

Centers of Gossip

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Not that anyone has noticed, but we live in a city that runs on gossip. Columnist Sally Quinn noted that after the Nixon resignation, “We were hooked on the heroin of the Watergate scandal and now we needed the methadone of gossip.”¹ It was not too long after that that cable news emerged to feed the habit. Now the Internet and blogosphere make it possible to mainline gossip about everything under the sun...politics, entertainment, what’s going on at any particular Starbucks™ location. Yes, you can read reports of who argued with whom about what over their decaf caramel macchiato.

And of course, the church maintains its reputation as a haven for gossip. As a preacher’s kid, I wonder that any clergy children stay in the church, especially if they lived in that fishbowl known as a manse. I could tell personal stories (and will at some later date) but the classic and quintessential story about church gossip is this:

Mildred, the church gossip and self-appointed arbiter of the church's morals, kept sticking her nose into other people's business. She made a mistake, however, when she accused George, a new member, of being an alcoholic after she saw his pickup truck parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She commented to George and others that everyone seeing it there would know what he was doing. George, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and just walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny...he said nothing. Later that evening, George quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's houseand left it there all night.²

Seeing things...observing things, gives people something to talk about. Well, people see us, they observe us and they will talk about us. They will gossip. The question is not, “Should they do that?” The question is, “What do we want them to say?” Let us pray. Lord God, whose Word is unstoppable, by the power of your Holy Spirit, may your word come alive in ways that are remarkable. In the name of the living Word Jesus we pray. Amen.

While this sermon is about gossip, it’s not about not gossiping. It’s about gossip and the witness of the church. Willi Abraham, author of *The Logic of Evangelism*, has described one of the reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity in its early years...it was gossip. All over the trade routes and military expansions of the Roman Empire, people talked about what was happening in the little outpost of Palestine. News of a Jewish prophet rising from the dead spread quickly...a resurrection would tend to warrant a breaking news headline. But that wasn’t all – people’s lives were being changed and new communities that crossed racial, economic and gender boundaries were taking shape and making a difference in the cities.

People gossiped about those early Christians...they gossiped about Jesus...they gossiped about the church. Some of the gossip was slander and caused the martyrdom of many. But much of it was the talk that comes with wonder at what is going on. Then wonder turned into investigation and investigation into conversion and commitment. And the church’ witness to Jesus spread. The gospel was gossiped throughout the known world.

The Thessalonians were one of the major centers of that kind of gospel gossip. Thessalonica, or Thessaloniki, was a vibrant city of the ancient world. It is one of the few New Testament cities that is thriving. In fact, last night I was listening to web cast music from Radio Thessaloniki. It is today a vibrant city of learning, arts, music and trade. During the apostolic era, Thessalonica had attributes that sound very familiar to us. It was a busy city. It not only had a major port, it was also located along a major route in the Roman road system – sort of like Baltimore with its harbor and I-95 running through it. Not only was business the order of the day, the commercial and military traffic was a medium of spreading the news, whatever that news might be. It was a capital city with a sitting Roman governor, so it had a robust

political life. When St. Paul visited the city, it was situated in the midst of a very dangerous world, with the ancient near East convulsed in rebellion and warfare.

And, it was full of religious options. Not only was the imperial cult mandatory, if there was a god you wanted, you could get it – Greek gods, Roman gods, Egyptian gods, Phrygian gods. Pluralism was a way of life for the Thessalonians.

You understand this if, for example, you've been following the controversy about the thirty-eight faith symbols the Veterans Administration has approved for headstones in national cemeteries. Apparently thirty-eight is not enough to accommodate the religious preferences of the American military. Yep, we've got religious diversity. Commerce, communication, politics, religious pluralism...who said the Bible doesn't speak to our time?

It is this city that is thrown into turmoil by three itinerant Jewish preachers. In fact, if you read the account of the missionary work in Acts 17, you discover that the Apostle Paul and his team spent maybe 15-22 days in town, but the effect was so profound that they were accused of being the ones who turned the world upside-down. This was not a compliment. The Romans valued order and anything that upset that order would be put down.

The Romans kept order by way of the imperial cult – it was a unifying religion. Just pledge your allegiance to the emperor, make the obligatory sacrifice and you can have any other gods you want. The Romans were content to promote religious pluralism as long as the state was the first among the gods. That's what the early Christians could not do. When the state demanded that they declare that "Caesar is Lord," they could only respond, "No, Jesus is Lord."

The Thessalonian church was an example of how the gospel took hold. They 'turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.' This was what the buzz was about all through Greece, Turkey and the Balkans. Those crazy Christians worshiped and served only one God. How could they do such a risky thing? Give up idols? Who would you pray to when you planted a tree, or got married? True, the gods were unpredictable and capricious, but if they could help with prosperity and success, why not give them a shot? Give them up? This would be like asking us to give up our cars, computers, cell phones and Blackberries™. We think they serve us. They get us where we need to be, in touch with the right people and on the right track at work.

No wonder people were talking about the Thessalonians. This was radical. It wouldn't have mattered if they had just added Jesus to their list of gods. But they didn't do that. They turned their backs on those gods in such a way as to say to anyone who was paying attention, "Not only are we not worshiping them, they aren't real. They don't exist. They are not worthy of one dime's worth of loyalty." In writing on this text, Beverly Gaventa has said, "...faith in the God of Israel who is the Father of Jesus Christ is not an optional practice to be added on to previous values and commitments. One cannot serve this God alongside idols; they must be put away. The claims of the Christian faith are all encompassing."

