

Sermon for Proper 28, Year C
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St. Paul exhorts the believers in Thessalonica: “do not be weary in well-doing.” Some people among them seem to have decided that, since Jesus was coming back very soon, there was no point in working hard. They may as well just live off of the kindness of others for a little while, have fun while they still could, and be ready to meet Jesus when he came. Why work hard to build anything up, when the big day is right around the corner? And so St. Paul writes the church and commands them not to enable that kind of behavior. “If anyone will not work, let him not eat.” Notice that he didn’t say to stop feeding those who *cannot* work, only those who *refuse* to work.

But the laziness and insincerity of some also had a detrimental effect on those who were trying to remain faithful. Because some weren’t pulling their own weight, the body of Christ in Thessalonica wasn’t functioning the way it should. And the other members of the body were being stressed in inappropriate ways. And yet St. Paul says, “do not be weary in well-doing.” No matter what others are doing, he tells them, don’t stop doing what is right and good. Don’t get discouraged by others, keep up the good work.

The prophet Malachi speaks against those who say God doesn’t do us any good. But there are times when their arguments do seem valid. Sometimes it does seem like it’s vain to serve God. Sometimes it does seem like the arrogant are blessed in spite of their arrogance. And we all know of evildoers who have mocked God and yet seem to prosper still. We see this in every sphere: In business. In government. I witness this regularly in the ordained leadership of the church. And when we see this, it can sap the energy out of our own efforts. It’s hard enough to do good, without the discouragement that comes with seeing others prosper in evil. I don’t know about all of you, but there are definitely times when I become weary in well-doing.

But Malachi teaches us that the problem, when we become weary of all this, is not in others or in God. The problem is in us. We get discouraged, because we have lost perspective. All we see is this little pocket of reality that we inhabit right now. And we are blinded by our sinful desires, so that we cannot see the bigger picture. We have allowed our worlds to close in around us, so that all we see is the present frustration, the present unfulfilled desire, the present suffering. And yet, if we could just step back a bit and look at the whole of reality, we would see something very different. The present suffering is only part of the picture.

For my own part, I pity anyone who persists in defying the Lord of hosts. “For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.” There will be no ultimate completion or fulfillment or consummation of arrogance and evil. There can be none, because it defies the very principle of being, God himself. In the end, it will all go up in smoke. And it will leave not a scratch on the goodness and righteousness of God or his redeemed people.

“But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.” Those who desire God more than anything else will be not merely be preserved until the end. They will be healed and perfected. Their suffering will teach them wisdom, and their deliverance will teach them joy, and they shall be remade in the image of God, to stand for all time as a sign and a sacrament of God’s love in the new creation. They shall be whole.

And if we can remember all this, if we can hold the whole picture in our minds rather than crumbling into our own present conflicting desires, then we can endure. Jesus teaches us in our Gospel reading that suffering and persecution to be whisked away. We follow him, if we follow him at all, in the way of the cross. Where our master went, we will go also. And he tells us that our time here is “a time for [us] to bear testimony.” Just as he spent his time here bearing testimony to the righteousness and love of God toward his people and creation, so we are called to bear testimony as well. Our testimony is to tell his story and to live lives that show evidence of his power to change us. And if we lose our perspective, if we grow weary in our well-doing, we have ceased to bear this testimony.

The time is coming. We don’t know when, but we can be sure we can’t avoid it. The time is coming when all things will harden and sharpen and come to a point. All things and all people will find that they are either renewed and remade or utterly destroyed. Since Jesus has made a way for us to be remade, let us cling to him in our suffering, rather than blaming him for our petty frustrations and disappointments. And let us faithfully bear testimony to his goodness, so that by our endurance we may gain our lives.