

ISAIAH 65:17-25 or MALACHI 4:1-2a

ISAIAH 12 or PSALM 98

II THESSALONIANS 3:6-13

LUKE 21:5-19

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost; Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 13, 2022; Year C

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Responsible Living: Building Beloved Faith Community!

The “Congregational Way” is the best polity governing local missional churches! The “Congregational Way” is the worst polity governing local missional churches! As usual, where you sit or where you stand determines what you see. As always opinions are worth what opinions are worth, always a matter of personal biases and perspective. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that every congregational system or denominational form of government, yes, from congregational, to presbyterial, to episcopal, all lower case “c”, has their own unique challenges, their own inherent flaws! Hierarchical ecclesial autocracies, as well as absolute democracies, have their own innately built-in challenges, deeply rooted problems, just like every flavor, every mode in between. My mentor’s mentor, the late Carlyle Marney, was a curmudgeonly liberal Southern Baptist back when you could honestly admit there existed such a thing. I resemble that remark! At one point during his illustrious, but way too brief, career, he was asked why he did not jump ship and become a minister in a different denomination. Cleaning up his language a bit, he told the following story, replying that in a vision, no doubt this story totally fabricated tale, he found himself pastoring his own bucket of “stuff,” if you get my drift. One day he chose to crawl to the top of his bucket and take a look. All he saw all around him was other buckets of “stuff.” So, he slinked back down into his own familiar bucket and

remained there until he died way to early from all the bad habits that often negatively impact many clergy types. It is a reminder, **as we have learned from experience, knowing full well, are acutely aware, there are no perfect churches or denominations. Let's just acknowledge that whatever we are and will become will always somewhat, at least in some ways, perfectly mirror and are the antithesis of the broad diversity that characterized the earliest churches born in the first and second centuries. We are alike and yet are different and all at the same time. Yes, we are a reflection and yet in no way resemble! After all, each first and second century ecclesial creation was distinct, each having its own characteristics, its own dynamics, each one possessing its own ecclesiological and theological nuance, each one by and large independent, save for when and where they were not. All of them were uniquely situated, presumably with Christ Jesus as the head of each institutional variation and version. There never was one, true, first church model, one quintessential example, quite contrary to naïve and popular opinion. It is interesting, however, holding true that at least a significant number of the early churches were indeed yoked, evidently made up of local congregations that operated under the auspices of a bishop, something very contrary to our "way" of thinking!**

I offer this brief early Church history tutorial, this primer in first century ecclesiastics, as a jumping off point to discuss all things stewardship today as we celebrate who we are as stewards of this local missional church, our version of beloved faith community, operating here and now within the wider apostolic, catholic, universal Church that remotely, somewhat, or completely, binds Christendom together as one. The writer of the second letter to the Thessalonians reminds these brothers and sisters in Christ that they are inseparably yoked, that they are accountable one to another, that they are responsible to this fledgling Christian community in not only spiritual matters, but in matters of physical necessities, the sustenance

required, yes, demanded to meet the needs of daily living. Sadly, this II Thessalonian narrative is often hijacked and taken way out of context by those who profess Christ seem to have no real desire to honestly, authentically, genuinely, follow Jesus, rather wishing to avoid or ignore doing for the last and the least, meeting the desperate needs of those who live on the margins, the disenfranchised of society who for whatever reasons are unable to take care of themselves and address their basic needs. I often say that these are the people who claim to love Jesus but who do not seem to like him very much! It is a matter of spiritual integrity! Whether these needy souls, our siblings, be food insecure, lacking in clothing or housing, simply desiring a hand up far more than the assumed handout, **there are some cold and calculating Christian individuals who are quick to quote the seemingly heartless and definitely harsh admonishment from second Thessalonians, citing it as proof, i.e., proof texting, smugly declaring that “anyone unwilling to work should not eat!”** Contrary to a majorly inclined narcissistic assumption on the part of more than just a few, this portion of a verse was never intended to be a blanket ethical statement. Unfortunately, however, this scripture alone has the power to be blatantly abusive, intentionally misused. Admittedly, on a first glance these words constitute a very surprising, even shocking text. As always, the answers are found in a contextual reading! As always, it is always context, context, context! A little background before we unpack this controversial command!

