

WGUMC November 23, 2014 Thanksgiving
I Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Tonight we have our yearly church conference. At this meeting we receive a report on the membership, elect leaders and approve pastors' salaries for the next year. It used to be a time when the pastor would have a chance to brag to the District Superintendent about all the wonderful things you have done in the last year. Well, that isn't done anymore, so this morning I'm going to give you the Pastor's Report, because it seems that that is what the Apostle Paul is doing in the first letter to the Thessalonians.

This is the earliest of Paul's letters that we have in the Bible, and it reads almost like a love letter. Paul is clearly in love with his work, and you might even say that he is still in the infatuation stage of his relationship with the church in Thessalonica. Some of his later letters show more of the stress and strain of trying to resolve conflicts in his churches, but this first letter is full of joy and gratitude.

Listen to his words: "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God...your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ...the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction...And you became imitators of us and of the Lord...you became an example to all the believers...For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you." [1:3-8]

Speaking for himself and for Silvanus and Timothy, Paul confesses, "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us." [2:8]

Paul very much sounds like a pastor in this letter. Here I am, three and half years into my appointment at Willow Glen, and I am still taking delight in you all. The longer I'm here and

the more we go through, the better I get to know you and the more dear you become to me.

It has been a difficult year for us in a lot of ways, but when things aren't easy in life, they get a lot clearer in faith. And it's in the difficult times that your pastor gets to see your soul peeking through. So let me tell you some of the things I've been seeing and giving thanks for this year.

All year long our Open Table anti-poverty program has been meeting and working with two people to get them to a more stable and sustainable place in their lives. Volunteers have been meeting weekly or bi-monthly to bring Christ into situations of crisis. It's been a long journey, but one of the sisters recently got a job, and the other found affordable housing. Tonight, one of the table volunteers will talk about what it was like to take that journey with a sister in Christ. I give God thanks for them because they made the Gospel more real in Willow Glen.

All year long our Caring Hands prayer shawl ministry has been cranking out the shawls, hats, scarves and mittens, one stitch, one prayer at a time. That's a lot of stitches and a lot of prayers. Under Jacque Lauer's leadership, they even made 21 prayer shawls, one for each of the women who went on the Walk to Emmaus. I give God thanks because they are being the hands of Christ, making the love of God more tangible, even wearable!

Speaking of caring hands, when Ruby Goodnight got cancer, we all knew that we were going to have to pick up the slack, and so a group gathered together and called themselves the Care Team. They spent several months talking about how they were going to organize the love of God in such a way that every member of our congregation who needed some extra care could get it. They worked out some procedures. They made up a brochure. E.Clay Buchanan set up a group email and put it up on the website. With Ruby as inspiration, the Care

Team is up and running. I give God thanks because they are making our compassion in this congregation more intentional.

Of course, we are all in awe of the things Ruby did around here. But there is a down side to one person doing everything. Sometimes others don't get to do much of anything. It may take a whole village to do all the visiting, the coordinating, and the calling that Ruby used to do, but this will be good for us, too. Carmen McBride and Jane Vivian have taken over the regular visiting. Kathy Benedict is coordinating communion. Lynda Hutcheson is calling greeters. There have been other people who have stepped up to serve, as well: Nate Unger took over the weekly email when Shirley Choy-Marshall got so sick last year. So now I give God thanks because a lot of people are being faithful and making the work seem more doable.

It's all about making the impossible possible. That's why our Mission Possible team has been working so hard all year. They put on a super fun auction and square dance in January

and a super successful rummage sale in September. We paid down some debt and fixed up the fellowship hall. Just this week, we put a new floor in the Wesley Room. The kitchen renovation will begin in January. I give God thanks for this hard-working team and especially for Brian Ganz, for his work of faith and labor of love. He tells us that by making our space more beautiful, we made at least one guy who comes here midweek, trying to stay sober, feel more valuable.

But we are not just sprucing up what's on the outside; we are getting more beautiful on the inside, too. Through Kaleidoscope and Covenant Bible Study, we have been encountering God's Word in new ways. But the big blessing to come our way was the Walk to Emmaus. It's been years since anyone from this congregation has been on the walk. But the stars aligned and the Spirit moved and three men and two women from Willow Glen got up close and personal with God over the past two weekends. I was thrilled to hear what God is

doing in them and can't wait to see what God is planning to do through them. So I give God thanks for grace that is life-changing and wonderful.

But wait. There's more. I'm delighted to report that we not only grew spiritually but also numerically this year. Seventeen youth were confirmed and received into membership in May. That must be some kind of record. And the confirmands were joined by thirteen adults. So I celebrate the fact that this congregation significantly lowered the average age of its membership and also improved its racial and cultural diversity. Willow Glen is starting to look more like our world. Praise God! And we have 30 more reasons to give God thanks for a year that has been most bountiful.

We have so many other reasons to give thanks. Building Hope built accessible paths for the Veggielution community garden, and I give thanks that God's good earth is now more accessible. We sent kids to camp and high schoolers on mission

trips, and I give God thanks that they are continue to show us that the Gospel is livable.

And last, but not least, this just in: two of our folks have been living the Gospel out loud by working endless hours to organize support for a housing impact fee that will help mitigate the loss of state and federal money for low-income housing in San Jose. I've watched these women use their God-given gifts to plan forums, organize rallies, question council members, and speak to the media. This past week, they helped pull off a great victory when the city council voted in favor of the fee, 7 to 3. So Pat Farrow and Jolene Jones, you made your pastor very proud because I could see your self-confidence building and your soul glowing. So I give God thanks for the way you are making your lives more meaningful by striving to make living here more affordable.

I could go on and on. For a pastor, all of you are pretty incredible and you make me so thankful. As Paul says, "For

what is my hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!" [2:19-20] I don't think you have any idea how much your faith deepens my joy. For there is nothing more soul satisfying to me than to see you growing in grace.

I know this was true for Rev. Wayne Williams, too. He served Willow Glen for 17 years, and he got to see a lot of growth happen here. So during his memorial service yesterday, I got to thinking about his long and loving legacy and wondering how we might best honor it. I realized that the best tribute we can pay to Wayne is to make a pledge to keep growing in grace. As Paul suggested to the Thessalonians, the legacy only lives if we all continue to stand firm in the Lord. [3:8] These are challenging times, but with your help, that's what I intend to do. Thank you and God bless you.