
There's Work to Do, or, An Open Letter to My Children

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 13, 2016,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Dear Moriah and Zachary, my beloved children,

Don't get nervous because you didn't know that I was going to do this. I'm writing you a letter because the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Thessalonians. Here I am the Dean of Duke Chapel and you know that I've been trying to train you to call me Mr. Dean at home, but it's apparently not working. So you can still call me Dad or jokingly, the NBA star Stephen Curry. As your father, I feel compelled to write this letter because I want you to come to understand a little bit better what is going on in our nation right now, post-presidential election. Regardless of who voted for whom or what state is red or blue, what you see is not really the United States of America but the divided states of America. This country, this state, are splintered, divided politically but more than that has come to the surface, if people didn't know it before. There are divisions across race, gender, and class and there has always been divisions but what you might be hearing or seeing now is a kind of rage raising its head all over the land. This is the world in which we live. "Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid" (F. Buechner). The nation is on fire.

In the letter to the Thessalonians, a part of what was read today, there's also a fiery rage beneath the surface. If you don't read the whole letter you might not catch this. Believers are being persecuted (1:4,6). There are wicked and evil people from whom others should be protected (3:2-3). The letter goes even further to tell of a heavenly judgment against those who don't know God or the gospel, that is, the persecutors. Because of this duress, some coped with their suffering by believing the day of the Lord had already arrived (2:2) and others just refused to work in the world (3:6-13). Rage isn't the only mood of this letter but it's prominent. You might not catch it in your first hearing or reading because it hasn't quite exploded to the surface like we see happening on the streets of America right now in protests. Some people are fuming and hurting and don't know quite what to do with their anger or disappointment or confusion or fear. This isn't to say that everyone feels this way. Some are quite satisfied with the election. But tension is everywhere and it's dangerous when political thought is privileged over a person's life.

You should remember that just because there are divisions doesn't mean people have to be disgusting toward each other or seek to destroy the other. Remember, treat others as you want to be treated. I can't believe that in 2016 I have to see a USA Today Weekend headline that reads, "Rise in racist acts follows election," giving as an example what was written on a softball field dugout in Wellsville, New York: "Make America White Again." I can't believe that in 2016 in our home city, Durham, someone wrote on two walls, "Black lives don't matter and neither does your vote." As you get older, you will see that it is a broken, sin-sick world with lots of hurting people and you will need to continue to pray, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." I can't believe that still in this day we are judged by the color of our skin and not the content of our character. Always remember you are

created in the image of God and are a child of God. Smart, gifted, compassionate, and beautiful (I know what you're thinking—you get your good looks from your mother). Remember who you are and whose you are. Remember that you can hold diverse views and it not be divisive. They may be different but difference is the context for unity; otherwise, we just have uniformity and that's just plain boring. Know that you will disagree with people in the future, including your parents, about all kinds of things but that doesn't mean you have to demonize, hate, or ridicule them. Just because you disagree doesn't mean you have to make an enemy. Even if you feel like you have one, remember to love them. Remember, as Christians, we stand on the side of love, the love of God and love of neighbor; those are two great commandments.

I don't say that because you are PKs, preacher's kids, and are familiar with the teachings of the church. I say that because God is love and as God's children, love is in your spiritual DNA. I also encourage this because we aren't Lord and our ways of handling things may not be typically the best. The Lord is Jesus Christ. We aren't lord of our lives or of the world. We are citizens of his kingdom in which faith, hope and love abide. And his kingdom is not the kingdom of this world with its divisive ethos. Any advice I give today has to be in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is Lord according to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians and that should make all the difference. Christ's lordship should make all the difference in our lives. That should be your focus, your theological calibration, to stay centered and grounded spiritually in the years ahead. You will need Jesus in order not to lose your way. Out of a commitment to his Lordship everything else in your life flows. This is why Grandpa and Grandma, Papa and Grammy, love the hymn, "On Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand." They've taught us that Jesus is Lord through their words and deeds. You can even go back into history and study the spirituals like I do and learn the "narcotic doctrine" of the enslaved summed up in these words—"You can have dis old world, but give me Jesus." This hermeneutic, this lens through which one sees the world, is how so many of our ancestors made it through every trial and tribulation. The great gospel singer and composer, Andrae Crouch sang about it too: "Through it all/Through it all/I've learned to trust in Jesus/I've learned to trust in God." Don't forget that. Don't forget the name of our Lord Jesus Christ through it all.

The name of the Lord Jesus Christ, not our name or brand, our organization or identity. We can go off track if it is about our name or latest cause, forgetting the one who is Lord of all or as the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper remarked in a speech at the opening of the Free University at Amsterdam in 1880, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" Christ claims us for his service. We are his, citizens of his heavenly country, living in a different way, hopefully. Remember being a Christian is not the same as being an American. Pledging allegiance to God is not the same as pledging allegiance to the flag; remember, Jesus was put to death by civic and religious powers. You will experience this tension too as a Christian in this country but remember you hold citizenship in God's land.

