

Zoar Lutheran Church
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So I was reading the readings for today and when I got about two-thirds of the way through the 2 Thessalonians passage, I read, “we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (2 Thes. 3:10) and it was like a record scratch. I said, “Wait, what??” Did you have a similar reaction just now? I re-read it like maybe I didn’t get that quite right. Nope, it’s pretty clear that our Bible, our sacred scripture, clearly says that feeding the hungry is conditional.

Now, the lectionary offers the preacher an out – there is an alternative text from Isaiah that I talked about in the Children’s message and that the kiddos will explore more in Sunday school. I consulted Pastor Michelle about if I should just skip this difficult 2 Thessalonians text and she said, “if you’re gonna keep it, you need to address it”. Totally. I decided to keep it because there are self-identifying Christians out there using this verse to deny a social safety net to our most vulnerable neighbors. As we all know, SNAP benefits were weaponized for political purposes and it will likely happen again. We need to wrestle with this passage if, for no other reason, than to be able to speak intelligently about what it does and does not mean when it is used in the public sphere.

So I’m going to get to the gospel – which is also difficult in a different way – in a bit. For now, let’s tackle this 2 Thessalonians reading. To start, we need to acknowledge that, unlike 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians is not an undisputed letter of Paul. That means that 1 Thessalonians is widely accepted as being authentically crafted by Paul but many, many scholars argue that 2 Thessalonians was not. The author of the passage we read today was likely someone who wrote in the style of Paul around 80-110 CE, which would have been about 15-45 years after Paul died. The bottom line is we don’t know who wrote this letter.

But it’s still in our sacred text. My immediate thought when I read it was, “Jesus didn’t put conditions on feeding the hungry!” But then I thought, “Right?” I’m not a biblical scholar and I started to doubt myself. So, I got a little nerdy. I opened up my fancy bible software that lets me analyse ancient Greek, Hebrew, and a bunch of different translations of the Bible. I did a search for the words “feed”, “food”, “hungry”, and “bread” filtering verses to only show me results from the four gospels. I wanted to know everything Jesus taught about the topic of feeding the hungry. My search yielded 96 verses where Jesus uses one or more

of those words. I read each verse including the passages before and after them and not one reflected a Jesus who put conditions on feeding the hungry. The closest I found was in Matthew 10:10 when Jesus tells the apostles to go out and cure the sick but don't take any provisions with them. The First Nations Version of the New Testament translates Jesus's reasoning for this instruction as "the ones who work hard in the harvest fields deserve to be fed and cared for". Ok. I agree. But that is very different from "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat".

I had pages and pages of notes about times when Jesus either fed people directly, told parables that included meals, spoke metaphorically about himself as food and nourishment, or referenced God's compassion for the hungry. Both the smaller stories within the gospels and the overarching narrative of Jesus' ministry direct followers to feed the hungry. Full stop. The people of Zoar do this beautifully every Tuesday night. Food is a gift to be shared compassionately and unconditionally, a teaching that is manifested most prominently in the sacrament of the Eucharist. We come to the table every week not because we worked for it but because Christ, offered in the form of food and drink, is a gift for all of us. We don't earn the opportunity each week to commune with Christ. The only condition to receiving Christ is that we are hungry for him. So, while this verse from the 2 Thessalonians may tell us that being fed is dependent on one's willingness to work, I assert that all of Jesus's teaching and ministry says otherwise. And that is what really counts in my opinion.

So does this mean that we can just throw away 2 Thessalonians? No, not at all. But verses like this one are an important reminder that Scripture is a compilation of *stories* not *quotes*. Scholars say that the context of this problematic verse likely had to do with either: 1) the Thessalonians becoming obsessed with Jesus's Second Coming and quitting living purposeful lives thinking, "what's the point if the world is ending tomorrow"? and/or 2) a rejection of Roman patronage where status was determined by how the wealthy provided for all of one's needs. And then David Tate reminded me that the idea of work itself for the Thessalonians and all of our biblical ancestors didn't mean punching a time clock or any kind of nine to five deal that we think of today. For the Thessalonians, work was living. It was subsistence. Taken in this context, the verse at hand isn't as offensive. But that's not what people are doing with it today in the public realm. This small verse has been weaponized and we need to know how to handle it. As students of Jesus, it's our job to speak truth to power, which means we need to tell the story that Jesus feeds the hungry every time, whether they've worked for it or not.

