

24th Week after Pentecost, Proper 25 – Year A – October 29, 2008
Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46
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By not subscribing to cable, which as you know is the only way to get television service here on the Mountain, Steve and I find our evenings free to walk Abby, our dog, read books, or engage in the luxury of watching a movie uninterrupted by ubiquitous and shameless commercials. We just watched Mel Gibson's movie, *Braveheart* again. It was a stark reminder of the terrible suffering and daily slog of life in thirteenth century Scotland. At one point, an old clan warrior is shot in the chest with an arrow. There is no anesthetic except good Highland whisky. After the arrow is removed and before his wound is cauterized, the old man gets drunk to help him bear the inevitable pain of the fiery poker's ungentle touch. While I'm sure I can speak for all of us in saying we are grateful that times have changed, our suffering or times of testing have not gone away. They come to us still, not now in the arrows of an English enemy soldier, but in other trials like job losses, stock market crashes, a sudden illness or death in the family, or a crisis of health or faith.

I have to agree with Eugene Peterson who says that, "we live in a culture that doesn't know how to suffer." He goes on to say, "We grow up thinking that if we are good we won't suffer; or that if we raise our standard of living ... we won't suffer; or that if we acquire an education we will ... not suffer. If suffering rudely intrudes anyway, we call for anesthesia. Anesthesia, which is most useful on occasions of surgery, is most harmful in matters of the soul." The issue of self-medication translates to a modern-day reality in the serious epidemic of drug and alcohol abuse or other addictions. It denies the fact of God's promises – the first being that we are all going to suffer in our lives; and the second being the good news of God's faithfulness, that we are never tested beyond our strength, and with every testing God provides us "the way out so that [we] may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13)

This first letter to the church in Thessalonica is likely the oldest surviving letter of Paul, and that makes it the earliest New Testament writing we have. The order of the Scriptures in our modern Bibles doesn't reflect the order in which they were written! In fact, quite a lot of Paul's letters were completed before several of the Gospel accounts were even written. Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica is an empathetic response to the suffering of those new Christian believers, striving to live out their faith in a largely pagan environment, and a testimony of Paul's personal suffering as an apostle in Christ, and for Christ. There is absolutely no doubt that Paul's strength and courage in such terrible times comes from his deep and complex faith in God and Christ Jesus. He doesn't call for an anesthetic, but in good times and bad, he suffers patiently with thanksgiving. Paul has studied the Hebrew Scriptures all his life, and now reads them with new eyes, the new vision he received through the gift of the Holy Spirit. He has seen the Risen Lord, and heard many stories about Jesus' life, and it is on Jesus' life that he models his own, and teaches others to do the same. That too is the challenge to you and me, and all disciples of the Lord Jesus.

For Paul, his work as an apostle of the Gospel meant that he traveled extensively. Many in his position could and would rely heavily on the hospitality of the people of the cities, towns or villages they visited for food and lodging at a minimum. Paul chooses not to do this, but continues to work as a tentmaker, earning his own money to pay for food and lodging wherever he went. To you and me, that might sound like a form of stubborn pride, refusing to accept help from others, and then using it to leverage his position whenever the community disagreed with him. Except that what we know of Jesus, and know of Paul, makes that hard to believe. Jesus' way of life was one of complete self-emptying, and self-giving, flowing from His perfect love of God, and God's perfect

love flowing through Him. Following in the steps of his Master, Paul also models the way of Christ's self-emptying and self-giving, losing his own life, for the sake of Jesus. His motives are not based in self-serving pride, but in a desire not to impose any burden on those whom he loves and serves in Christ's name. Apostle is not a job title for Paul, it is integral to his very being, and is reflected in his way of life. Christian is not a job title for you and me. It is integral to our very being. How then do you and I reflect this in our way of life? I cannot live your life for you. You cannot live my life for me. God has blessed us individually with gifts and resources to enable us to participate in and continue Christ's work here on earth. It is in our relationships and sharing that we shine with the light of God's love to the world. It is in our relationships and sharing that we give out of God's love to help one another within and outside of this community of faith.

Practicing God's love and graciousness is not a project, program, task or job description, it is a way of life for me, for you, and for everyone who loves God and their neighbor. As Paul reminds us, living the message of the gospel, is not about pleasing mortals or avoiding suffering. But it is about being faithful to the trust and stewardship of God's immeasurable gifts to each of us, as we live our lives according to God's will, and seek, just as Jesus did, to relieve the suffering of others. This is the way of life that Jesus lived, and Paul emulated. Jesus conforms his human heart and human mind to please God, to honor God, and give all glory to God, and He changes the world for all time and eternity. Paul's heart and mind are transformed by a revelation of the Risen Lord, and he too patterns and shapes his life like Christ's and makes a difference in the lives of many people in time and for eternity. This is the way of life that God desires for us to embrace, through good times and difficult times. And it is against this measure that God tests our hearts with love, with mercy, and with compassion.

Amen.