

## There's Something About That Church

### *2 Thessalonians 1: 2-4*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

Imagine you are striking up a conversation with a neighbor. You start by talking about life—the job, the family. Then the conversation shifts as they ask you to tell them something you are grateful for about your church—something everyone does, right? Maybe we mention our values. Maybe we tell them a heartfelt story. Maybe we mention the people or the music. There's something about this church we would speak about—maybe even brag about. When we hear St. Paul speaking about the church in Thessalonica, he is bragging: “Their faith is flourishing. Their love for one another keeps increasing. Their faith is strong enough to endure even the toughest of persecutions and afflictions.” There's something about that church. In a word, it is their faith.

Let's begin with a reminder: Our faith is a team sport. Contrary to popular belief, faith isn't something we possess as individuals, it is something we cultivate together as we journey through the good times and the bad. It is why we participate in liturgies and creeds—to form us as a community. Often people will say, “Well, I can't say the creed because I don't believe every line in it—the virgin birth or resurrection of the body.” My response is, “Who believes every line of the creed!?” Okay, some people do. But the point isn't to ascend to a theological construct. The point is that we say it as a community because in a large group of people someone believes the line when another doesn't, so we are covered! When St. Paul talks about faith it is almost always in the context of community. When he says, “God won't give you more than you can handle”—an unhelpful statement we often hear to comfort someone's grief—the “you” is plural! The statement isn't intended for individual ears, because there are lots of things life throws at us we could never handle by ourselves.

On NPR this week they were interviewing Lonnie Bunch, who is the director for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. It is a museum one-hundred years in the making, which tells the unvarnished truth about the African American experience. When you walk into the three-hour long exhibit, you begin by taking a descending elevator into the basement. When the elevator doors open, you start by entering into an eerie slave ship, listening to the piercing sounds chains and shackles. From there you slowly climb up a ramp through the emotional layers of black history: slavery, through Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, to Oprah. As the interview went on, people called in to share their experience of the museum. Many said it was one of the most spiritual experiences of their lives. Why? Because what was on display were the stories of a resilient people whose steadfast faith has brought them through the darkest of times. And it still does. Too many of us have been taught an individualistic, Billy

Graham, personalized, let-Jesus-into-your-heart version of faith. When the truth is sometimes my faith can help carry you, and other times I need your faith to help carry me. Faith is a team sport that grows through the good times and the bad.

So if it is true that faith is a communal activity that keeps growing, how is God growing our faith as a church these days?

As I was pondering the question the other day, the church doorbell rang. There, standing outside, were two women. One of them asked, “Do you have a Wednesday night youth group here?”

I said, “No, but you might want to try the Baptist church down the street.”

She said, “Well, I remember when Stuart Ellis, the old pastor, was here and you held a Wednesday night youth group.”

“Ahh, well we don’t have one anymore.”

She said pointing to the other woman, “Well, her children used to attend the youth group here fifteen years ago, and I remember there was something about this church that was very warm and welcoming. And you probably want to know why I am saying these things fifteen years later.

You see, I’m a social worker and I am looking after three African American boys, and they need somewhere where they can hang out and perhaps get a meal on Wednesday evenings.”

I responded, “Well, we don’t have any programming on Wednesday evenings and we only have a couple youth that age.”

“You are not hearing me,” she said. I’m telling you; I have three young men who you can start a youth group with. You have a banner hanging right there that says Black Lives Matter, so I’m beginning to think that God sent me here to challenge you.”

“You have no idea,” I said.

She said softly, “If you don’t want to do anything then we can go elsewhere, but there has always been something about this church.”

What is the “something” she is talking about?

Now I’m not telling you this to make us any busier than we already are. I’m telling you this because sometimes when we ask God to grow our faith the doorbell rings with the gift of another opportunity waiting at the door. Who knows where it will lead? But God won’t give us more than we can handle. Which seems true, only if we are handling whatever it is together.

We must always give thanks to God for you. For your growing faith, your love that is increasing, and the faith that is still at work forming us...through the good times and the bad.