

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
Acts 17: 1-9

Over the past few months, over three million people throughout the world have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and over two hundred thousand people have died from this disease. The Coronavirus doesn't discriminate by gender, race or age. It wreaks havoc wherever it goes.

These daunting numbers are a testimony to the power of germs. Germs are tiny microorganisms that have the ability to float through the air and live on surfaces for hours and even days. In order to protect ourselves from being infected, we have to avoid touching anyone or anything that's come into contact with them.

Germs aren't the only things that are contagious. So is laughter. Much like a virus, laughter has the ability to spread across a room once it is released. But instead of making people sick, laughter infects us with joy. It breathes life into the people who receive it.

I love the image of infecting people with joy. As this pandemic goes on, people are starting to get irritated with the restrictions that protect us. They're also becoming anxious about the future that awaits us. These unsettling feelings cause us to feel disillusioned and afraid. They make us want to withdraw and give in to our frustrations and

fears. Our world desperately needs to hear a message of hope...one that helps us focus on something bigger than the situation we're in. This message is found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Acts reveals how the Holy Spirit used this life-changing message to flip the ancient world upside down. Last week we heard how the Spirit empowered Peter and John to heal a lame man in Jerusalem. Starting in Chapter 13, Acts shifts its focus to the way that Paul and his companions spread the message throughout the Roman Empire. Today's reading takes place in Thessalonica.

Whenever Paul went to a new town, he would go to the local synagogue and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. Paul used the Hebrew Scriptures to show his listeners how it was necessary for the messiah to suffer, die and then rise from the dead. Luke tells us that some of Thessalonian Jews were persuaded by Paul's message, as were a number of devout Greeks and a group of prominent women.

But some of the Jews were outraged by Paul's message. Luke tells us that they formed a mob with some of the local hooligans from town, and went searching for Paul and Silas. When they couldn't find them, they dragged the man who Paul and Silas were staying with in front of the authorities and charged him as an accomplice. The man was

released on bail, and if we had read further in Chapter 17, we would have heard how Paul and Silas left Thessalonica for another town, where they immediately went to the synagogue and started telling people about Jesus Christ.

Paul and his companions were known for “turning the world upside down.” This description tells us that their message was contagious. It infiltrated the hearts and minds of the people who heard it, and changed the way they believed and lived.

Like many of his visits, Paul experienced problems in Thessalonica. That’s because Paul proclaimed that Jesus Christ is the true incarnation of God’s love, and that even death could not contain him. Paul referred to Jesus by titles like Son of God, Savior and Lord. These names were reserved for Roman emperors, which meant that Paul’s proclamation stood in the face of Caesar and his empire. Paul’s message also upset Jews who believed the promised messiah would be a royal figure who would deliver his people from their oppression.

The reading that Cindy read from 1 Thessalonians is the introduction to a letter that Paul later wrote to the church in

Thessalonica. Paul begins it by telling the people that he thanks God for them, and remembers their work in his prayers.

The people in Thessalonica had only been believers for a short time, and yet...people from hundreds of miles away knew about the extraordinary way they lived out their faith. Paul tells us that in spite of severe persecution, their lives were filled with joy. This unexpected response made people curious about the God they worshiped, and interested in “catching” the faith they had received.

Paul tells us that it was the Holy Spirit who empowered the Thessalonians to be filled with joy. He also commented that their lives were marked by faith, hope and love. These characteristics tell us that the people in this church just didn't just profess a belief in God...they lived out their faith. And they did this by imitating Jesus.

Like the sound of laughter spreading across a room, the faith of the believers in Thessalonica was contagious. They imitated Jesus... and now the people in Macedonia and Achaia were imitating them. Their faith was like a beautiful symphony that echoed through the silence of a lost and broken world...summoning others to come and join the dance.

The Thessalonian Church embraced their faith in the midst of a pagan world. Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was devoted to the imperial cult of Rome while remaining steeped in Greek culture. This meant that Roman and Greek idols dominated the landscape.

We too live in a culture engulfed in idols. We may not call them gods or bow down and pray to them. But when we spend money on ourselves without thinking about our hungry neighbor or put more effort into building up our bank account than building up the Kingdom of God, we are making idols out of ourselves.

However...when we imitate Jesus by giving sacrificially so that hungry people can eat...when we engage in random acts of kindness...become peacemakers and reconcilers...love instead of judging...and seek to heal, help and restore...then we are truly worshiping the One True and Living God.

The story of these ancient siblings shows us that when we live out our faith with conviction and joy, we become music to the ears of lost, hurting and hungry people in our community. Like their song that rang throughout the Roman Empire, our music will be contagious. It will

infect the people who hear it with God's love, and inspire them to sing along.

I encourage you to infect someone with joy this week by loving them the way that Jesus loves us. As we imitate Jesus by sending notes of encouragement, calling to check up on folks, picking up their groceries so they don't have to leave their house, giving an offering to help feed the hungry in our community, or praying for people by name, we can trust that the Holy Spirit will use our words and actions to expand God's upside down kingdom and breathe resurrection life into this unsettling time.

May the Spirit continue to grow each of us into deeper faith as we embrace our baptismal call to go...and turn the world upside with the message of Jesus Christ. Amen