

Acts 2:42-3:10 (CEB)

⁴²The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. ⁴³A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were united and shared everything. ⁴⁵They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. ⁴⁶Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. ⁴⁷They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Peter and John were going up to the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon, the established prayer time. ²Meanwhile, a man crippled since birth was being carried in. Every day, people would place him at the temple gate known as the Beautiful Gate so he could ask for money from those entering the temple. ³When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he began to ask them for a gift. ⁴Peter and John stared at him. Peter said, "Look at us!" ⁵So the man gazed at them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶Peter said, "I don't have any money, but I will give you what I do have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, rise up and walk!" ⁷Then he grasped the man's right hand and raised him up. At once his feet and ankles became strong. ⁸Jumping up, he began to walk around. He entered the temple with them, walking, leaping, and praising God. ⁹All the people saw him walking and praising God. ¹⁰They recognized him as the same one who used to sit at the temple's Beautiful Gate asking for money. They were filled with amazement and surprise at what had happened to him.

Acts 6:1-7 (CEB)

About that time, while the number of disciples continued to increase, a complaint arose. Greek-speaking disciples accused the Aramaic-speaking disciples because their widows were being overlooked in the daily food service. ²The Twelve called a meeting of all the disciples and said, "It isn't right for us to set aside proclamation of God's word in order to serve tables. ³Brothers and sisters, carefully choose seven well-respected men from among you. They must be well-respected and endowed by the Spirit with exceptional wisdom. We will put them in charge of this concern. ⁴As for us, we will devote ourselves to prayer and the service of proclaiming the word." ⁵This proposal pleased the entire community. They selected Stephen, a man endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional faith, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶The community presented these seven to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷God's word continued to grow. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased significantly. Even a large group of priests embraced the faith.

1 Thessalonians 1:6-10 (CEB)

⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. ⁷As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸The message about the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so that we don't even need to mention it. ⁹People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a result, you are serving the living and true God, ¹⁰and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. His Son is Jesus, who is the one he raised from the dead and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath.

You have been rescued by the grace of God - so make an impact in this world!

Patti and I have been part of the St. Andrew family for more than fifteen years. It has always been clear to me that St. Andrew is filled with a bunch of educated and self-motivated people who tend to be successful at whatever they undertake. So it shouldn't surprise anyone that the people of St. Andrew want to make an impact in this world, to make a real difference in the lives of others.

And this is only as it should be. God has poured his grace upon us all. He has rescued us from the darkness and brought us into the light. In view of what God has done for

us, isn't it our duty, our obligation, to put our many talents and gifts to work for God, to build for his kingdom, to make a difference in the world – to pay it forward?

From its beginning nearly two thousand years ago, the Church, the body of Christ, has understand that God's call for us to love him and others is not mere sentiment, but a call to action. If we truly live as God's people, then the world will be better because we are here.

Read through the two passages from Acts. You can see the church at work – making an impact. Don't be misled by the fact that Peter is able to perform a miracle you can't –

The Bible and "Love"¹

In our culture, "love" has become a word that is used so freely, to express so many different ideas and feelings, that it has become almost useless. I "love" God, I "love" my family, I "love" my dog, I "love" dark chocolate (ok, I do!). Because we use the word in so many ways, we need to begin with a brief look at the biblical use of the word "love."

In the Old Testament, our love for God is focused on the delight and joy we find in God. Our love for God is our seeking after God himself. Our love for God is bound up with our obedience. Those who love God are those who keep his commandments (Deut 5:10), serve him, and walk in his ways (Deut 10:12). At the same time, our love for God is to be an internal matter, an affair of the heart (Jeremiah 31:33). Much more than simply affection for God or others, love encompasses the whole person – our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

God's love is focused on his people, as a nation or community, more than on any specific individual. God's love for his people is manifested in his relentless pursuit of Israel despite their endless abandonment of him and the covenant. The story of Hosea gives concrete expression to God's unfathomable, incomprehensible love for the people he has chosen! God instructs Hosea that he is to love and marry a prostitute, Gomer, and continue loving her, no matter what she does to shame and dishonor him. God loves Israel and Hosea is to love Gomer – regardless!

In the New Testament, Jesus builds on the Old Testament understanding of love but makes it completely unconditional. Our love for God represents total commitment and trust. Our love for neighbor is extended to all humanity and cannot be separated from our caring for the marginalized in our society. Jesus even makes clear that our love for neighbor is extended to our enemies – all are included!

