The Road, the Letter, and the Landscape

November 5th, 2017

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Letters are invaluable treasures for the social historian, and for historians in general. In letters we see the many actors of history writing and thinking on their own terms, reporting things as they see them, expressing their worldviews as they feel them. They are raw, uncensored, and exciting glimpses into the minds of those who shaped the past. The letters of Paul are no exception. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul reports on his own missionary efforts as well as the manner in which these efforts were received. It's an uncensored look at how people in the 1st Century experienced the Holy Spirit. In our reading today, we discover three key aspects of this experience—the reception of the word of God, glorying in the salvation of others, and living a life worthy of God.

To receive the word of God is in itself one of the greatest parts of experiencing God. Traveling religious teachers and philosophers were not new—the Hellenistic world was full of them. And Thessalonica, being a major Greek town, had seen its traveling teachers before—they had seen the traffic of the *human word* time after time. Paul, however, rejoices that the Good News, the word of God, the word from God, was able to reach the hearts of the Thessalonians. He says: "We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Many years ago, Simone Weil wrote an interesting book, or letter, really, called *Letter to a Priest* (Penguin Books, 2003)*.* It charts her struggle with wanting to embrace the Christian faith, but finding it difficult to accept many of the contents of that faith. It begins beautifully, in the humblest terms possible. There are some painfully beautiful quotes scattered throughout this book, as when she says: "A saint who walks upon the waters is in every respect analogous to a saint who weeps" (53); or, when she writes: "I believe that the mystery of the beautiful in nature and in the arts…is a sensible reflection of the mystery of faith" (60). Nevertheless, for all the lucidity of her arguments, the beauty of her prose and her sentiments, there is a frightening arrogance, a heart closed to something different than what she would like. Only 30 pages into her book, she suggests that the apostles misunderstood Christ, that the Church has produced more evil than good, that the mission of the Church has failed (30-31). Fifty pages into her book, she brazenly tells the Church what it should do about the relationship between science and religion (56). This is not the letter of someone seeking God. This is a letter seeking to correct God or create God, to correct the Church, to reshape God into the image of Simone Weil. It is the prototype of most of our religion today. In our day and time, we often speak in terms of religious experience. Experience is important, but take a moment to think about the nature of experience. Some of my greatest memories, which were almost religious experiences, were traveling in the countryside of Hokkaido, where I grew up. There is nothing like seeing a summer thunderstorm passing over the fields in Sorachi, watching farmers burn barley in the autumn in the hills around Furano, or seeing night waves crash along the beach on the northwest coast of the island, or looking down at the pale, white dead trees in the smoking crater of Usu. Those are very important, personal memories for me. The thing is: I did not arrange the clouds on the day of the thunderstorms; I did not paint the autumn barley, the fire and the smoke; I did not hurl the breakers onto the dark sand of the northwest coast or plant the ash-white trees in the dark rocks of Mount Usu. I was blessed to be invited into those moments and those landscapes, but I could only enjoy and stand in awe. The only choice I had in those moments was to open my heart to the grandeur of the event. I believe this is what the Thessalonians did. They did not try to paint the landscape of their experience for Paul; they opened their hearts and received what God was giving to them—God's word, the eternal and wondrous meaning of all creation and redemption, the Good News that brought them salvation. Throughout our lives, we want so much for God to receive us as we are, we want His grace and His presence in our lives—but have we ever stopped to think that God wants us to receive Him as He is? To let go and experience something that we cannot create, cannot name, cannot build, cannot interpret, cannot modify, water down or rationalize away? That would be real openness.

Because of the openness of the Thessalonians, the apostle rejoiced—and in rejoicing he discovered another kind of glory. There is the glory that God promises us personally—"Christ in you the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). That is personal and individual. There is the breathtaking glory of God that we read about repeatedly in the Old and New Testaments, such as what transpired on Mount Sinai when God spoke the Law to Moses (Exodus 20), or the Transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2-8) or the final revelation of God. Here, however, Paul speaks of a different glory, saying: "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!" (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). Rejoicing in the glory of others, rejoicing in the salvation that others have found—this is a much needed glory in our church today. The London Marathon in 2016 had just such an event of glory when Will Brindley and Alex Lacey helped another runner cross the finish line. As Alex described it: "‘It was quite overwhelming. I was struggling throughout the race because I had a calf injury that was playing up from mile 13. Then around mile 24 I saw this lad on the side of the road, his top half was leaning back and his eyes were rolled up into his head. He was tearful and he said, “I can’t not finish”". Alex then basically carried this man until around mile 26, at which point he could barely endure the pain of his own injury. It was then that Will Brindley, intervened and helped the other two, and the three of them finished, crossing the finish line together. (http://metro.co.uk/2016/04/26/you-may-have-missed-this-touching-moment-at-the-london-marathon-5841784/?ito=cbshare). On life's road there are others waiting for someone to help them cross the finish line. Some of these people are on the sidelines, exhausted, injured, running out of hope. Some are fine—they might not even know they are in the race and would be happy to find out and to have your companionship. In your quiet time, pray for the people you encounter. When you are in public, look around at the people you interact with, and even the ones you do not interact with. Whether they know it or not, these people want to cross the finish line, too. They want to be complete in a way that only God can make them complete. They want their road in life to go somewhere. However powerless you might feel in your day to day life, you have the power to pray for them, to invite them, to share with them the hope of glory and to glory in their success and their joy when they discover where they are going and Who has called them to such bliss.