You will remember that the early converts to Christianity, proselytes initially known as “followers of the way,” believed that the second coming of Jesus was imminent, that his return was, if not immediate, at least somewhere on the near horizon, dawning on what no doubt should have taken place in their midst, surely within the next days or weeks. Hence Luke’s proclamation, “**lift up your heads, your redemption draws nigh!**” (Luke 21:28). This radical theology, what turned out to be a false flag, would eventually become known as the

Parousia. Our Christian scriptures are full of quotations that affirm this early belief, sincere as it was. These apocalyptically infused narratives were written during the real time moments of a very unsettled day, at the apex of what was a restless, topsy-turvy, period in which the early Church was birthed, emerging as a major sectarian movement within Judaism, and began its long, evolutionary, processes that continue right up through us today. **Despite their joy in Jesus, these faithful few longed for a way out of their misery, a relief from their immense persecution, the terror and torture inflicted on them by Rome's relentless fury. Yes, these earliest Christians drank the Kool Aid, guarantees promising them an Armageddon, apocalyptic, technicolor, escape, yes, literalizing what is metaphorically described, graphically revealed, in the Book of Daniel, Revelation, and other striking biblical texts, yes, including our reading from the Gospel of Luke as well as these two letters, presumably written by Paul, these compositions addressed specifically to the church at Thessalonica! And so, these faithful folk, believing with all their minds and following their hearts, sold all they had, consolidating their possessions, combining all their limited but seemingly unlimited resources, what appeared to be an endless supply until the end time would magically, miraculously, yes, mysteriously, come. Yes, they began to live the communal life, yes, an authentic, genuine, version of communism, lower case "c", one for all and all for one. The Book of Acts, following a description of the bellwether events at Pentecost, highlighted by the coming of the Holy Spirit on all flesh, tells in rapid abbreviated detail about their history in the making, acknowledging matter of fact and without fanfare, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts . . ." (Acts 2:42-47). After being disfellowshipped,**

unceremoniously kicked out of the temple, these fledgling sectarian congregations now had to fend for themselves, rejected by family and friends, disowned. Our reading in Luke today reminds us of their unwanted abandonment and independence. the small churches managed to rally together while circling their collective wagons, continuing to live together in this ecclesial, New Testament, *Kum ba Yah* setting! Yes, their communal practices remained in place! So, in honor of stewardship today, I am advocating, recommending, that we all sell all our possessions, combining them all, and come and live here as a local beloved faith community! NOT! Sometimes, being biblical is not at all practical nor in our best interest! Frankly, it was not in the best interest of the Thessalonians back in their day! That is a merger I do not think any of us desires to see!

Well, this generous practice was working well until it did not, until provisions began to run low as they began to run out of life's basic necessities. The first conundrum was that their benevolence became much more difficult, coming to a grinding halt, including an inability to take care of widows and orphans, a sacred obligation, an ancient practice that always remained a high priority, at the top of the biblically hospitable list of must do things. The second problem is that they were approaching a point of no return because there was no return in sight from this poignant reality, what appeared to have developed into a permanent situation in which they could no longer feed and take care of themselves. These Thessalonians realized that they had no other available option that to go back to their former occupations! They had no other plan in place, no escape hatch to deliver them from the clutches of hunger. Yes, they had made a colossal mistake, a huge miscalculation, a ginormous error in judgment. Yes, they were wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Obviously, according to their limited worldview, surely Jesus was merely tarrying. After all, that is the way these biblical minds worked! Surely, he would come back soon! Well, after more than two thousand years it is a safe bet to assume, always a

