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Sermon: June 7, 2015
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“LOVED AND CHOSEN”
First Thessalonians 1:1-10

‡ In a culture that assumes “big” is a synonym for “significant,” what is the value of a small church?

‡ In a culture that values style over substance, what is the value of an unspectacular church?

‡ In a culture that worships money, what is the value of a church of modest resources?

‡ In a culture that craves social and political power, what is the value of a church that has little and does not seek more?

Many would calculate that congregation’s value at little to none. Some would say it has no reason to exist.

{I Th 3:3; 5:14} I am talking about the Church in Thessalónika. It was birthed in weakness and battered by persecution. Economic and social frailty put their fellowship in a precarious position. Many members felt “**unsettled.**” Some were “**disheartened.**” A few acted out in “**disruptive**” ways.

These struggles did not cause the Thessalonians to lose faith God. However, reading between the lines, it is apparent that they doubted themselves and their future.

‡ Why isn’t God blessing us with security and success? Is God displeased with us? Are we doing this all wrong? Have we misunderstood the Gospel? Are we imagining that God is with us and we are being saved?

In First Thessalonians chapter 1 the apostle Paul dispels their doubts. Please turn there with me.

■ Verse 4: “**For we**” (that’s Paul, Silas, and Timothy) “**we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you.**”

This is our anchoring verse today, and we will keep coming back to it: “**For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you.**”

To human eyes your group has little value, small, unspectacular, small, modestly funded, and powerless as it is. He who is omnipresent and omniscient sees differently: you are “**loved,**” cherished, treasured “**by God.**”

{Acts 17} You have been reviled by Jews, rejected by Gentiles, dragged from your homes by a mob of rioters, arrested, and accused of treason. It appears that the LORD God has abandoned you, or even cursed you. To the contrary, God “**has chosen you.**”

{Heb 4:12; II Ti 3:16} Is this text truly “**alive and active**”? Is this Scripture actually “**God-breathed**”? Is it really “**useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness**” in 2015?

It is. Although this epistle was not written *to* us, in God’s foresight and goodness it was written *for* us.

The world, the flesh, and the devil insist that we are unloved and unlovable. They offer as proof our sufferings and our weakness. Their arguments sound plausible; yet Holy Writ announces that we are “**loved by God.**”

Many voices tell us that we are useless to God's Kingdom. They offer as proof our unimpressive statistics, which sound so authoritative; yet, through his apostle the King of the Universe declares that **"he has chosen"** us.

In a culture that values style over substance, assumes "big" is a synonym for "significant," worships money, and craves power, we are loved by the Living God. He has chosen us for his purposes. Amen? Amen!

A word of caution: this affirmation is a cause, not for pride, but for joy and gratitude and humility.

{Jn 15:16} Messiah says, **"You did not choose me, but I chose you."** His original disciples were hardly "The Most Likely to Succeed" in their class and, with a few exceptions, neither are we.

{1 Co 1:27-28, 29} Paul might have had us in mind when he wrote, **"God chose the foolish things.... the weak things... the lowly things... and the despised things."** God deliberately chooses ordinary people like us to reveal his goodness and glory, **"so that no one may boast before him."**

■ **"We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you."** This is not intuition, much less a case of wishful thinking. Paul firmly states **"We know,"** Silas and Timothy and I see things as they are, based on objective observation.

What have they observed?

★ First, they have observed God acting for the Thessalonians from the outside.

■ Verse 5: **"our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction."**

{Is 55:11} It is prophesied that God's word **"will accomplish what [he desires] and achieve the purpose for which [he] sent it,"** and it does. The Good News has come to Thessalónika with δυνάμις [dúnamis] – that is the origin of our word "dynamite" – with force, might, and miraculous **"power."**

{1 Th 3:3} Paul is writing to a small, unspectacular, modestly resourced, socially and politically powerless congregation birthed in weakness and battered by persecution. Later in the letter he warns that they are **"destined"** to undergo further **"trials."** Either he is crazy or, contrary to the world, he does not define power as dominance and control over others.

