

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

TRULY GIVEN

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

1Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

2We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. 6And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

DIAGNOSIS: False Control

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Taking Control

"Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right, here I am, stuck in the middle with you." People are so very reactive these days. Kneel versus salute seems a flashpoint, and each of us counts friends and family on both sides of the argument. Harsh words fly back and forth, and mutual understanding seems impossible. But surely, we can inject a voice of reason into the midst of everything, and people will hear us. After all, isn't it obvious that injustice and privilege are ravaging the land? We see countless children hungry, working poor who lack access to basic healthcare, and incidents of racial injustice caught on video. Clearly someone needs to take a stand, and no one else seems to get it, so we'll take charge. We study scripture, and we know a thing or two about righteousness, so who's more qualified to take action than us? We know we've been trained to prove it!

Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Losing Control

We're such well-meaning and magnanimous disciples. We see countless neighbors clearly in need of our help, and surely the Spirit must be at work in us, that we would see beyond ourselves. But, as we set ourselves to the task of serving, we are surprised to encounter such resistance to our gifts given "freely," and sometimes even outright rejection. So, we double-down. Not even this can deter our hopefulness, and we love a challenge. We see others making self-destructive choices and if only we could make them see our wisdom, the tide would turn. Really, it's like we're the only ones with eyes open—we know beyond any shred of doubt what's truly right and wrong. But, it's like we're the only ones who get it. How could everyone else be so dense as to not see it the same way we do? Doesn't the Bible make it all clear as day, especially to a bunch of so-called Christians (and most especially, Lutherans!)? So, you bet we're frustrated at having our overtures rebuffed! We guess that's just the hard work of being reformers, right? Or, maybe

that's too confrontational, so we soft-pedal and say we're just trying to win friends and influence people. But either way, we hate deaf ears, and our stubborn hearts remain so hopelessly invested in our project. Defeat is not an option. We are dedicated to achieving our purpose—which, of course, is one and the same as Christ's, right?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Lacking Control

We are inevitably confronted by the truth of our idolatry, but we're incapable of recognizing it. The reality is that everything we've done has been in service to the god of control—our control over others. Deep-down, that's what we want more than anything, and we don't hesitate to elect ourselves into that “holy” office of moral enforcement. We choose ourselves, and why not? WE'RE the ones who constantly give and invest everything for the sake of others. We deserve this, and how dare anyone judge us! Yet, our “free gift” to the neighbor was always a pretense, and isn't it really true that there's no such thing as a free lunch? We toil to make others conform to a vision of reality we construct, that they would act, speak, and think according to our own law, instead of God's law. We would be gods. Yet, despite the endless nagging disappointment and frustration that we can't deny anymore, our hearts stubbornly reject the truth of God's creation. We only trust in our own power and persuasion, and thereby edit God out of the equation. And as we detest our creatureliness, we already taste the wrath that is surely coming. As Isaiah prophesied, “It set him on fire all around, but he did not understand” (Isa. 42:25).

PROGNOSIS: Truly Given

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Given Everything

Though our gifts come with strings attached, there is one who comes among us with the one singular true and free gift. Jesus does not go to the cross, suffer, and die just to manipulate or

control or play on sympathies as we have done to each other. Rather, Jesus surrenders all control, to be fully consumed by death. And in this death, he takes upon himself our deadly sin of manipulation and exploitation, in order to give us his resurrected life, by which we are finally reconciled to God and to each other. But this is no mere matter of virtue or self-improvement or making amends. No, Jesus comes thoroughly unbidden and unanticipated, so that we would instead be completely transformed as a new creation, from within to without. This is clearly not our own doing, but God has the final word, and has said, "My beloved, I choose you" (v. 4).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Giving Everything

As a new creation, we now rejoice in God our Creator, whose abundance and grace meets us at every turn. We sense that the world has changed, and though we don't fully understand exactly how, we absolutely know whose power is responsible for the whole thing. And we trust this, because it's so utterly real. At every turn, we are reminded of what has already been accomplished by Christ, and we trust him in that—even though we're not quite sure just why we trust him so completely. We know it's irrational. Yet, Christ's power so overwhelms us that we cannot help but love our neighbors, because we now see them as children of the living God, and we couldn't possibly love anything more than God's good creation! But that's not all—we now recognize ourselves as God's free gift to those neighbors, for we only pour out the same free forgiveness, compassion, and mercy upon them that Jesus has poured out upon us. Of course, we still get rejected. We're not naive. But we are NOT discouraged, because we realize that God has already accomplished everything for us and for them before we even had any glimmer of thought to speak or act. God didn't ask our permission, so why would God ask theirs?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Everything Taken

In the many and various ways we now give ourselves to our neighbors, we cease to glory in ourselves, because we only know that this is the work of God, and we love nothing more than to speak of that. We decrease, because Christ will surely increase. Yet, there will be times when others take advantage of our seemingly naïve generosity. Sometimes we even give to others when they lie to us about their need. We don't know any better. We trust without verifying. But still, even THIS violation gives way to the joyful remembrance that Christ gave absolutely everything, even his whole life, while we were still sinners who did not know him. If we're violated, then let us be violated like Jesus, that the Spirit would thoroughly prove its power through our weakness. And so, we give ourselves away anyway, simply because we have nothing to lose, and nothing to prove, thanks be to God!