

## Thessalonians 5:16-28

### **Holy and Whole**

#### *Spirit, soul and body, joined together through God's grace*

Heart to heart. Conversation that can happen with a close friend or a complete stranger. The difference between a heart to heart conversation and other types of conversation is that they are not usually one sided. Both people engage in sharing something deep about themselves. It is not one person listening and the other not sharing anything about themselves, but rather both being vulnerable. These conversations don't tend to happen regularly. Most of our conversations stay on the level of what the weather is doing, or what people we know are up to, or our own day to day.

Heart to hearts take time. They happen over a cup of coffee or tea, a glass of wine, or after a good meal or waiting for hours at an airport. When you get to know someone well, they can happen as needed. I have a girlfriend who is also a minister, we graduated from Knox College together. The two of us don't need any prelude to a heart to heart. We know each other so well that we can get into the nitty gritty about life with the words, "I need to talk, you got some time?"

Even though she and I live very much apart from one another, the airways allow us instant access. But this has not always been the way for people who lived before telephone lines came to be common place. Letter writing was the form of communication and sometimes heart to hearts took days, weeks, even months to have if people who really cared about one another wanted to communicate.

And the letter to the Thessalonians is just that – a heart to heart conversation to a newly formed community of Christian believers. Paul cared very much for this fledging group of people. It is estimated he only spent about three weeks with them before he had to go for his own safety. But they stayed very close to his heart. So much so that he sent his friend Timothy to go and see how they were managing. The letter was written after Timothy returned to Paul, and Paul wants to help this faith community to better understand the Good News of Jesus Christ.

That Good News? That Jesus lived, died, and rose, ascended to God, and will return to gather all who believe to be with God - always. This is the Christian hope. We forget that it is one of our core beliefs because we are very busy dealing with the things of life we have in front of us right now. But trust me on this... it is a rare person indeed who upon hearing of a loved one's death does not hope that their loved one has done more than just be placed in the ground, that somehow their lives have gone on from this world to a place different and beautiful, holy and whole.

The Christian hope, the hope of the church, is that Christ will come again and that in our living and in our dying we are in relationship with God.

But let's talk about our living. You see even though Paul was all about Christ coming again, he never said stop living today. In fact, he all but commanded that Christians should not be idle. In these last words of the letter to the Thessalonians Paul also gives short statements that might be deemed the "how to" of Christian living. Let me share a little about these statements as they might seem rather hard, if not impossible, to live out.

First, "Be cheerful no matter what." Now Paul was someone who knew suffering, he had been beaten, jailed, run out of town, hurt by friends, and he had a pain in his hip that never went away and yet he wrote, Be cheerful no matter what. His joy came from a well of trust in God that was deep, that regardless of his circumstances he knew that God was always with him and that in the end he would be with God.

Then he says, "Pray all the time." I used to think, "How can I be praying all the time, I would never get anything done." I was pretty old when I realized I could work and pray, think and pray, garden and pray, play piano, sing, do dishes, mow the lawn and pray. It is more about keeping God in your mind, knowing that God is always present. Living life in a prayerful way that acknowledges that God is with you.

"Thank God no matter what happens." Well that fits into the same category with the same reasons as "Be cheerful no matter what." It is about knowing God is with you. "This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live." Knowing that God goes with you always.

"Don't suppress the Spirit and don't stifle those who have a word from the Master." God has things to say and do through scripture, through each of us and our relationships, and the Spirit is alive and well in that work. It takes practice to engage it, but it is there for everyone who believes.

On the other hand, where are not to go all Polly Anna either. We don't check common sense, understanding, questions, and knowledge at the door. Paul writes that we are not to be gullible. To check out everything and keep only what is good. Throw out anything that does not bring life into your world and that of others. To rid ourselves of those things that harm or suck the life of the world from the world. That can be daunting task given the evil that we see or read about each day. But we can start with our own minds and households.

God wants so much for us. Life abundant is the goal. Abundant life does not mean riches and having every prayer answered exactly the way you hoped it would be. Life abundant comes from knowing that God who makes everything holy and whole, may make you holy and whole, put together, - spirit, soul, and body – so much so that you would be ready for the coming of Christ at anytime. God can do this. God is the author of life.

The last lines of this passage may seem to be nothing more than just a wonderful closing to the letter. But it is much more. Paul's words are about being in community, making sure everyone gets to hear the letter. It is about being the people of God and not leaving anyone out. I happen to watch the series Blue Bloods on TV and there is always a scene where the Raigan family gathers for a meal together. The rule is they can't start the meal until the whole family is gathered together. No one is left out. There are not whole until everyone is present.

So it is with the church. Your presence matters. We are not whole without all who are a part of this family of faith are gathered together. Unlike the Raigan family we cannot always wait for all to come and be present. Some are only able to be with us in spirit due to health and distance. But being a Christian means to do this faith thing in community. And so, we do our best to bring the church to others. Still, we can only be the church when we gather regularly, caring for one another, and then bringing that love and care out into the world.

The Communion we are able to partake of is called communion for a reason. It is because it is a meal of unity and community. It is the family of God gathered together. It is in the church that we rejoice in the presence of the risen Christ among us and our unity in Jesus' name.

In this meal we affirm the real presence of Christ in the church and in our lives. In this foretaste of the fullness of Christ we are put together spirit, soul, and body, fit for the coming of Jesus Christ, made holy and whole. God who called you into this community of faith is completely dependable. If God said it, God will do it! Amen.