Lastly, the apostle praises the Thessalonians for living a life worthy of God. The gospel transforms us. It puts to death the sinful nature (Romans 8:13) so that we can live by the Spirit and live truly, so that we can live the way Jesus lived. One cannot teach this in an abstract or academic manner. It will utterly escape us if we try. It is taught through the bittersweetness of interpersonal relationship. Paul says: "As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory." (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12). A life worthy of God requires that we interact in such a way. On Friday, I went to see the remarkable film *Loving Vincent*, a film about the final days of Vincent van Gogh and the various villagers he interacted with. The whole film is animated in Van Gogh's style of painting. 100 painters had to paint all of the frames of this film. I have always loved Van Gogh's work, and to watch his type of brushwork and colour radiate, swirl, flicker, and glow on the screen was captivating and enchanting in ways that words fail to describe. The Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa would have loved it. As some of you may remember, in one of the segments of his movie *Dreams,* he dreams that he walks into various Van Gogh paintings and eventually meets the artist himself. This new film allows viewers to do just that—we enter into those paintings, into the greater experience of them. There is a glory of light and colour and energy in Van Gogh's work. One might say that Van Gogh depicted the urgency of beauty, the absolute urgency of light. Although he struggled with his own faith, there is something utterly religious in the way he approaches the landscape and even the paint itself. It is ecstatic and at times otherworldly. Modern critics may consider representational painting, and landscape painting in particular, as outmoded, obsolete and bourgeois, but they will never be able to get rid of Van Gogh. Even children love his paintings. There is something immediately recognizable and enjoyable in them, even if you have no idea where the Langlois Bridge is or have never been to Arles—and that would include me. I have never been to Provence, much less Europe. Van Gogh's 9 years of frantic paintings would have never been possible without his brother Theo Van Gogh (1857-1891). Theo was himself a successful art dealer, living in Paris, Brussels, London. Vincent wrote him copious letters with sketches. Theo was one of the few, if not the only person in the world that Vincent confided in. And Theo welcomed this confidence and this sharing. Not only did he support Vincent emotionally throughout these years, he supported him financially. He even introduced him to other Impressionist painters such as Paul Gaugin, Paul Cezanne, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri Rousseau, Camille Pissaro, and Georges Seurat. Without Theo's time, money, and hard work, without the art supplies Theo sent, without Theo's open heart to receive letter upon letter and to answer in turn, Vincent might not have painted *Starry Night* or *Wheatfield with Crows* or any of the other magical paintings that he produced. Vincent himself was quite self-giving. In 1882, he met an abandoned, pregnant woman in The Hague who was walking the streets to try to survive. As Vincent explained: “I met a pregnant woman, deserted by the man whose child she carried. A pregnant woman who had to walk the streets in winter, had to earn her bread, you understand how, I took this woman for a model and have worked with her all winter. I could not pay her the full wages of a model, but that did not prevent my paying her rent, and, thank God, so far I have been able to protect her and her child from hunger and cold by sharing my own bread with her.” (http://blog.godreports.com/2012/11/vincent-van-goghs-unappreciated-journey-with-christ/). This prompted his parents to seek to put him into an asylum. Because it's insane to share our lives with others, to live in a manner worthy of God. It always has been and always will be.

I believe in community building. Human beings were meant to live in society and not alone. However, I do not believe that we can ever build society or community without the kind of one-on-one relationships that Paul speaks of, the kind that Theo shared with Vincent, or Vincent with Sien Hoornik. It is also not impossible that nobody will remember the 100 painters who painted hundreds, thousands of frames for the film *Loving Vincent* to made, to share the glory of Vincent Van Gogh's landscapes with a new generation. And I bet not a single one of them minded the intense, labourious, exhausting work of painting each frame, each picture because in the midst of this tedious craftsmanship, they celebrated the glory of another's work. That's another kind of relationship that is worth considering. A life without relationship is impoverished and godless. A life of really loving others is indeed the life that is worthy of the God who is love (1 John 4:8). As Van Gogh himself said, "The best way to know God is to love many things."