

## **First Thing Last**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

*August 30, 2009*

### **1 Thessalonians 5:12-28**

*Imagine Paul close to finishing his letter to the church in Thessalonica. Suddenly he realizes that he is nearly out of paper. But he still has so much to say, so he crams it all in rapid-fire before he runs out of room to write.*

Brothers and sisters, we ask you to respect those who are wearing themselves out among you, looking after you in the Lord and admonishing you, and in love to esteem them very highly because of their work.

Be at peace among yourselves.

And, brothers and sisters, we urge you that you admonish the slackers, encourage the timid, hold on to the weak, be patient with everyone.

See to it that no one repays anyone evil for evil. But always seek the good for one another and for everyone.

Always rejoice. Constantly pray. In everything give thanks. This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Don't extinguish the Spirit. Don't dismiss prophecy. But test everything. Hold on to what's good. Keep away from evil's every guise.

May the God of peace himself make you completely holy, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept entirely blameless when our Lord Jesus Christ comes. The one who calls you is faithful and is the one who will do it.

Brothers and sisters, pray for us, too.

Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.

I require you to swear by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

### **Children's Story**

The Great Forest is a good place for squirrels to raise a family. There's plenty of food and plenty of water; there are plenty of trees and plenty of neighbors. There are also plenty of places to get lost, and that's just what Sammy the Squirrel did one day when he was very young.

Early in the morning, Sammy ran off to play. But he didn't come home for lunch. Sammy's dad knew right away that something was the matter. Sammy was hurt or Sammy was lost. Either way he was in danger, and his mom and dad would have to go and find him – which is just what they did.

They left Sammy's younger brothers and sisters home alone and went to look for Sammy. All afternoon they used their eyes, their ears, and their noses, hunting for Sammy. They searched every corner of the Great Forest, until at last they found him!

Sammy was so happy to see his mom and dad! They were happy, too. And once they were sure that Sammy was okay, they headed straight for home.

As soon as they arrived, they called all their friends and neighbors to join them. Sammy was home safe and sound, and it was time to have a party.

It seemed like a lot of fuss to Sammy to have a party. But his mom and dad knew better. A lost squirrel is in a lot of danger. It was a wonder that they had found Sammy safe and sound. Oh yes, there was every reason to have a party!

### **Sermon**

What a lot Paul crams into just seventeen verses, many of them short verses! I preached a sermon on these verses five years ago. I tried to cram a lot into that sermon, to cover the ground that Paul himself covered. Looking back at that sermon, I see that I didn't do Paul justice. I skimmed too quickly over too much. It was hard not to; there is so much in these seventeen verses. Today I'll try to say more by talking about less. Maybe it will work, maybe not. In either case, it will be over soon enough.

**In this letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul, as often, ends where he begins, first thing last: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (v. 28).** The first thing and the last thing is grace, always grace. I’ve heard definitions of grace, some simplistic, some complex. But as often as not, definitions conceal as much or more than they reveal. So I’ll not bother with a definition. How about a story?

One day a little child wandered away from home. She left the back yard and entered the deep, dark woods. When she turned around, her home was lost to her. She wandered in those woods, wandered and wandered, barely able to see through her tears. When she tripped over a bulging tree root, she stayed where she fell, crying, lost, alone, terrified. But her mother was looking for her. She looked up and down the long, straight street the house was on. She looked in the neighbors’ yards. And she searched in the deep, dark woods. She searched and she searched, listening, calling out to her daughter, listening some more, never giving up until she found her daughter’s sleeping form, worn out from crying, cradled her in her arms, and brought her home.

That is grace, part of it at least.

For the children of God, whether in Thessalonica or Columbus, whether in Dhaka or Darfur — for the children of God, the first thing and the last thing is always grace. And the story of grace is the story of Jesus Christ — the story we tell, the story we have been told, the story we live within, the story that makes us who we are, the story that gathers up every other story. The story of Jesus Christ is the world’s story. His story picks up the pieces and puts them together. His story gathers us, puts us together, and sends us on our way. Jesus came for us, called to us, found us, brought us home. That is grace, the first thing and the last thing.