dangerous thing, that Jesus in the flesh is not returning, not coming back, at least in the way once naively prognosticated by the ancients, these predictions met with the absolute hollowest results. And yet, a large segment of the Church continues to peddle this conspiracy theory, full of nonsensical prognostications, now erroneously called by some “the rapture,” a made-up word nowhere to be found in the Bible, just like the word Trinity! Judgmentally proclaiming the need to get saved, including vitriolic threats of a fiery furnace, hellfire and brimstone, that repentance must happen in a hurry before he comes, they obsessed on these end times, *Left Behind*, scenarios! After all, Jesus would not tarry much longer we are warned. Frankly, it is a lot like a child waiting for Santa Clause or the Easter Bunny! My hunch is that the Christ, the Christly Spirit, has never left us and continually comes to us, returning over and over and over again, always available, always present within and among us, one spiritual avenue among many mysterious ways that we humans experience God-presence in the universe. So, what’s an ancient local missional church got to do? What’s a first century beloved faith community got to do? Better go to plan B and better go there quickly! Quit killing time and take necessary next steps!

Well, they, whoever they are, once said that “familiarity breeds contempt!” Well, evidently so does laziness, because, evidently, there was a lot of contempt because there were a lot of church members at Thessalonica who were not pulling their weight, who chose not to work, sitting on their comfortable backsides, enjoying the shrinking smorgasbord, the dwindling buffet, that was theirs to behold and partake as they stuffed their gullets waiting on the not-so-inevitable. Evidently, at Thessalonica there were some members who had become both irresponsible and undisciplined, a deadly combination for any budding institutional organization! Thessalonica, we have a problem! None of us will ever know just exactly when the great awakening took place among this people, when the point of no return

rudely appeared on the horizon of their reality, ravenous “hanger” rearing its ugly head among a people no doubt confused by Jesus’ delay. Obviously, at some specific point in time it became painfully obvious that the only return was going to be a return to normal, whatever consisted of normal for a people now living life in constant fear and anxiety, an ever-present danger, all of them living on the edge, barely existing as they faced an abysmal future. Yes, all of these vulnerably compromised followers of Jesus now in the crosshairs, clearly in peril, standing on the very precipice, yes, on the verge of starvation! At the time, if things did not change, if the Romans did not get them, the lack of food would! The Thessalonian writer was making a plain and simple plea, that everyone do their part no matter how small, that every congregant pitch in and provide for the community. No one got an exemption, no exception, unless of course, they were incapacitated, unable to work, incapable of participating in the process. It was imperative that every able-bodied individual step up and put food on the table! Yesterday was done! As George W. Bush once eloquently observed, “The past is over!” It was time to get busy! Immediately! Right now! Today! Not tomorrow!

And this is where our lection from II Thessalonians finally and thankfully intersects with our celebration of stewardship today! Along with food insecure among all the many challenges and problems facing the young church at Thessalonica, many of them being occasions for conversation and conflict, the real issue at stake was one of fellowship, the sibling relationships that demanded the deepest level of love and trust. The Thessalonians could have been arguing about any number of complexities that confronted them daily, the lack of food no doubt being the major player in their growing litany, their laundry list of complaints. But at the core of these rapidly deteriorating developments was the high relational standard at stake, and that was their accountability and responsibility toward one another. In one story from the Book of Acts, we read the

hideous and unfortunate story recalling the purported demise of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They sold a piece of property but chose to selfishly hold back some of the proceeds, bringing only a part to lay before the feet of the apostles. Well, as you know, they were both struck dead, yes, as I like to say, DRT, dead right there. But they were not smited because they held back a portion of the property they promised to give to the community, nonetheless an egregious error in judgment. No, they died because they lied about this illicit transaction (Acts 5:1-11). Of course, my serious hunch is that they were executed for their betrayal, not struck down by an angry, ungracious, deity. Yes, that would be consistent with the nature of mythology, yes, including much of the content from the Bible, embellishment and exaggeration, as well as complete fabrication, a normative, routine, practice, a common, familiar medium, found in many ancient writings. The good news for us is that God, or no one else for that matter, is going to strike us down dead! I remind us of this horror story as a reminder of the seriousness the early churches took with their commitments to one another, their pledges of allegiance to God and to their fellow brothers and sisters, along with their own personal fidelity. **It was a sacred covenant, an ethical and moral expectation, agreed by everyone involved that would govern every aspect of their personal and ecclesial relationship. These bonds were the ties that bind and were not to be entered into casually, without much aforethought, much contemplation and reflection, never to be taken lightly, yes, considering all the consequences in these life and death decisions.**

