

“Growing Abundantly”

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4; 11 & 12

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

to the church of the Thessalonians

in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

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 everyone 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.

To this end we always pray for you,

asking that our God will make you worthy of the call

and will fulfill by God's power

every good resolve and work of faith,

so that the name of our Lord Jesus

may be glorified in you, and you in him,

according to the grace of our God

and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Growing Abundantly
2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

October 30, 2022
Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

True to my word and the warning I gave you last Sunday, today is the occasion of the *Dreaded* Stewardship Sermon. Dreaded not so much because all of *you* have to listen to it or read it (though there is that) but dreaded because *I* have to write it and deliver it. On an average, the weekly sermon takes me about 8 hours to write beginning with when I sit down with a cup of coffee and open my computer and ending with posting it on the website and attaching it to the 148 emails I send out every week (with another 12 hard copies mailed out). Not included in those 8 hours are the very many moments I spend thinking about what to say, considering the direction in which we might go and what analogy or story to use to help illustrate whatever point I'm hoping to make; all of which must take place long before I even hit the "brew" button on the coffee maker.

II.

Having been at the craft of sermon writing for so many years, you'd think that by now I would have it down to a science. The truth is, though, every week some wheel or another needs to be reinvented and each sermon is a slog to a greater or lesser degree. It is not a wholly unpleasant experience, however, as there is much satisfaction both in engaging in the process and in the fruits of the outcome.

While it is true they teach a "homiletical method" in seminary (at least they did at Princeton) I long ago tossed *that* out the window. For me, the sermon writing is less about embarking on a set course, and more about roaming the country-side with a certain willy-nillness. If I can keep the lark from becoming a labor it generally turns pretty well (even surprisingly so) for the both writer as well as the listener or reader. Over the years, I've learned two very important things; secrets, if you will: first, just *start*; second, put yourself "out there" and keep *open* to the experiences that arise during the course of the day and in one's life.

III.

A couple of weeks ago, I was sitting on the porch at the manse and the Unitarian-Universalist minister, The Reverend James Galasinski, came riding by on his bicycle. I said hello and bid him welcome, and he stopped and got off his bike to chat. He said he had something about which he wanted to speak to me. A new ecumenical endeavor, perhaps? Some cultural or political matter to discuss? Maybe even the resumption of our long dormant Canton clergy group? No, no, and certainly not.

Instead, James sought my perspective, as a pastor, on the new roof they apparently need for their church. How involved did I get with such things, was a special committee formed, how long do such things take to accomplish? Like that. I offered some modest counsel, but mostly I listened to him lament about having to be concerned with such things, as the *pastor*. Finally, I said “James, if you do not want to be concerned about such things, you are in the wrong profession.”

IV.

This past Tuesday I met Jim Durham at the church at 8 a.m. Well, *I* was there on time (early, actually) but Jim moseyed in about 10 minutes after. Which is fine because, as I often remind him, he’s getting to be an old-timer. Jim has been keeping our church, and the manse, warm and toasty for well over a quarter century. He has always come when called, and has been very gracious to the church. Over the years Jim and I have become friends, and during that time he’s taught me an awful lot about plumbing, heating and electrical, in specific; as well as a good deal about the world, in general. He’s one of the few people in my life who gets testy with me from time to time; or, probably more accurately, feels free to *express* that testiness with me. Which usually occurs when I’m *not* listening to what he is telling me (guilty as charged). Along with Rich Grayson and Barry Walch, Jim serves as something of an older, male role-model, mentor, font of old-school knowledge and fatherly figure.

V.

Last Saturday, during the Bazaar, I discovered we weren’t getting any heat to the registers in the foyer, the narthex, the choir room or below the smaller stained-glass window facing the park, so I called and left a message with Jim.

He rang me up on Monday and asked for “a little help” moving the old choir robes, so we arranged to meet the following morning. In spite of the fact I had worked until 8 p.m. the night before, had pastoral calls to make on Tuesday and had no end of things to do that day in the office including the Stewardship mailing, it quickly became apparent to me that more than “a little help” was required; in for a dime, in for a dollar.

I went home and changed into work clothes (the *other* kind of work) then Jim and I proceeded to get down to business. After quite a bit of head-scratching to figure out what was what, we bled air from the waterlines, removed and vacuumed the filters, replaced a circulating pump and installed two pressure relief valves. Or, more accurately, *I* did all that as Jim directed.

VI.

By the end of the day I was dirty and sweaty and filled with a great sense of satisfaction about what *we* had accomplished, as it was very much a team effort; with Jim providing the brains, and I the brawn. I was also pleased with all that Jim had taught me, some smaller portion of which I had actually absorbed; not to mention learning a great deal about how the church’s heating system operates. The following day, Wednesday, we met once more and fired up the boiler. There were no leaks and no squeaks, so we proceeded to test and label each of the five heat runs off the boiler: choir room and pastor’s study, foyer/narthex, south facing rooms downstairs, north facing rooms, and Fellowship Hall. Everything worked to perfection: every blower, every circulator pump and each thermostat. So much so, that we now have heat even in the foyer which, in my 25 years, has never really been the case. For Jim it was business as usual. For me, though, it was something of a miracle.

VII.