It doesn't mean you won't be angry at God sometimes or the world or even others, sick of wrong and mistreatment of the vulnerable. It won't mean you can't lament and question and struggle with God. There's room for this in the Christian life. That what's happening now for many; they're wondering how to live and act as a Christian in today's climate. One thing is for sure when you're a Christian you know who is the Lord of the future and present and who reigns ultimately. "Many things about tomorrow/I don't seem to understand/But I know who holds tomorrow/And I know who holds my

hand.” The Lord Jesus Christ, not our favorite political party or key issues about which we care deeply, no matter how important they are. Jesus is Lord and that should shape your whole life, every square inch. If you have been redeemed by Christ, your life has been redirected in him, regardless of who sits in the oval office.

Now just because Jesus is Lord doesn't mean we shouldn't do anything in the world and just wait on the Lord in the family room watching Netflix. Jesus is Lord doesn't mean we should be lazy. These are not lazy times for any of us. These are serious times. An early Christian manual of instruction, called the *Didache*, teaches, “[N]o Christian shall live idle in idleness. But if one will not do so [i.e. work], that person is making Christ into a cheap trade; watch out for such people.” We cheapen Christ if we think that Christ will do everything by himself and you can just sit there having your Peppermint Mocha Frappuccino and Mango smoothie from Starbucks. No, following the Lord Jesus Christ costs us all something. Jesus, when he goes to the cross, shows that it may cost you your life.

There is the word of the Lord but there is also the work of the Lord. God is faithful but God also calls us to work faithfully and not sit idly by as the world is set on fire. In other words, join *orare et laborare*. You both take Latin so you know what that means—pray and work. Don't just pray as if it all depends on God or just work as if it all depends on you. You are a co-laborer with God whom throughout history has been working to make the world right, reconciling all things to him through Christ.

From the beginning, God structured the world in such a way to make creative work prominent as part of the divine plan. A Sabbath rest on the seventh day is important but so is work the rest of the other days. Work orders our lives and helps us live into being co-laborers with God. Thessalonians is a great encouragement to get to work, reminding the church of how the apostles worked night and day to support themselves, even though they didn't have to. Work was their way of glorifying Jesus Christ and participating in the life of Christ. And there's always going to be work that needs to be done, not for work's sake or for profits, but for the reign of God. Some may shake their heads in disapproval or approval of the election results but the bottom line is that there's work to do.

Work in Christ's name has a certain texture to it. What is this work? I'm so glad you asked, kids. Paul's letter urges us to work and “do not be weary in doing what is right” (3:13). There are those who don't work for various reasons, but if you work, do what is right. What is right? Right is doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8). What is right? Right is caring for orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27). What is right? Right is not mistreating or oppressing resident aliens, because you were aliens in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9). What is right? Right is “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). What is right? Right is bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18). This is the work of the Lord and there's so much work to do. It's time to “pray with our feet” (Abraham Heschel) and heal with our hands and join the redemptive work God is doing in the world.

There will be those who are ‘idle’ which really should be translated in Thessalonians as ‘disorderly’ or ‘disruptive.’ They are busybodies, busying themselves in your business, not working but working around to get in your way. They are doing the wrong kind of work, emissaries of evil. Not everyone is happy about the work of the Lord. They will meddle in the ministry Jesus has called you to do. And

sometimes this will frustrate you or wear you down. You will get weary from working hard but seeing no results in your lifetime. You will get weary from saying the same things over and over again but seemingly no one appears to listen or you don't see any change. You will get weary when it seems as if evil always prevails. You will get weary from working on behalf of the least of these, those whom your Servant Leadership class at Trinity is focused on. You will get weary from working for the common good of all.

But let me use Paul's words, "don't be weary in doing what is right." This is so timely. I know you may not fully understand what I'm saying right now and you'd really prefer to be on Xbox 360 right now, Zachary, I know. But I want you to be on the right side of history and the right side of theology and follow the steps of our Lord Jesus Christ. Don't just be for him but be for what he is for. Let that be your guide for what is right. Walk together children and don't get weary. Work together children and don't get weary. We've come this far by faith leaning on the Lord. Don't let anybody turn you around. And if you follow Jesus, not even dark days or dark tombs will stop you.

*When in the darkness I would grope,
faith always sees a star of hope,
and soon from all life's grief and danger
I shall be free someday.*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,
nor what the future holds for me,
but this I know: if Jesus leads me,
I shall get home someday. (Beams of Heaven)*

As your grandpa always tells me at the end of phone calls, I'll tell you today—
"keep up the good work."

Love,

Your Dad, Mr. Dean.