Community! Relationships! In that respect alone, we today, as “becomers” and builders of beloved faith community, right here and right now as the First Congregational United Church of Christ, we share a common bond with our first-century forebears in the faith, all the faithful who have gone before us, blazing happy trails, an important link we have been emphasizing in worship over the last two weeks with our Reformation and All Saints emphases. Like the little

church that could at Thessalonica, just like them, as they were, we too are accountable to ourselves and to one another, and of course, to God, because we are all we have got when it comes to sustaining our church, to nourishing and nurturing our congregation, yes, breaking it down to pedestrian basics, to the least common denominator of paying the bills. We are our only source of income! The gifts we bring, and those gifts far exceed, yes, even outweigh, mere financial requirements, are indeed the ones we have, that are conveniently and readily available at our disposal. Therefore, we have a sacred trust with one another that we will do all that is possible, all that we are capable, to insure the fiscal, the fiduciary health, yes, emboldening, empowering, the churchly ability and sacred stability of this local missional church, as we continue to become and to build, to create this holy and beloved faith community we all love and through which we honor and serve God. Each one of us is entrusted to take up the slack of the other, making a real difference, trusting that people gladly give as they are able, no coercion, no manipulation, no pressure, ever put on anyone regarding their sacred stewardship, this gift of grace shared between them and their God. Our hope and prayer, our goal and objective, is that we will embrace stewardship as a joyful matter, a glorious opportunity, expressing the abundance and generosity that overflows in our lives as we rejoice in our graciously good God, a byproduct of grace, never a matter of required expectations or any unreasonable demands. As we enter this annual, but way too brief, season of gratitude called Thanksgiving, with its overwhelming emphasis on giving thanks. Yes, we need to dwell there longer than we do! Christmas can wait! The Yuletide will get here! We seek to express the inexpressible because are so mindful of all the many gracious gifts, indeed gifts of grace, we gladly call blessings, every aspect of this life and living that brings us joy and causes us the greatest rejoicing.

This is what was at stake at the church at Thessalonica, as well as all the fledgling congregations that were sprouting in cities and towns as the word about Jesus of Nazareth began to spread like wildfire, spawning the new religious movement, all fueled by wonderful tales told by a host of witnesses, evangelistic missionaries cut in the mold of the apostle Paul, the best known, perhaps most popular, and definitely most prolific writer of the bunch. **Indeed, that is what is at stake for us as well as we ponder our personal and corporate stewardship. In the final analysis it always comes down to our relationships. My hunch is that one of the reasons, among many, that you are here is because you like each other! Just a hunch! Yes, it is always about the whole more than the part, a group dynamic, though individuals of course are essential, extravagantly important, priceless treasures in earthen vessels valued in myriad ways. At its core our stewardship, in every conceivable and holistic way, is always myopically focused on building up the community of faith! And we are at our best when we are able to name our core values, claim our welcoming identity, affirm our hospitable and inclusive congregational ethos, all of what makes us special, unique in so many ways, yes, inspiring and inspiriting us to gladly give of our resources, to practice stewardship in the myriad ways that contributing to the local missional church takes, as we sacrificially offer ourselves and some of our possessions to the cause, the beloved faith community called the First Congregational United Church of Christ! Yes, the old adage continues to hold true, it demands our time, our talent, and yes, whatever amount amounts to our sacred tithe!**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to be stewards, our stewardship a sign of our love of God, our desire to follow Jesus, and our commitment one to another as a local missional church, as beloved faith community! Amen and amen.