**It’s worth noting that, from first to last, grace is focused on community, on “us,” not on “me.”** The community of faith in first century Thessalonica is the focus of the seventeen verses we heard a few minutes ago. There Paul offers instructions and corrections and warnings to that community. In those verses, he quickly sketches important concerns for the community and its leaders, the community and its individual members, the community and its domestic and foreign relations, to use those terms — in other words, how to relate to other community members and how to relate to people who don’t belong to the community. In those verses, he sketches important concerns for the community and its habits of heart and life, for the community and its hope and its roots and its life-source.

We have a challenge in English. Often we can’t tell if “you” and “your” in a biblical passage are singular or plural. “Is Paul talking about me or about us?” Most often, when the Bible says “you” or “your” the word is plural. Community comes first. The Heidelberg Catechism captures this well in its description of the church:

from the beginning of the world to its end,  
[the Son of God] gathers, protects, and preserves for himself  
a community chosen for eternal life  
and united in true faith.

And of this community I am and always will be  
a living member. (A 54)

The “I”-part, the “me”-part, the singular, is within community.

God’s grace is focused on this community, focused on the community because the community embodies Jesus’ story to the world. Jesus gathers and builds the community of faith for the sake of the world. “As the Father has sent me,” he says, “so I am sending you.” Sending us to a world lost in the deep, dark woods. Not that we’re out of the woods ourselves. But we have been found there. We have been given glimpses of home. And we get foretastes of home in Word and Sacrament. We’re still in the woods — we belong in the woods; the mission is to the woods — but we know there’s more than the woods, and we know the one who is the way out of the woods.

Christ came into the world for the world. Christ humbles himself in the world for the world. Christ suffered in the world for the world. And so God’s grace makes us a community, a community in the world — in the deep, dark woods — for the world, a humble community, a suffering community, a dying community — for the world. Not slowly wasting away, not dying of old age, but offering ourselves — not you, not me,

but us together — offering ourselves as a sacrifice, to die for the sake of the world, for the sake, at least, of our deep, dark corner of it.

**I know. That's impossible for us to be and to do. Impossible, except for grace.** Listen to Paul: “May the God of peace himself make you completely holy, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept entirely blameless when our Lord Jesus Christ comes. The one who calls you is faithful and is the one who will do it” (vv. 23-24). The “yous” are plural again. And there’s something complete and comprehensive in view, embracing the community and its members in their human totality, spirit and soul and body.

Paul has in mind a picture of a church that is holy and blameless, fully. In other words, fully and without fail expressing God’s intentions. Of course, we hear “holy” and “blameless” and right away we probably think about moral and ethical purity. Certainly moral and ethical purity has its place, but holiness is more comprehensive than that, whether a community is blameless in that holiness or not. Holiness is about God’s choice, about being chosen by God for a purpose, for a destiny even.

What Paul has in mind, then, is a church that lives up to its calling, to be the body of Christ in the world to the world for the world, to express in its life, in its lived-every-day story the amazing, saving, reconciling work of God in Jesus Christ. In other words, to steal an expression, that the church be a “living epistle,” a letter that can be read by anyone, a letter that tells the story of Jesus Christ.

Again, this is impossible for us to do. We’re not up to it. The deep, dark woods? We’re afraid to go back there. We like it out in the sunlight. We could get lost in those woods, lost and hurt and alone and threatened. We don’t trust those woods. We’re not sure if we really trust the one who’s sending us back into those woods. Me? I’ll tell you, there are certain kinds of churches I don’t want to go near. Not again. Not ever. Even if God is pushing. And there are sorrows and pains that people bear, sorrows and pains that we’re not ready to come too close to ourselves, especially if our own wounds are too raw.

We have all sorts of reasons to flounder and fail, all sorts of reasons not to even try. “But,” Paul says, “but . . . God calls . . . God is faithful . . . God will do it . . .” It sounds like what Paul has in mind is this: “God will see to it.”

We work, we wait, we watch, we pray, we love, we cry, we help, we hope, we fall, we fail, we try again. And God, somehow, through all that, despite all that — God sees to it.

We have a word for that. It’s called grace. The first thing and the last thing.