This was radical religious innovation and to many it seemed careless. But if this new religion were just a new philosophy, a new way of talking about the world and how it's organized, it might have just ended up as a small blip in ancient history. But when Paul writes to his beloved congregation, he describes what has happened because they turned to serve the living and true God. In discovering the beauty, glory and greatness of the God whom they saw in Jesus Christ, they were willing to forsake all the frail and inadequate things they had been trusting. They threw everything in with Jesus and their lives were changed. They weren't just talking about different things. They were living differently, and so Paul praised them for the kind of faith that led to works of gratitude. He praised them for love that labored. Their love was not sentimental emotion – it worked hard for the sake of others. And they had a patience that came out of the hope they had in knowing that Christ would return.

God's word was unstoppable in their lives. Today the flow of words just seems unstoppable. Many of us get more than one newspaper. We check online press agencies. Our e-mail inboxes are overflowing. The only way we can keep up with the books that are being published is to hope we can at least read the reviews. But those words don't shape us for a life that delights the Lord.

The Word that was unstoppable for the Thessalonians was the Word made flesh – Jesus. Moreover, just as Jesus was made flesh, when they were united to Christ, the word became concrete, tangible and embodied in their lives. They didn't talk about faith, they believed. They didn't talk about love. They loved. They didn't talk about hope. They patiently waited – and that was hard work. This is what Darrell Guder at Princeton Seminary calls “doing the witness to Jesus Christ.”

Just like George's truck parked out in front of Mildred's house was something that people could see and then talk about, so the life of a disciple of Jesus should be something that others actually see. It's got to be visible. It takes shape in how we treat one another, how we approach ethical dilemmas. It takes shape in our hope for the future God will create. If we trust that Christ will come again someday, then that day will change how we will live this day.

Because of the faith, love and hope of the Thessalonians, nobody had to ask what was happening to them – the word about them spread like wildfire. In fact, when St. Paul said that the word of the Lord went forth from them, it was not just a comment on their present life. It was hint of the future witness of the church in that place. In the 9th century, two monks, Cyril and Methodius went from Thessalonica, taking the gospel and the Cyrillic alphabet to the Slavs. Anyone who has taken Russian and Greek can see the relationship between the two alphabets. That alphabet was a tool for sending forth the word of the Lord. (Just a little history.)

People saw changed lives. They gossiped. The word went forth and others encountered Jesus in ways that transformed them. I don't know about you, but when I read this description of that church, I want to be like them. I think that's the effect Paul wanted to have when he wrote this letter. Notice that he tells them that they observed the life of the apostles and imitated them. Then, folks in the area noticed the Thessalonian Christians and imitated them by becoming disciples of Jesus. That's how gossip, at its best, is a means whereby we try to figure out who we are and how we ought to live.³

Now, it's important to know this about the Thessalonians. As their founding pastor, Paul loved them and was thankful for them and for the way they were being shaped in the faith. But, they were not perfect. They were having problems with their doctrine and they weren't treating their pastors right. They were a little shaky in the area of sexual behavior, as well. But they were a people who had done three very significant things: (1) In faith, they turned toward God and abandoned all the futile and temporary things they had previously trusted; (2) in love, they served that God and (3) in hope, they trusted that God to care for them. That was enough to get the gossip going.

Now, here's a story that has been gossiped about for some time in missionary circles. These things always seem to happen on the mission field, not in America (well, they also happen to my mother). Missionaries to Guatemala have told the following story:

A poor widow in one of the congregations in Guatemala was down to her last twenty cents and without food. She began to pray about her problem. As she was praying, she felt a deep conviction that God was telling her to go to the large supermarket in town the next day and fill up several carts with groceries and take them to checkout stand #7 for check out. This was not just a vague feeling on her part but a deep, Spirit-born conviction. She went to the supermarket the next morning, loaded enough groceries into carts to last two or three months, and took them to checkout stand #7. Just as she got there the cashier closed the stand to go out to lunch. She suggested that the woman take her groceries to another stand, but the woman said, "No, I cannot. My Father told me to take these through checkout stand #7." So she waited while the clerk went to lunch and came back again. The clerk was surprised to see the woman still there, and started to check out her groceries. Just then an announcement came over the loudspeaker: "This is our seventh year of business and we are pleased to announce that whoever is checking out at checkout stand #7 gets free groceries."⁴

The point of this story is not for you to go to Safeway and hang around waiting for the P.A. system to blare out “Attention, Safeway shoppers.” The point of the story is this: When the word of the Lord comes to you and says “Trust me with your life instead of the things you usually trust. Turn to me. Love and serve me instead of the false gods who clutter your life.”...when the word of the Lord says that, what will you do?

If the Thessalonians turned their back on the emperor, who would protect them from political threats? If they turned from fertility gods, who would secure their legacy, their future? If they gave up sexual randomness and confusion for God's design, how would they be loved? They would gain all those things from the God who died for them while they were still sinners. They would be transformed by a God who would be with them in all the circumstances of their lives, even in the consequences of their own bad decisions.

Dearly beloved disciples of Jesus Christ, this letter from Paul is addressed not just to that ancient congregation. It is a letter to us as well. After hearing this gossip about the Thessalonian church, what do you want the gossip about us to be? What...who... will others see in us and what will they say? How will the word of the Lord go forth from us? Let us pray. Lord God, may we be so overwhelmed by your presence in our lives that we ever and always turn in your direction to love and serve you. May our lives be visible examples of faith that works, love that labors and hope that endures. May we become, like the Thessalonians, a center of gossip about your saving and transforming power, for the sake of Christ, the only Word that matters. Amen.

Footnotes: 1. Quoted by William Willimon in "Heard About the Pastor Who...? Gossip as an Ethical Activity," *The Christian Century*, October 31, 1990, pp. 994-996.

2. Just google "church gossip."

3. Willimon, op. cit

4. <http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/thessalonians/4089.html>