¹ Much of this material is adapted from Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged by G. Bromily)

the world is still being changed by Jesus' disciples. As you read on, you'll see that the believers in Jerusalem had so much to do that they needed organization and structure. There were widows who were getting overlooked and the disciples did what needed to be done to take care of them.

These brief passages tell us a lot about the spread and growth of Christianity. There was every reason for Christianity to quickly fade away, but pagans saw in the Christians a life they wanted for themselves and their own families. These Jesus-people actually cared for another. They actually made a difference.

Christians in Thessalonica – the new kids on the block

Thessalonica lies on a major highway about 200 miles north of Athens, Greece. This port city had been visited by Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 16 & 17) and, as he had done throughout his travels, Paul founded Christian house churches there. Not long after leaving there to continue southward across Greece, Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. This letter is 1 Thessalonians and it is probably the oldest of all the NT writings, having been written in 50AD or so.

It was customary in those times for letters to begin with an expression of thanks to the letter's recipients. But this is no run-of-the-mill thanksgiving. Paul is so effusive in his thanks for the Thessalonian Christians that it is hard to even discern in the letter where the thanksgiving ends.

Though this Christian community is perhaps only a few months old, already they have been persecuted (1:6; 2:13-16) and some have died, though whether

from the persecution we can't be sure (4:13-18). Yet, despite their spiritual youthfulness, Paul is convinced that they have been grabbed by God, empowered by his Spirit . . . chosen. Paul is as sure of this as he is of his own empowerment, for in them he sees already “the work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” that ought to characterize the lives of all Christians. Not only did the Thessalonians hear the words of Paul's gospel proclamation to them,¹ they grasped its power, and for this, Paul is deeply thankful, remembering the Thessalonians “constantly.”

Being the light to the world!

Like Paul, these Thessalonians were making an impact. For as thankful as Paul was for what was happening within the Christian community in Thessalonica, he is even more thrilled by their witness to others. In the short time since their coming to faith in Jesus Christ, the Thessalonians had been an inspiration and example to other Christians throughout Greece. Indeed, Paul is so expansive in his praise that one wonders if he is indulging in a little hyperbole. Perhaps, but regardless, the power of God that seized this small group of Christians quickly turned outward as word of their faith and love and hope spread.

The Imitation of Christ (and of Paul!?)

When Paul gives his thanks that the Thessalonians have become “imitators of us [Paul Silvanus, and Timothy, see 1:1] and the Lord” it can strike us as a bit odd or off. After all, aren't imitations mere copies of the original, even phony at that? And is Paul really so bold (arrogant?) as to expect that these Christians will remake themselves into *his* image?

In our world, we get pretty shy about being role models. But the language of imitation was prevalent in Paul's day. If Paul had not been willing to hold himself up as worthy of imitation, he would have been seen as an unworthy teacher. Paul means that we can look to Jesus and even to himself as we seek to learn the shape of an authentically Christian life. It is not a call for us all to do and say the same things, nor to be cheap knock-offs of the real thing. I must live my life, not Jesus' life and not Paul's. But from them, I can learn much about what it means to live each day in right relationship with God and with other persons. Look back a few weeks to Philippians 2:5-8. There, Paul urges the Philippians to have the “same mind” that was in Jesus. It is a call for us to imitate the selflessness of Jesus so that, like the Thessalonians, we might, in turn, be an example to others. (v. 7)

Having turned from idols, these Christians had become imitators of Paul and of Christ and, in so doing, had become an example to all. The power of God that had worked within them and their community was quickly directed outward. We shouldn't imagine that they had developed lots of ministries and new programs. There had been no time for any of that! Yet, nonetheless, others saw in the Thessalonians a transformation that reached every part of their lives – their work of faith, and their labor of love, and their steadfastness of hope. This transformation revealed that, by God's grace, the Thessalonian Christians understood that they were to be the light to the world (Matt. 5:14). Others wanted what the Thessalonians had. It was true then, it is true now – so long as others see Christ in us.

God has richly blessed us at St. Andrew and this community is a blessing to all who take part. Indeed, the blessings that are St. Andrew are too numerous to count.

Our challenge will always be to remember that the charge given us by God is to be a blessing to others – to be the salt of the earth and the light to the world. God has saved us not merely for ourselves but for the sake of others, so that we might have a real, meaningful, and lasting impact on this world.

