

“Life Together”
Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 12; Luke 21:5-19; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes for A Sermon for Every Sunday
2022

This week the lectionary has been making me smile. In my own congregation, this Sunday is the one we’ve designated for making financial and other practical commitments to the ministry of the church ... and here we have this wild variety of texts! First, there’s Isaiah’s description of the world God will bring about: a world full of joy unmarred by death or distress ... a world full of peace and blessing for everyone. These are the promises around which we gather as a community; they form the substance of our hope! Then, in Luke, we have Christ’s warning that, when God’s kingdom finally comes, the things of earth will pass away – *everything* from our beautiful church sanctuaries to these flesh and blood bodies we sometimes call temples of the Holy Spirit. Finally, we have this letter to the church at Thessalonica. Here it becomes clear that while Christians live by faith in God’s promises and Christ’s coming, our feet are firmly planted on the ground. The author of this letter writes the Thessalonians to give them advice about the daily life they share and matters as mundane as committee work and the budget and chipping in to pay for stuff. It is in some ways an uncomfortable word to read, but I do think it has something important to say to us today.

Listen to this passage from **2 Thessalonians 3:6-13**

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Thanks be to God.

So, first of all, it amuses me to see that the word “busybodies” shows up in the Bible at all! It’s such a funny word ... makes you wonder what sort of trouble a first century busybody would create. I tell you what, though: this is the kind of text you want to read *without making eye contact with anyone in the church*, lest they take it personally. The whole passage has a scolding tone I find pretty off-putting. It just goes to show, even the earliest congregations had their share of disagreements and slackers. (Though the word

“slacker” isn’t there; that’s mine). At any rate, this writer does not mince words as he addresses the issues at hand.

I want to start by saying what this letter is *not*, before I try to say what it is. First of all, it does not address people who for some reason *cannot* work. In many parts of our world, there are far more people yearning to work (and to earn a living wage through work) than there are folks attempting to shirk the responsibility of work. This text does not take aim at them. What’s more, this letter does not suggest an early form of the protestant work ethic. To work and prosper are not offered as indicators of God’s favor toward any individual or group of people. Work and prosperity are just evidence that people have made the effort to support themselves (and perhaps also their community).

“We did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it,” says the author of this letter, “but with toil and labor we worked ... so that we might not burden any of you.” Usually when we talk about eating bread in church, we are *not* talking about bread for which we work or pay. At the altar or communion table, especially, we are talking about bread we are *given*. We acknowledge that, when you get right down to it, everything we have is a gift from God’s hand! Our very life ... the air we breathe ... the earth from which the grain grows ... the bread we hold in our hands – these are gifts from a good god. And they are gifts we’re called to share! To feed the hungry, the stranger, and the newcomer in the land is essential to our faith; it always has been. In fact, hospitality was so important to early Jews and Christians that they developed all kinds of rules to encourage hospitality and to protect a place at the table for people who were outsiders in the community. They worked intentionally to preserve a place for the needy and for strangers, who have always been the easiest for communities to ignore and exclude.¹

To feed and include people takes work, even when the food we share is a gift! I’m reminded of that every time my congregation shares a meal. There’s a team to set up the tables and chairs. A team to lay out the plates, cups, silverware ... tablecloths and flowers, too, if we’re feeling fancy. There’s a team to cook. A team to welcome people. A team to serve the meal. A team to clean up afterwards. If everybody does a little work and gives what they can to pay for things, it’s fine. The food gets purchased, the jobs get done, and no one feels put upon. But ... *that wasn’t the case in Thessalonica*. For some reason – the idea that Christ was coming soon, maybe ... so stuff didn’t matter? Or because people were tired or cheap or lazy? We don’t know WHY exactly, but *some* Christians in Thessalonica had stopped working. Members who were capable and had lot to give had simply stopped contributing to the life and ministry of the church. They’d stopped doing their part.

