

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Pentecost 20

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I want to do something a little different today during the sermon.

I want to invite you to do a little Bible study with me.

I want to invite you to examine with me the text from 1 Thessalonians, which is our second reading this morning.

Now, I understand this is a bit unorthodox.

I understand that usually we hear a sermon on the gospel reading, but we will get there, I assure you.

But I have an agenda this morning.

It is good to have an agenda.

To know what we are going to do.

To have a purpose.

To envision that which we hope to accomplish.

It is good to have an agenda.

We come to almost any gathering or any meeting expecting an agenda.

Even a party, even a social even has an agenda, that is to have fun.

And yes, you are all sitting there in your seats thinking to yourselves, "So far the pastor's agenda for this sermon has been to talk about agendas."

But that hardly seems enough for a sermon's agenda, to just talk about agendas.

So, let me draw our attention back to the text from 1 Thessalonians.

In fact, it would probably be a good idea to take out your Celebrate insert right now, and look at that second reading.

Go ahead. Open your Celebrate to the second reading.

And I want you to notice the opening greeting.

It says, "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace to you and peace."

Now, this letter opening is different from all of Paul's other letters—that is, those letters which scholars are positive were written by Paul.

There are some letters in the New Testament that are attributed to Paul, but scholars debate whether Paul actually wrote them or if they were written by others and just attributed to Paul by name, such as Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, and Titus.

Aside from those letters, scholars for the most part agree that Paul actually did write Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians, and Philemon.

And in all of those undisputed letters of Paul, except I Thessalonians, Paul writes the salutation in this way: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now look again at the second reading in your Celebrate.

How does the salutation appear in I Thessalonians? It simply reads, "Grace to you and peace."

All the other undisputed letters of Paul read "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Only here in I Thessalonians does it read differently, “Grace to you and peace.”

Why? Because Paul had an agenda when he wrote I Thessalonians, and he sets out his agenda at the very beginning of his letter.

Now some will say that the salutation in all of Paul’s other letters evolved from this salutation here in I Thessalonians, because I Thessalonians was Paul’s earliest letter.

I Thessalonians is not only the earliest writing in the NT, it is also the earliest Christian writing, period.

So, some argue that Paul’s salutation had not evolved into its full form yet.

Some argue that the salutation had not yet become “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Some argue that in this early letter, it was just “Grace to you and peace.”

But I would argue otherwise.

I would argue that the full salutation already existed “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

And what Paul then does in I Thessalonians is intentionally removed the latter part of the salutation, the “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Look again at the second reading.

It just shows “Grace to you and peace.” Right? Where did the rest of the phrase go? Well look immediately above “Grace to you and peace.”

And it says there “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I submit that Paul removed the phrase “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” from the salutation and shifted it above, so as to use it to speak about the recipients of the letter.

In essence, Paul, is saying, “You, Thessalonians, are already in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. You don’t need me to wish you grace and peace FROM God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

So, why does Paul do this?

Why does he apparently change what was the common formula for the opening of a Christian letter?

Because he has an agenda.

And his agenda is this—to support the Christians in Thessalonica in the face of terrible persecution.

You see, the church in Thessalonica was experiencing suffering and persecution.

The portion of the letter we have here in front of us even mentions it—at verse 6.

And there are other references to persecution like this throughout the letter.

At one point, Paul even mentions that some members in the church have died.

And I used to think Paul was referring to members who had died of natural causes, but more likely he is referring to members of the church in Thessalonica who died as a result of persecutions.

So, the Thessalonians were experiencing persecution, some had even died, and Paul’s agenda is to support this church, to give them encouragement, and even to help them avoid further persecution.

And that is why he changes the salutation.

For, you see, it is my belief (and indeed this is the focus of my dissertation that I presently writing...)

It is my belief that the salutation portion of Paul’s letters was not just a greeting in a letter, but it was also the public greeting Christians used with one another.

I believe Christians greeted one another in public with the words, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

That is a rather lengthy greeting, right? Why not, simply say, “Hi.”

But in the Roman Empire at this time, part of everyday life was to announce to others in public the person or persons who served as your patrons.