Today’s scripture reading, the first 12 verses of Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, is a rather flowery, upbeat bit of praise and encouragement which one might expect at the start of such a letter (or “epistle” to use the Greek word). From a homiletical perspective there isn’t an awful lot there upon which one might hang a sermon. One sentence, however, did garner my attention; even greatly so. Paul says, “Your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you, for one another, is increasing.” A rather short sentence, but there is quite a bit of nuance in it to unpack.

Over the past 25 years much emphasis has been placed on the idea of church growth, mostly because there hasn't been very much. In fact, quite the opposite. Unfortunately, our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, has suffered the sharpest decline of all the so called "mainline" protestant churches. Between 2000 and 2015 we lost over 40% of our membership and 15.4% of our churches.

VIII.

As evidenced by those statistics, when we in the church talk about "growth" what we really are saying is the number of members, congregations and, of course, financial contributions. For Paul, however, growth is not gauged using head-count, square footage or profit/loss statements but, rather, by the measuring stick of faith. Moreover, Paul seems to differentiate between "having" faith, which is how we usually express it, and a "growing" faith.

Rather than seeing faith as kind of two-dimensional, static object or possession, Paul lauds an active, fluid and changing expression of one's convictions that rises up from page, creed or doctrine to exist in the three dimensions of our very real world; and, to do so *abundantly*. That is, a faith which is teeming with life, rife with energy, verdant, life-giving, dynamic, unexpected and joyous (i.e., fun). A faith that is growing abundantly will never show up on a spread sheet or as a statistic; however, it is every bit as real, tangible, observable and verifiable.

IX.

Though, perhaps, I was less sympathetic than I could have been, or ought to have been, when responding to The Reverend James Galasinski, it would be disingenuous of me not to admit that I, too, took refuge for a time in the mistaken notion that the pastor should stick to spiritual matters and leave the physical world to the congregation; if only to "empower" the laity, which is often the rationale employed in that kind of thinking.

Yes, it would be nice to think that the pastor, in specific, but also the church, in general, could just stick to the *spiritual* matters: the nurture and education of children, comforting those who are suffering or grieving, theological exploration and interpretation, the study of Scripture, prayer, fellowship, counseling and, of course, evangelism and mission to the larger world. Eventually, though, all of these things which we consider our

“ministry” are bound *to*, if not bound *by*, the heating system that isn’t working properly or the roof that needs to be replaced.

X.

Which, of course, brings us to our annual Stewardship Campaign. Every year at this time, we take an intentional pause to consider the degree to which our ministry will be bound or, alternatively, unbound correlating to the degree we are *able* to support the church, and the degree to which we *choose* to support the church. This we do as individuals, as a family and, together, as a congregation.

Stewardship, the challenge of funding the work and mission of our church, is very much a *team* effort, as was the case this week working with Jim. Like the heating system here at the church, we only arrive at the desired result when every part of the system, or congregation, is doing their part toward our common goal of bringing some much needed warmth to a world that is often so very cold. Such a message is one you would expect in the Dreaded Stewardship sermon and, as such, is business as usual.

XI.

That said, there is more to say because in the church, and this church *in particular*, miracles *are* our usual business. The first miracle is that there even *is* a church: the body of Christ made manifest in the world in the hearts and minds of its believers, but also in the physical brick and mortar, wood and stone structures that serve in the real world as a beacon of hope, a shelter and sanctuary, and the home to a group of people which is formed and bound together as a family by their faith; a faith in God, and in each other.

While this first miracle is a gift we *receive*, the second miracle is a gift we *offer*, both to ourselves and to each other; by growing our faith, and abundantly so. Though many church folk, *and* pastors, would rather stick to the “spiritual stuff,” the real world concern that is stewardship is actually the very thing that lifts our faith off the page and into the third dimension and, thereby, brings it to life.

XII.

Paradoxically, stewardship is the most direct way to move a static faith which is in for a dime to a growing and abundant faith which is in for a dollar. While it is true that most stewardship campaigns attempt to chart a set course which bends the spiritual back around to the physical, I would advocate just the opposite: that we begin by roaming willy-nilly through the countryside of the real world of heating systems, roofs, staff salaries, and utility bills; or, in a word, stewardship.

Stewardship is the fertile ground of mystical movement which leads us through the wilderness, often in roundabout ways, and brings us to the promised land where all that “spiritual stuff” resides. Stewardship is a process and it takes time, but if we can keep the lark from becoming a labor I can guarantee there is much satisfaction to be found both in engaging in the process and in the fruits of the outcome. Fruits you will have certainly given to others but, also, fruits you give to yourself.

XIII.

I end today with the two secrets to stewardship. First, just start. Take the faith that is yours and put it into motion, put it into action, lift it off the page, allow it to be a living and growing expression of who you are and what you believe.

Second, put yourself “out there.” Stewardship is a risk, no question about it. Realize, though, that when you find a congregation where faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of us, for one another and for the world, is increasing day to day and year to year, well, that is the smartest bet you can make. And we can absolutely see the pay-off of such a wager if we keep ourselves *open* to the experiences that arise during the course of the day and in our lives. The proof is in the pudding. Here in *this* church where we are teeming with life, rife with energy, life-giving, verdant, dynamic, unexpected and, especially, joyous, miracles are happening *every* day.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to offer my thanks to each one of you for your support of our church; this past year, all these years and in this next year to come. You *are* the miracle that is this church.