9/29-30/18 Rev. Amy Haines

1 Thess 1:2-10 Stepping Out in Faith Making a Difference Series

Consider the many ways our faith ancestors here in Springboro stepped out in faith. In the 1800s they began to meet as societies, then purchased land, then built the first Christian churches. 51 years ago they voted to merge two congregations into one. 18 years ago they began to support IHN families. 15 years ago they opened a Christian preschool.

Then there were the everyday decisions, the yearly missions, the emphasis on Christian education, that continued to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. You and I would not be gathered here for worship today without the faithful men and women who have gone before us, stepping out in faithfulness and obedience, in service and mission, in witness and study.

Today we celebrate the faith of those who have gone before us, the commitment of those present now with us, and the call to serve into the future.

Today we bring to a close our September sermon series “Making a Difference” that reminds us we are all called to live as disciples of Jesus, in response to God’s love and grace. This series reminds us that we all have gifts to share as members of the body of Christ, no matter how young or old we are. Today we close out this series celebrating faith’s impact on our lives

and the ways we step out in faith, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide us and empower us.

We don’t serve others simply to be nice people. We don’t live lives of service simply to be good.

We serve to share the love of Jesus and in response to Jesus.

Our call to serve is grounded in our salvation, grace offered to us through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Saying yes to Jesus is the foundation of our faith, believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Yet once we say yes to Jesus, we are called to then build on that foundation, to live what we believe, to put our faith into action.

Jesus never allowed his disciples to simply hang out and swap stories of their experience of Jesus. Instead, Jesus sent them out 2 by 2 to serve in his name. Jesus reminded them to feed his sheep. Jesus called them to go and make disciples. Jesus empowered the disciples to live in such a way that others looked at them and wondered what made such a difference in their lives.

Following Jesus is about more than just believing in our heads and in our hearts. Following Jesus also includes living with our hearts and our hands.

Faith is not only what we proclaim in worship or what we live within these church walls, faith is also how we allow Jesus to influence every moment of every day, at work and school, with friends and family, in church and by ourselves, and in response to the needs of the community around us.

(shared a story from James Harnish, Making a Difference, p.92)

Friday night at Declare Springboro, an ecumenical worship service at North Park, Wendy Ford shared her story of beginning the Springboro Community Assistance Center. Having worked for years in the school, God led her to do something to assist the families of students and others

struggling within our own community. She was a single mom with a full-time job. Yet God called her to do something. And Wendy ended her testimony by encouraging each one present Friday night to do something. Do something to begin to impact the community around us in the name of Jesus.

Maybe that something is an extra dose of kindness to harried cashiers and waiters. Maybe that something is spending an extra five minutes getting to know the story of a neighbor. Maybe that something is giving an extra hour to volunteer at church or school or SCAC or driving a neighbor to a doctor appointment. How is God calling us to step out in faith, as individuals as well as a church community?

Yes, the needs around us are daunting. Homelessness and living paycheck to paycheck. Drug abuse and silent victims of assault. Apathy and fear. Anxiety in our children and loneliness in our seniors.

The more we open ourselves up to stepping out in faith, going where God calls us to go, the more sensitive we will become to the great many needs around us. We may also realize then that our mission to transform the world in the name of Jesus is more complicated than we imagined.

Have you ever wanted to simply give a donation of food yet found God calling you to learn more about food deserts and food insecurities? Have you ever wanted to be kind to others

yet found God calling you to confess your own ingrained racism or sexism? Have you ever wanted to do something, yet were not willing to go fully where God wanted you to go?

Take heart. Even when we stumble, even when we fear, God will never give up on us.

God will keep loving us, even when we run in the opposite direction from which God calls us to go. God will keep calling us, even when we refuse to move an inch, let alone a step, in faith.

And God does not leave us alone, even offering us the support of the body of Christ, the community of faith, brothers and sisters who are also called to step out in faith.

We can find strength from God’s presence, strength from the community of faith around us,

and strength from God’s Word.

The Apostle Paul’s letters to the early Christian communities were a source of encouragement,

reminding them they were not alone. Sometimes Paul celebrated their ministry. Sometimes Paul chastised their struggles. Yet throughout Paul’s letters he reminded the early Christians

who they were and whose they were, and that they were not alone each time they stepped out in faith. If we are open to God speaking to us through Paul’s words to us today, we can also find comfort, strength, and encouragement.

When Paul wrote to the Christian community in Thessalonica, he began with energetic praise,

commending them for their faith while encouraging them to stay strong.

When Paul arrived in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, it was already a bustling city in the Roman Empire, capital of the province of Macedonia, an important stop on the trade route of the region. Even though Paul was chased out of town after only a few weeks of proclaiming Christ crucified and risen, the seeds of faith he planted took root in the hearts and lives of the Gentile community there. This letter to Thessalonica is often referred to as the earliest of Paul’s writings, and even predates the compilation of the Gospels.

Yet here you can see early Christian theology grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, lived out among a community of believers living by hope and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

To be a Christian in the first century was not easy. When one changed allegiance from the plethora of Roman gods to worship the one true God, when one believed in Jesus as savior

when he was killed as an enemy of the state, one often lost family members and friends, even jobs and status in the community, for one no longer believed in the dominant religious, social and political perspectives of the day.

