

As we turn this morning to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we remember how Paul traveled widely spreading the good news about Jesus Christ, gaining supporters in towns and cities throughout the Mediterranean region. When he was unable to be with these new followers of Christ, Paul put pen to paper and wrote to them: he wrote letters of support, encouragement, chastisement, advice and even praise. His letters kept that connection amongst these new Christ-following communities strong, despite the distances that separated them.

Let us turn now to 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10.

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly <sup>3</sup>remembering before our God and Mother your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you, <sup>5</sup>because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. <sup>6</sup>And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup>so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup>For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. <sup>9</sup>For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, <sup>10</sup>and to wait for God's Son from heaven, whom God raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

May God add a blessing to our hearing and understanding of this word.

Let us pray, Holy One, mysterious one, one of grace and peace, we ask that you may be with us now, open our hearts to your word, grant us curiosity, engage us in conversation with one another and with you. Move among us, work through us. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

Each time I've read this scripture, I have found myself lingering on one phrase in particular: "You became imitators of us and of the Lord." Perhaps your mind, like mine, jumps to all sorts of different places: a younger sibling who always seemed to want to copy her older sibling (perhaps some of you know this from experience). Another place my mind goes is the idea that imitation is the highest form of flattery. I also think about how much we value uniqueness and individual expression – don't copy someone else, just be yourself.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord.

Let me share a story that I heard this last week when I was in Chicago.

Andrew is a young Disciples Seminarian and a friend of mine. This summer, he traveled to Bosnia to explore the question of reconciliation in a country that has been ravaged by war and divided along religious and ethnic lines. Bosniaks (mostly Muslim), Serbs (predominantly Orthodox Christians), and Croats (predominantly Catholic) are the three dominant ethnic groups in this small southern European country. In 1992, these three ethnic groups took up arms against one another, and over the next three years about 110,000 people were killed. Almost two

million were displaced. Today, more than fifteen years after the war ended in 1995, people in Bosnia continue to wrestle with questions of reconciliation, new beginnings, how to move forward together. And it was this process of reconciliation that Andrew journeyed to Bosnia to explore. As Disciples, you know that we call ourselves a pro-reconciling, anti-racist church.

On this particular Sunday morning, Andrew sits in a pew by himself immersing himself in the Catholic mass that one of his acquaintances and friends, Father Milovan, is leading. As a Disciple, Andrew often finds the presentation and sharing of the Eucharistic meal to be the hardest part of Catholic mass for him. He too wants to partake of the holy meal, but he also respects that the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist's theological and ritual significance differs somewhat for his own, so Andrew does not partake of communion in Catholic services. Normally though, even in a Catholic mass, he would join the line of people and go forward. Approaching the priest, he would cross his arms over his chest and bow his head to acknowledge that he too is a fellow member of the body of Christ. This would be a sign to the priest to give him a blessing but not the communion wafer and wine. Today, though, here in Bosnia, in a new and different culture, Andrew decides to stay in his seat.

As he sits with his head bowed, he notices a bit of a commotion at the front of the chapel. The short, round priest, his friend Father Milovan, is not standing at the front of the chapel quietly passing out the host to the line of Catholics waiting to receive it. Instead, the host in his hands, Father Milovan bustles around the outer edge of the chapel, making his way toward the back. Andrew sits up a bit, watching his friend approach him, each step bringing him closer and closer. The priest stops in front of Andrew, and offering him the a wafer and cup, he says to Andrew, "The body of Christ broken for you, the blood of Christ shed for you." Andrew opens his mouth, and Father Milovan places a wafer on his tongue, flesh on flesh. After Andrew has received the chalice, Father Milovan returns to his place at the front of the chapel where he serves the Eucharist to his congregants.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord. We see in Father Milovan an imitator of the Lord – one who crosses boundaries, welcomes an outsider, and shares God's gifts. Father Milovan imitates Christ's risk-taking, Christ's loving hospitality and Christ's determination to live into the hope of God's kingdom realized on earth.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord.

And then something interesting happens, the imitators become the imitated. Paul tells the Thessalonians, "now **you** have become an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." Father Milovan, an imitator of Christ, becomes an example to us of radical hospitality, risk-taking and generosity. We all have stories in our lives about people we know who are imitators of the Lord, examples to others. Those who enter into the risky-business of living like Christ.

And here's where it gets powerful. Look around this room. Here in this room there are imitators of Christ. Really look. You will see some who are old, who offer years of experience and wisdom in their imitation of Christ. You will see some who are young, who remind us how to play, how to rejoice in the world around us. They too are imitators of Christ, an example to us. Some of the imitators of Christ you see are people whose praises we sing, others' work goes largely seen and unsung, but it is there. It is all around us.

In the midst of the stewardship campaign as we are, I think of all of those people who have given to the church over the years, all those who have offered of their resources and themselves. Talking about money often makes me a little bit uncomfortable. I find it especially hard right now with the economy being what it is and the increased struggle for many to hold onto work, to keep up with home and car payments, to make ends meet. And yet talking about money is something that Jesus did, and often. He often talked about giving to the poor, about economic justice, about the need to put God before wealth. It makes me, and perhaps some of you as

well, uncomfortable. But we can find comfort in Paul's words to the Thessalonians, "in spite of persecution, in spite of hardship, you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit. As we think about how we might become imitators of Christ in our giving to the church, we remember that there joy in giving, joy in imitating Christ. We find joy in the story of that unconventional Eucharistic meal shared by Father Milovan and Andrew. We find joy in looking around us at the imitators of Christ with whom we sit, and worship, rejoice and pray.

At the communion table, we find the joy, sustenance and renewal that we receive in being imitators of Christ. Let us prepare ourselves for these holy gifts by singing together hymn number 351, "Fill My Cup, Lord."