Most individuals in the Roman Empire were part of what was called the client-patron relationship, where persons attached themselves as clients to persons of higher status called patrons and as clients, they sought daily benefits from their patrons.

And clients would show their gratitude by honoring their patrons by declaring the names of their patrons out loud in public.

In a similar way, Christians likely announced to each other and to the persons around them in public that their patron was God through Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace to you from our patrons, God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

But this no doubt got Christians into trouble, because ultimately the great patron of all the Roman Empire was the emperor, who was understood as the Father and the Lord of everyone.

And the great gift of grace the emperor provided was nothing short of the peace of Rome, known as the *pax Romana*.

Indeed, before the emperors, the Roman republic had known civil war for a hundred years, with only small periods of calm strewn throughout.

And so when peace was finally established by the first emperor, and maintained by each subsequent emperor, those persons who reigned as emperors were literally worshipped as gods throughout the Roman Empire.

Altars and temples, parades, and other demonstrations of emperor worship were on full display in Roman cities and in the provinces.

And so then, for Christians to say publicly, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ..." well that was politically subversive.

For Christians to publicly greet one another like this could invite persecution as it likely did for the Thessalonians.

And so Paul's agenda in this letter is to encourage the Thessalonians to aspire to live quietly, and mind their own affairs, and behave properly toward outsiders...

That is what Paul actually encourages the Thessalonians to do in the letter, "Aspire to live quietly, and mind your own affairs, and behave properly toward outsiders..."

Don't invite persecution upon yourselves.

And Paul, therefore, effectively tells the Thessalonians in the salutation portion of the letter to greet each other in public simply with the words, "Grace to you and peace," because such a greeting would be innocuous to the ears of outsiders.

Outsiders are not going to hear that as politically subversive, because Christians could be talking about the grace and peace of the emperor.

You see then, our words...our words matter; that is the message of today.

What we say, and also what we don't say, matters.

It is the message of I Thessalonians and it is the message of our gospel as well.

There in our gospel reading the Pharisees are trying to entrap Jesus in his words.

They want him to commit himself, by saying either he is for Rome by saying he is for taxes, which those who follow him will see as hypocritical. "Our Lord Jesus is subscribing to Rome?"

Or Jesus can say he is against Rome, and he is against taxes, which will land Jesus in big trouble with the Roman authorities.

They are trying to entrap Jesus in his words, but Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisees by asking for a Roman coin, which depicted the head of the emperor.

Now already, this would have proven the Pharisees to be hypocrites, because as followers of God's law, they are not to have any graven images, so why would they even produce a denarius.

That aside, Jesus says that you can give to the emperor these little trinkets of silver which bear the emperor's image; you can give the emperor these coins.

But give to God that which belong to God, that which bears God's image, namely your whole lives.

For as, Genesis 1:27 states, "God created humankind in God's image."

Yes, words matter...

What we say matters...and what we don't say also matters.

And this has been topic of discussion in our Racial Justice Forum as of late, such that the question has arisen, "Why have some people never before acknowledged the problem of racial injustice until now?"

"Why have some people never spoken out about this important issue in our society?"

"Why have necessary words remained unspoken by many who should speak out?"

It is a question we have only just touched upon in our conversation in the forum, but which we hope to discuss further.

Why do we as people remain silent until it becomes absolutely necessary for us to say something, if we ever even say anything at all?

I know it is a question I continue to struggle with.

And, I need to encourage all of you again to join the forum discussion, for the forum has continued to be a powerfully insightful and dare I say truly moving experience, where everyone has been civil with each other and abundantly honest and open with one another.

Yes, brothers and sisters in Christ, words matter...

What we say matters... what we don't say also matters.

This is the agenda of Paul and of Jesus—to understand the gift of words, and to speak faithfully when it is necessary.

We ask God then to give us the right words and the courage to speak them when we need to.

We ask God to hold our tongues, and to bless us with silence when what we would speak would harm others or even ourselves.

And we ask God to give us the ability to know the difference.

Thanks be to God. Amen.