

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
November 6, 2016

Text: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8; 13-17; Matthew 16:18

Theme: “Humility and Hope”

Building can bring budding hopes and suddenly humility. Those starting a new business, or building a house, a career, or a church may well experience struggles early on. But then things start to improve, some success, very good. It becomes good to the point that over confidence, even arrogance start to creep in. Then suddenly something breaks or changes. New technology comes along that makes your product pretty much obsolete. You run into a road block in your education. The next step up seems to have pulled away just when you were about to step on it and you are left in midair, but not for long. The completion of your long planned for and quite expensive building is put on hold because of a permit problem.

Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica. It's still a young church. Paul expresses words of concern and words of hope, certain hope. The building of the church is God's building, His work. We hear Jesus' words speaking to that in Matthew 16, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Don't miss the “my” in these words of our Lord.

The church in Thessalonica was started by Paul and Silas on Paul's second missionary journey. They had rolled into town after leaving Philippi and passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia (Acts 16:40-17:1). They had taught in the Jewish synagogue for three Sabbaths reasoning from the Scriptures Jesus is the Christ. We read in Acts 17 that some were persuaded, as well as many devout Greeks, and not a few leading women (vs 4). The church, the body of Christ, was now in this place of Thessalonica.

Then the trouble started. It started from some of the Jews who were not convinced that Jesus was the Christ. They drag some of the believers before the city authorities. They accuse them of acting against the decrees of Caesar saying there is another king, Jesus (Acts 17:7). Paul and Silas were sent away by night to Berea. The church, the little church is still there. They are still facing trouble and persecution. With Paul's sudden departure some questions arise. They had not been fully instructed in matters of the faith.

They knew Jesus was returning, were expecting it. But what if some die before that happens (or maybe some had)? What of them; would they miss out? Paul addresses this question in 1 Thessalonians (4:13-18). He probably wrote the letter during his extended stay at Corinth. He assures them that those who fall asleep before the Lord's return will not miss out. Paul assures them that at the sound of the trumpet and the voice of the archangel, the dead in Christ will be raised first, then those who are alive, will be caught up in the air to meet the Lord (vss 16, 17). He told them to encourage one another with these words (vs 18). I'm sure they did.

But still they were a little church, how would they fare facing troubles and afflictions? Now a new question arises, another source of fear. The word has been circulating somehow that Christ had already returned. "We ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or spoken words, or a letter seemingly coming from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." (2 Thessalonians 2:2) Now the fear was, "Did we miss it?" Fear was probably a very common response in the challenges faced by the young and little church.

But despite the fears, the church grew. Christ was building His church. It grew throughout the time of the apostles and beyond, grew amidst much opposition, challenges, even persecution. Then in 313 a great turning point, the Edict of Milan ending the

persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. So there would be a time of the church growing not just in souls, but in buildings and resources. The church would grow through the decline and fall of the western Roman Empire (and continue to grow in the Eastern Empire). The church would be part of mix in filling the vacuum of power in the decline of the Empire. The church continued, grew, even prospered in some ways. With the discovery of the Americas and exploration, the church also expanded there. Christianity thrived in Europe and the Americas.

And for those in power in the church, sometimes fear was replaced with arrogance. Some leaders spent more time as lords than shepherds, more concerned with power than repentance. Though centuries passed and secularism grew for a long time in Western culture the church retained a favorable place. The church was accepted, often even encouraged. It was not so hard to advocate biblical morality as the culture reflected such morality, at least in theory. It was easy to become complacent when it came to holding to the teachings of Scripture, lose track of the distinctiveness of Christianity. It was the day of the big church.