So, now to today's gospel. This week we head into apocalypse season. Sounds fun, right? The reading today from Luke is a seed of hope wrapped in a terrifying shell. At this point in the gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem. The disciples were admiring the new temple being built, in awe of the opulence and beauty of it. Meanwhile, Jesus knows that very shortly he will be unjustly tortured and put to death. He also knows that he will be resurrected. Jesus foretells that the amazing temple before them will be destroyed in ways that seem impossible. He shocks his disciples by saying there will be a day when the whole thing will be reduced to rubble. He warns people that things are going to get much worse before they get unimaginably better. That's a hard pill to swallow but it's that hope of the better that sustains us through the worse.

At the time that the writer we call Luke wrote this gospel, the Second Temple in Jerusalem had been recently obliterated and the people persecuted by the Romans. The destruction of the temple was a wound that left a deep, deep scar on the Jewish people. I think a lot about Palestinians in Gaza when I think about the destruction of the Second Temple. The horrors that Jesus describes in today's gospel - wars and insurrections, nation rising against nation, earthquakes, famines and plagues, persecution, and executions - weren't necessarily imagined terrors for our biblical ancestors. Nor are they inconceivable today, right? At our Thursday morning Bible study, Pr. Michelle noted that the tragedies described by Jesus are cyclical, many happening right now. Our biblical ancestors were already living through the worst. There are people living that way today. Maybe you feel like you're one of them.

The seed of hope comes from the promise that "by your endurance you will gain your souls". Jesus is telling us to hang on. And he assures us that our faith is enough to withstand the devastation. He even posits that the turmoil is "an opportunity to testify", a chance to share our story of heartbreak and belovedness through Christ. Jesus assures us that we will have the right words when we need them and that our enemies won't be able to contradict the wisdom granted through our faithfulness. He tells us that, through that faithfulness, God has equipped us to somehow remain whole in spite of harrowing circumstances. Jesus even tells us to "make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance".

I don't know about you, but I don't like this idea of not preparing. It's a big lift for me to trust that I will have the right words at the right time - there is comfort in being prepared. (Hence the manuscript.) And preparation is certainly warranted at times - for seminary I had to preach using only a page with pictures

on it and, let's just say, my preparing a manuscript is a better choice for all of our sakes. But this reading and, quite frankly, our everyday lives right now remind us that there are things that we can never prepare for. Things we never saw coming like a scary diagnosis, a child with mental health struggles, a devastating car accident, neighbors being pulled from their homes by masked agents, food being cruelly withheld from the most vulnerable here and abroad. These things are happening. And it's so hard to feel adrift, feeling caught off guard. Feeling like you just don't know what to do. Feeling out of control. But the suffering that we encounter in this moment is not forever. The confusion, despair, and pain is not boundless. We don't need to prepare to endure until the end, we just need to do it. I think Jesus was telling that to his disciples before he heads to the cross, Luke was telling that to his audience in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple, and they both are telling that to us today.

And even if you feel that this message doesn't resonate with you at this moment, the time will likely come when it will. When you'll need to find the seed of hope offered today. Jesus reminds us that, even when our temples fall and it feels like life is throwing overwhelming suffering your way, God is looking out for you. God has equipped you. God is busy. God's imagination is wildly at work in this world. We can't prepare for what God has in store for us because God's vision transcends our knowing. And while this can feel unnerving, it can also be liberating. Jesus tells us that he will give us words and wisdom if we just hang on to see the ending that the Creator is imagining. Jesus promises that "by [our] endurance, [we] will gain [our] souls" (Luke 21:19). And he assures us that we will have what we need to meet the moment because the Spirit will guide us. We just need to follow her through the ruins of our temples because God is at work building something new. Something built with a love so big that we cannot even begin to fathom it. The 2 Thessalonians reading and Luke's gospel ask us to wrestle with the suffering we witness and tend to it, trusting that God has already prepared us for the work the world needs. Let's let that seed grow in our hearts and our lives together this week.