

Contagious

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Introduction

Today I want to encourage you to be contagious.

You heard me. Contagious. That word has certainly occupied our conversations in these recent days. You and I have spent most of this last year worrying about who might around us so that we didn't become contagious.

I went to my doctor on Monday for my annual physical. The receptionist had to ask me a series of question to make sure I wasn't contagious. The last one was a recitation of every possible symptom of the virus. She tried her best to ask the question in one breath, but with about two symptoms to go she had to gasp for breath. After answering appropriately, I asked her if she ever got light-headed when she asked that question. She smiled, and told me that people have thought of her as light-headed her entire life.

But I want to talk about a different kind of contagious today. Not one related to any scary disease, but rather related to something that is holy and life-giving. It's the kind of contagious that is described in 1 Thessalonians 1. Listen again to these verses from that passage:

And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8)

These people were contagious!

There a key word in those verses that I don't want you to miss. In English, this version translates it as "model."

- Initially this word was used to describe the indentation made when a hammer would make when it missed the nail. When I miss the nail, I usually hit my thumb. But it's a picture of a noticeable and lasting indentation in the wood.
- After a while it began to be used to describe a formal imprint made on a document, like the one a notary public creates.
- But ultimately it became the word used to describe a pattern, like one of those Simplicity patterns a seamstress might use to create an article of clothing.

So in this passage Paul is saying the Christians in the church at Thessalonica had become patterns that made a lasting imprint in the lives of others. Their lives infected the people around them. Those watching imitated the Thessalonians. They modeled their lives after them. In other words the Thessalonians were "contagious."

Like virus in a contained area. Their faith spread.

#1: You saw it in their walk

These Christians were clearly different than the rest of their society. The text says:

They tell how you turned to God from idols ... (1 Thessalonians 1:9)

We often think about faith being spread by what we, so we try to DO a lot in our community so that people will see us out their doing stuff.

But their faith was contagious because of what they DIDN'T do. They rejected idol worship and all of its strange rituals and superstitions. That would have been risky because so much of commerce and politics was connected to the pagan culture that existed all around them.

We live in a society that is also filled with idols and we need to turn away from every one of them. An idol has been defined best as anything other than Jesus that has a grip on your life. Instead of turning away from them, many try to please both Jesus and their idol of choice.

That's why God constantly reminds His people that there is no other God but Him. That's a recurring theme we are hearing in our study of Leviticus on Wednesday nights. And in today's Gospel reading, Jesus reminded us that some things belong God and He is not willing to share them with anyone else.

So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. (Matthew 22:21)

So the challenge of faith is always

Do I stand out as different from the culture around me?

Not only was their faith contagious in their walk of faith...

#2: You saw it in their worship.

Walking away from your idol of choice is one thing. An important thing. But even more important is what you walk toward, and what you do as a result. Look at the text:

They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9)

The people became servants of God. In a world where dominated by self-promotion, the idea of servanthood seems old-fashioned and counter-cultural. These Christians did not turn from idols in order to grab the spotlight; they turned in order to serve. The language is the same that is used to describe the slave-master relationship.

As one writer expressed it:

We live in an age that prefers to think of God as a partner rather than a slave owner, our friend rather than our master.

We might give him a vote in our decision-making processes, but we are hesitant to give Him absolute, unqualified authority in our lives. The question in our minds is “What if He chooses something other than the choice we want made?”

One day my daughter wanted to show me a card trick she had just learned. She spread a deck of cards out in her hand with the backs facing me. One card was sticking up much higher than the rest. “Pick a card, dad, any card.” As I ran my hand over the deck trying to make a selection, she in turn moved the deck so that the highest card was always under my hand. I was told I could pick any card, but it was clear which card I was supposed to pick.

That's often our approach to God. “Lord” we pray. “I give this issue over to you completely. But make sure you choose to do this thing this way. Pick a card, Lord, any card. As long as you pick this one.”

That is not the role of the servant. Throughout the Scriptures He repeatedly says “I am the Lord.” Which implies that we are not in that role.

A devotional I read recently made this comment:

God is not your senior partner. He is not the man upstairs. He is not your co-pilot. He is God. There is no other. You will find meaning in your life only in becoming His servant.

So their faith was contagious because of their walk, and their worship and in their ...

#3: You saw it in their waiting

Look at verse 10:

... and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (1 Thessalonians 1:10)

They turned from idols to serve and to wait. What were they waiting for? For Jesus to come down from heaven. This sounds like a text from Advent, doesn't it? We are almost there, but not quite yet.

This Christians knew with absolute certainty that Jesus was coming again. This had been the promise that was made as Jesus ascended into heaven (Acts 1), and they were convinced that Jesus would keep that promise, just as He had kept every other promise.

In the second century, the Romans began to persecute the Christians in the realm. Smyrna, which is in present day Turkey, was one place where it was especially severe.

May Christians were being fed alive to wild beasts. The Bishop of that area was named Polycarp. As the bloodthirsty crowd grew in its intensity, they began to demand the life of Polycarp.

But they couldn't find him. He had been taken into hiding by a small band of Christians. The Romans tortured two young believers who had helped to hide the Bishop until they finally disclosed his location. When the Romans arrived, instead of continuing to run, welcomed his captors as if they were friends. He talked with them and made them eat a meal with him before he would leave.

He made only one request before being taken away. He asked for one hour to pray. The Roman soldiers stood over him for that hour, listening to his prayer. Their hearts melted as they listened, so they gave him an extra hour. By the end of the second the entire detachment of soldiers was have second thoughts, and as overheard asking each other why they were sent to arrest him?

The Proconsul tried to find a way to release him. "Curse God," he pleaded with the Bishop, "and I will let you go!"

Polycarp's reply was: "For eighty-six years I have served him. He has never done me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King was has saved me?"

The Proconsul again looked for a way out. "Then do this old man. Just swear your allegiance to the emperor and that will be sufficient."

Polycarp's reply was: "If you imagine for a moment that I would do that, then you don't know who I am. Hear me plainly. I am a Christian."

The proconsul threatened him with wild beasts, and finally threatened to burn him alive. Polycarp's reply was: "You threaten me with a fire that burns for an hour and is over but the judgment on the ungodly lasts forever."

On February 22, 155 A.D., Polycarp was burned at the stake. He died proclaiming that Jesus was coming to save those who believe from the coming wrath. His death inspired many people to become Christians. His faith was contagious.

APPLICATION

The first time we hear about Thessalonica in the Scriptures is in Acts 17. There we are told that Paul's preaching incited a riot, and he had to escape to the city of Berea. That was about 49 A.D. By A.D. 70 Thessalonica was considered to be one of the leading centers in all of Christianity.

Don't miss that! This city, once hostile to the faith, now was known as a Christian city. Those Thessalonians so contagiously influenced the pagan culture that Jesus Christ was the dominant force in the region.

I am heavily burdened for our city. I pray that God would make us the Thessalonica of Ohio. But that happens only as the people of our community, perhaps beginning with the people of our church, become contagious carriers of the gospel.

I challenge each person listening to my voice today to be contagious for Jesus. I thought about having masks made for us to wear that said "I'm contagious." But I thought that might convey a different and frightening message to the people we meet. So let's do it like the Thessalonians did. Let's let people ...

- See it in our walk
- See it in our worship
- See it in our waiting

Let's pray ... Amen.