But now in our culture things have changed. Is it back to the little church days? Paul addresses the false idea that the Lord had already returned. He reminds his readers that he had addressed the subject while he was with them, said before that happened the apostasy, must come, the man of lawlessness, “the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.” (2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4) Who would this be? It is probably the same as that which we called the Antichrist. Our Lutheran Confession made the historical identification of this power with the office of the papacy based upon the claims by the papacy to hold both spiritual and secular power, and saying

that it is necessary to recognize such authority for salvation, and claiming the authority to make new laws of faith (see *Book of Concord*, “Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope”, paragraphs 1-6, “Smalcald Articles”, Part II, Fourth Article, paragraph 10). John is presenting the same picture (of the man of lawlessness) in Revelation through the two beasts under the control of the dragon (Satan). Is the Antichrist to be found in the office of the papacy or somewhere else? In any case, the picture we have is of the powers of hell let loose against Christ’s church (Revelation 9, 12, 13). The world is ready to bow down, to turn from the truth to the lie of the dragon. Are we in such days?

The church instead of growing seems to be declining in the west. We have become out of step and out of favor with the culture around us—even persecuted? Is it back to the little church? And the response, is it fear? Is it even worse, despair?

We remember our Lord’s words again, ““And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Remember the “my” and remember the my is not the same as “mine,” belonging to me or you or even us. If we look to human authority and strength then we will have the responses of fear and despair, or complacency and even arrogance. In face of opposition we look at our strength or lack thereof and think, “Oh, no, we won’t be able to stand. All is lost.” No, we won’t be able to stand on our own. We would be like the 11 on the day of the resurrection before they realized it was the day of the resurrection. We would be in hiding, the best we could do.

On the other hand if all is going well we may be tempted to move from salt and light to commanders and generals. “You are Peter, on this rock,” the mistake has been made of seeing Peter to be the rock, the man, the person, the papacy. We remember if left to our sin it is our nature to exalt self above every so-called God or object of worship.

But it's Christ's "my" not ours. On this rock, that rock being the solid confession that Jesus is the rock, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Christ builds His church. He is the head of the church. "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Built on Christ fear and despair give way, are replaced with hope. Paul has plenty of hope for his readers in Thessalonica. "God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, sanctified by the Spirit and belief in the truth." (vss13, 14) The Scriptures have many words of hope for us. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." (1 Peter 2:9) "You are all sons of God through faith." (Galatians 3:26) In our Lord Jesus we are heirs of salvation.

We look to our returning Lord Jesus remembering where He has been. He left the glories of heaven to come to the ordinaries of this life. He experienced more than the ordinaries; He encountered temptations, was tempted in every way as we are yet without sin. He never stumbled or tripped, fulfilled all righteousness for us. Then He went to the cross to atone for all our unrighteousness. He received the justice of God against all our sins. He was faithful unto death. He descended to the camp of the enemy not to suffer to but to show His death was not victory, but defeat for the enemy. He is now risen, ascended, and reigning at the Father's right hand. There He intercedes, rules over all for the sake of His body, the church. We have this assurance as the church shows itself gathering in congregations large or small or somewhere in between.

Our Lord Jesus is still building His church, built as the Spirit works in God's Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper to give faith and to strengthen faith. The gates of hell have not been, nor will prevail. Prevail is probably not the best translation, "overcome" is better (*katiscu, w, katischy*). The "gates of hell" could well mean those who sit in the

gates, that is, the powers, the rulers, the chief ruler of evil. They will not prevail though they rage. No, they do not overcome, are overcome themselves by the blood of the Lamb. Jesus continues to build His church. The church seems to diminish in one place yet grows in another. If the time comes when all appears to be lost, it is not. Victory is always assured. Paul assures those believers in the little church time of Thessalonica, “To this He called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus.” (vs 14)

Paul exhorts, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.” (vs 16) As Paul speaks of traditions here he is not referring to customs, no, he is referring to what has been passed down, the teachings. This would be through Scripture and at what had been passed through the apostles to the church. They are passed on to learn, believe, and to teach. As we continue to hold fast to the teachings hearts are comforted and we are established in every good work.” (vs 16)

Christ build His church whether that church appears as big church or little church. As we remember it's His church and building, arrogance gives way to humility, and despair to hope. For Jesus's sake. Amen