★ That brings us to Paul's second observation: he and the team have seen God acting in, among, and through the Thessalonians from the inside out.

■ In verse 3 he recalls their **"work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."**

📖 **"Your work produced by faith,"** your ἐργον [érgon], your righteous deeds generated by πίστις [pístis], the unshaken conviction that the Gospel is historically accurate, theologically reliable, and spiritually dependable.

📖 **"Your labor prompted by love,"** your κόπος [kópos], your sometimes difficult, frequently inconvenient acts of compassion, mercy, and justice that are aroused by ἀγάπη [agápē] love.

📖 **“Your endurance inspired by hope,”** your ὑπομενησ [hupomenēs], your cheerful, patient fortitude and constancy energized by ἐλπις [elpis], the confident expectation of ultimate rescue by the Son of God.

Notice the correlation between the inward virtues and outward conduct. Faith produces work. Love prompts labor. Hope inspires endurance.

Notice also the cooperative, mutual interaction between the Triune God and his people.

{Eph 2:9; Php 2:12} **“This [faith] is not from [ourselves], it is the gift of God”** for which we cannot take credit. Yet we can act upon God-given faith to produce righteous works – or not. Paul admonishes: **“work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”**

{Ro 5:5; Rev 20:12-13} This **“love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit,”** we cannot take credit for it. Yet we can act upon God-given love in compassion, mercy, and justice – or not. Hence, we will be **“judged according to what [we have] done.”**

{II Th 2:16; Mt 10:22; 24:13} This **“hope”** is **“in... Christ”** and is given by him, so we cannot take credit for it. Yet we can act upon God-given hope to endure temptation and hardship – or not. Messiah warns **“the love of most will grow cold, but whoever [endures] to the end will be saved.”**

Faith-generated works, love-prompted labor, and hope-inspired endurance are not “sexy.” They do not scream significance the way a huge membership or imposing campus or giant budget do. There is no way to calculate their value.

And yet, inspired by God’s Holy Spirit, Paul contends that these are the sign and substance of the Gospel at work. They are the distinctive mark of a people who are loved and chosen by God.

I see our **“work produced by faith”**: prayer warriors interceding for me, the church, and those in need; musicians offering their best; TGIS staff nurturing their students; board members doing nuts-and-bolts tasks – **“work produced by faith”** in confidence that the ministry is worthwhile because it is done for and with God.

I see our **“labor prompted by love”**: MOPS grandmas caring for infants; PADS volunteers feeding the homeless; Deacons caring for the needy with generosity and discernment; members reaching out with a card, a phone call, a visit, a ride, a meal; and so on – **“labor prompted by love”** because God first loved us.

{II Co 4:8; Ro 5:5} I see our **“endurance inspired by hope”**: those **“hard pressed, but not crushed”** by sickness or disability; the bereaved, grieving not without hope; members **“perplexed”** by a loved one’s addiction or mental illness, yet **“not in despair”**; and so on – **“endurance inspired by hope in Jesus,”** for we know his is the only hope that **“does not put us to shame.”**

We do not work, labor, and endure with absolute consistency or consummate skill – still, we do them **“with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.”** Sometimes it takes my breath away.

That isn't all there is to it. Paul mentions a few other things in our text.

- {II P 3:18; Ro 8:29} Verse 6: **“You became imitators of us and of the Lord.”** Many of us are “[growing] in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” We are increasingly being **“conformed to [his] image.”**

- {MT 22:37} Verse 9: **“You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”** All of us have served the subtler idols: money, sex, power. Now, many of us are learning how to **“love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart... soul and... mind.”**

- Verse 10: you **“wait for his Son from heaven.”** We don't mess around with identifying the Antichrist or forecasting the rapture. We do confess and believe the Son will return to usher in God's Kingdom in all its fullness. That is our expectation.

We are a small, unspectacular church of modest resources and little power. Many in our culture would say this congregation has little value.

They are mistaken! **“We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen”** us.