Presbyterian Pastor Liz Forney points out that even Christian communities have members who are not inclined to work and, as the first disciples gathered into

¹ I borrow this approach from Elizabeth Barrington Forney, who suggested it in the Homiletical notes she wrote on 2 Thess 3 for *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*.

communities, they developed rules to help balance the workload ... so that no one could get away with doing nothing, and no one *had* to say, “It seems like I do everything.” Forney cites the rule of St. Benedict as one of the best-known and oldest rules; it dates to the 6th century. Benedict created instructions for his community, hoping to alleviate some of the tensions that inevitably arise when Christians share a common life. The Benedictines’ common life involved cooking, eating, working, living, and praying together, just like in our churches ... except they were together 24/7! Benedict crafted a rule that put each member of his community to work as he was able, given his abilities and disabilities, his skills and talents. Benedict’s attitude was much like that of the early church. He said, “No one is excused from rendering personal service to others. No one is exempted from performing the mundane tasks of daily life. Rendering service to others is necessary to our own fitness. Exempting someone from commonplace chores endangers them to vanity,” he said.²

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says something similar in his classic book *Life Together*. In a chapter on ministry in community, after describing the also-essential-and-helpful ministries of holding one’s tongue, meekness, and listening, Bonhoeffer describes the ministry of active helpfulness. He says,

[The ministry of helpfulness] means, initially, simple assistance in trifling, external matters. There is a multitude of these things wherever people live together. Nobody is too good for the meanest service. One who worries about the loss of time that such petty, outward acts of helpfulness entail is usually taking the importance of his own career too solemnly. [Bonhoeffer goes on to say:] We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God It is part of the discipline of humility that we must not spare our hand where it can perform a service, and that we do not assume that our schedule is our own to manage, but allow it to be arranged by God.³

As Bonhoeffer and Benedict knew, mutual service is easiest to arrange in a monastery, where monks make vows of obedience to their abbot. In churches like mine *free service* takes the place of a vow. We have to acknowledge – sometimes repeatedly in a day – that our siblings in Christ have a claim on us. We are called to serve them willingly.

How to serve and when to serve our communities is a matter for *discernment* – for each of us and for all of us. As a leader in a faith community, I see this all the time. A committee needs help with a particular ministry, and members of that committee ask, “Who might be good at this? Who might enjoy it? Who might have the time?”

² John McQuiston II, *Always We Begin Again: The Benedictine Way of Living*, Harrisburg, PA, Morehouse Publishing, 1996, as quoted by Liz Forney.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein, Harper and Row, Publishers, NY, 1954.

They settle on some names and invite those folks to take part. And the people they've invited think about it, pray about it, then say Yes or No. Or the reverse happens! Someone's in the pew, and they see or hear that we need help with a particular project. And they think, "I could do that!" or "No ... there are other things I need to do this Saturday morning." Or maybe, "I can't do that thing, but I could do this other thing. I'd like to help!"

Some of the decisions we make (about what to do or not do) are easy; others call for more careful discernment. I remember an old book on spiritual practices with a whole chapter on *Saying Yes and Saying No* – because saying Yes to one activity means saying No to others, and all our decisions affect us for good and for ill. As it says in this book, "What you decide today, you are tomorrow."⁴ What we do today shapes the person we will be tomorrow and the next day and the next and in the day Christ talks about – the day of God's coming. You and I will *become* more just, more generous, more hopeful, more holy, *or* we will become more idle, lazier, more selfish, more stressed-out, based on choices we make today, and depending on what we do.

What are *you* doing today? You're listening to this sermon, instead of the ball game or the news. That means you are a person of faith, or at least intrigued by this God-thing. Is this something you give regular attention to? Is there a community you support with your money or talents and time? Can people tell that you want to be helpful in your community ... that you're willing to contribute what gifts you can? Do your efforts reflect your willingness to let God order your life ... and your gratitude for the gifts God has given you? Do you serve as you're able, not because you *must*, but because you can? ... because, for the love of Christ and the love of neighbor, you will?

I hope so. For your sake, and for the church's sake ... and also, for God's sake. I hope that the new creation God is making (the one full of joy and prosperity and blessing, the day for which we pray and hope) ... I HOPE it will begin in you. In all the small and daily ways that are within your power to choose, I hope you will decide to be a part of God's kingdom coming.

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⁴ "Saying Yes and Saying No," by M. Shawn Copeland in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. Jossey Bass, 1997, p 66.