of your Kingdom of God when you will reign supreme.

Finally, we pray for ourselves, and, as Jesus' disciples, we pray as he taught us to pray, saying...