Paul began his letter to the church at Thessalonica remembering their commitment to faith, hope and love. If those three attributes sound familiar, they are! Paul uses them again in 1 Corinthians 13 as foundational aspects of living in Christian community and living in service to the world around us.

This early Christian community is remembered not just for living by faith, hope and love, but by the work that comes from their faith, the effort that comes from their love, and the perseverance that comes from hope. Does work, effort and perseverance sound easy? They are not. Rather, they are intentional choices that follow the ways of Jesus rather than the ways of this world.

How is our ministry, how is our lives, reflective of faith, hope and love? Are those qualities we strive to live by only in Christian community, or qualities we strive to live by each and every day

in the midst of ordinary life?

Paul next celebrated that the good news of Jesus was more than a story to them. The good news of Jesus came to them not merely as words on a page or words spoken by another

but came to them as the living word of God, with the power to transform lives. They fully vested themselves in God’s Word, fully convinced the story of Jesus was the truth of God.

They trusted in the Holy Spirit working in and through and among them.

How do we allow God’s word to take root in us, in such a way that it transforms how we think, how we act, and how we love? Do we invest more time in the Bible or in Facebook? Do we value the power of the Holy Spirit? Do we trust the Spirit to guide us where God would have us go? How confident are we that what we believe is the truth of God?

As the church at Thessalonica embraced the word of God and lived in response to the word through faith, hope and love, Paul next commended these Christians for being imitators. They were imitators not only of the faith of Paul, but also his companions such as Silvanus and Timothy. More importantly, these new Christians became imitators of Christ, even imitating his strength at the cross as they received the word of God with joy and stood strong in the face of suffering and persecution.

..Max Lucado once observed,

“People who live long lives together eventually begin to sound alike, talk alike, and even think alike. As we walk with God, we take on his thoughts, his principles, his attitudes. We take on his heart.’” -- Leadership from the Heart Participant Book p.28

As you and I grow in faith, we are called to become more like Jesus each and every day. We are called to take on the heart of God to reach the needs of the community around us. We are called to be imitators of Jesus. This does not mean we do exactly what Jesus did in his day and age. This does mean we live by his qualities, his characteristics, his love for God and love for others.

John Wesley would call the journey to be more like Christ the journey of Christin perfection.

This perfection does not mean we will be perfect in life. We will not all get As on every test.

We will not find everything in life to be to our liking. We will not always be a shining example of love or grace.

Yet we know that we are forgiven. We know that we have been called to be God’s kingdom here on earth. We know that we are called to strive to live by love and grace, in mercy and service, all of our days.

Is our faith stronger than it was a year ago? Five years ago? Do others see Christ in us a little more each and every day?

Paul then celebrates that not only did these early Christians become imitators, they became examples of faith to other early Christian communities. They not only became known for what they believed, but also for how that belief transformed their lives. No longer did they worship idols. No longer did they fear this world. They had hope in Jesus’ presence with them now,

and confidence in Jesus’ coming again.

Believers in other Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire gained strength to stand firm in faith and were encouraged to take the next step of faith when they heard how the church in Thessalonica stood strong, even in the face of struggle and sorrow.

Who have been examples of faith to you? Who has encouraged you along your faith journey?

Who made faith real to you? Who made a difference as they lived the hard choices of following Jesus in our day and age? What can we learn from our ancestors in faith, and what can we learn from one another here today?

The Apostle Paul celebrated the early church community at Thessalonica. He also encouraged them to continue down the path of faith and faithfulness, living by word and action, trusting the Holy Spirit, being imitators and examples of men and women all in for Jesus.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, continue to be encouraged in your faith journeys. Continue to listen for God’s call. Continue to prayerfully find your place to serve. Continue to look beyond your self-interests to the needs of our community. Continue to be ready for those not yet here.

Be open to the Holy Spirit, and where the Spirit will lead us.

Be open to the Holy Spirit, and how the Spirit will convict us.

Be open to the Holy Spirit, and the ways in which the Spirit will empower us.

Don’t discount the ordinary gifts in your life that God can use in an extraordinary way. …

God is able to take whatever we have in our hands and use it for Kingdom purposes.

-James Harnish Make a Difference p.100

Even small things can make a big difference. So find your way to serve.

Today, we are celebrating the many ways we have been in ministry this past year. Today we are celebrating the ways that we serve not only within these walls, but also beyond this congregation, in mission and ministry, together and individually.

Yet even while we celebrate, listen for God’s call to take the next step of faith. The work of our ministry is far from over. The needs are still great in our congregation as well as in our community. So be open to new adventures in faith. Be open to knowing more about different ministries within our congregation. Be open to the way God may be calling you to do something.

Together, as members of the body of Christ, how can we continue to be faithful and impactful, obedient and passionate, sacrificial and supportive, living for Jesus in word and action?

We are all called to make a difference. And to keep making a difference. All in the name of Jesus.

So as we finish this series, remember and heed Paul’s words to the Philippian church:

“Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received

and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

–Phil 4:9

May God guide us as we learn and grow and serve and mentor others. May God be praised as we love and serve and celebrate together today, then take the next step of faith. May we support and encourage, celebrate and journey with one another, in faith and hope and love and joy.

May it be so.

Let us pray.