¹When Paul refers to “gospel” in v.5 he is not referring to the four Gospels of the NT. The first of the Gospels, Mark, would not be written for another 15 years or so. Instead, Paul uses “gospel” to refer to the Good News of the proclamation that he brought to Thessalonians and everyone else who would listen. This proclamation, the gospel, can be summed up in three words; “Jesus is Lord!”

Loving as Caring

Luke tells us that Jesus was once approached by a lawyer who asked him what he must “do to inherit eternal life.” Jesus asked the lawyer what was written in the law and the lawyer replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (see Luke Chapter 10) Jesus told the lawyer he had answered correctly. But of course, being a lawyer, the man asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied by telling a story, the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story, a Jewish man, lying injured by the side of the road, was refused help by a priest and then a Levite (the priestly tribe of Israel), only to be helped by a Samaritan, who was the true neighbor. It is hard for us to grasp how shocking this story would have been to the good Jews listening to Jesus. It would be as if Jesus told the story in an Israeli café today, with an Israeli schoolgirl lying injured, refused help by a Rabbi and an Israeli soldier, only to be helped by a member of Hamas!¹ You see, the Jews of Jesus’ day despised the Samaritans, holding them to be little better than dogs. Jesus’ listeners would have been angered by the story, but they might have also grasped the depth and universality of God’s command to love their neighbors.

Our love is to be a practical love, a love not only of the heart, but of the hands! In the NT, the word most commonly translated “love” is *agape*. *Agape* does not necessarily connote warm affection. Instead, it conveys sacrificial love, focused on acts of mercy and caring.

Jesus’ announcement in Nazareth was a proclamation of the arrival of God’s kingdom, a kingdom built upon a foundation of sacrificial love. Of course, the kingdom’s arrival seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. In light of suffering and hatred, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom? How could Paul speak of Jesus’ victory on the cross (Colossians 2:15)? Richard Hays of Duke Seminary answers such questions this way, “Why do the powers of wickedness continue to operate effectively in this world? Because the story is not over. The climactic victory has been won on the Cross, but there is still much residual resistance. So we live in a tension-filled interval where skirmishes are still under way.” But do we really have a role to play in the full realization of the kingdom of God? If so, what is it?

God’s plan to transform, renew, and restore all of creation is to be worked out through us. Jesus asked his disciples how they could possibly be the light to the world if they kept the light hidden from others. He told them to go out and make disciples across the entire planet. As selfish, prideful, and weak as we humans tend to be, God, in his wisdom, sends us out to do his work. And he has sent his Holy Spirit to guide us and strengthen us, so that we will not insist upon turning inward to our own needs, but will turn outward in compassion and caring.

¹ The shocking nature of this parable is driven home in John Crossan’s, *The Dark Interval*. 1988. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the New Testament, love is not a feeling or even an idea. It is the concrete expression of Jesus’ self-sacrificial death on the cross. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for others.” (1 John 3:16) We look to Jesus’ life to see what love really is. True love for God and neighbor is an expression of our repentance, transformation, discipline, and sacrifice. How can Jesus’ example of sacrificial love transform our own notions of what it means to love and care for others? How is your love for others seen in your own concrete actions; i.e. in your concrete caring? How is your love for God seen in your actions? Do we ask enough of ourselves or is our love limited to that for which we can find some extra time and effort in our busy lives?
2. What are some stories of times when you made an impact, when you took action in the face of need? What are some stories of occasions when you did not? All of us have plenty of stories of both. What holds us back from taking action? What are some concrete means by which we could make more of an impact on those around us?
3. Imagine how thrilled the Christians in Thessalonica must have been to receive such a letter from Paul! In Paul’s thanksgiving, today’s passage from 1 Thessalonians, he commends them for imitating himself and Jesus Christ. We often talk about becoming Christlike, though sometimes the very idea can seem a bit overwhelming. But what would it mean to become “Paul-like”? In what ways do Paul’s life and missionary journeys inform our own mission to be the light to the world? You might even discuss what we know – or don’t know! – about Paul.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday Leviticus 19:1-18 God instructs Israel on love as caring. See esp. v.18</p>	<p>Tuesday Isaiah 54:4-10 The compassion that is God's everlasting love.</p>
<p>Wednesday Luke 6:27-36 Jesus talks about loving those who are the hardest to love.</p>	<p>Thursday Acts 9:36-46 Tabitha is the one who has cared for the widows and now she has died.</p>
<p>Friday 1 Timothy 5:4-8 Caring for widows (the most marginalized group in ancient cultures) and for one's own family</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

