

May 10, 2020
Mission Impossible
1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

If you ever hear Kirstin talk about the process of childbirth, you would hear quite a story. Words like profound, intimate, and formational are readily in her mind. Her experience, and her memory of them, was one of endurance, striving, hard work, and single-minded determination which formed her identity at the most basic of levels.

These are only some of the words that I would use to describe this experience. While Kirstin was the one doing all of the work, I was on the outside, watching (they generously called me a birth coach. . .) and trying to interpret the signals that my wife was sending. Was it supposed to take this long? Was she supposed to make those sounds? Where did the energy come from, given that every meal that she'd eaten had departed at the very beginning of labour? When she nearly bit my finger off, was she trying to say I love you in a deeply mystical, endorphin fueled way?

The movies show it as all pain and breathing and pushing and dire warnings of lifelong celibacy from that point on. Why in the world would anyone do this more than once?

It doesn't end with birth, either! The average cost to raise a child in Canada to 18? Over a quarter of a million dollars! The average night's sleep for new parents? 4 hours and 44 minutes. I didn't know this, but new parents can often be considered to be driving under the influence because of lack of sleep!

So now, the question isn't why would you do this more than once, it is why in the world would you do it at all?

The scripture that we are covering today has a lot of family themes in it, and I think many similar themes to what I've just cynically described of parenthood. Paul compares himself to an infant, a nursing mother, and a patient father. He has been attacked, beaten, imprisoned, and strongly encouraged to leave the city in his previous experience. So then why in the world would Paul go down the street, and do the exact same thing over again?

On these weekends where we celebrate Mother's Day, or Father's Day, they can be hard days for some of us. For many of us, all we have experienced in life is the bad side of what Paul mentions: selfishness, authority misused and abused, lack of honesty and integrity and encouragement and nurturing care. How can we expect positive, warm fuzzy feelings from a passage that is so heavily invested in family language?

Remember, the audience that Paul is writing to. For many of them, listening to Paul's gospel would mean being abandoned by their families. This is true in parts of our world today. When I was overseas, I met with a young mother who had fled her home

country with her two young children, one step ahead of a husband who was trying to have her executed. This is a reality of our broken world.

Paul says that a true church functions as a redeeming community for the failures of our human systems and categories. We experience the love, nurture and care from church moms and grandmas. We are encouraged and admonished by church dads and grandpas. I am only alive because I was sheltered, cared for, often fed, and loved by my Lethbridge mom and dad, Shane and Diane Porter. My children know whose pockets have candy in them after church services. When I cannot be in the physical presence of my own parents, it is the church that fills the need for care.

How do we do this? How do we build such trust among perfect strangers? What is the secret? Paul tells us several things in this short passage.

He tells us that setting off on this adventure is fraught with risk.

Remember, he has just been imprisoned, beaten, and chased off. It is very difficult to have the courage to try again if you've been burnt in the past. Remember courage is not being unafraid, it is having the ability to master fear, and react with wisdom – to know what risks are worth taking.

Second, Paul tells us several things to avoid.

In Paul's time, there would be many travelling philosophers who made their living travelling and teaching. Wealthy benefactors or patrons would pay a stipend to them. For unscrupulous philosophers, it was possible to become wealthy if one was willing to sell out the truth. Maybe not completely, but subtly. A little misdirection here, a little flattery there, and then watch the patronages roll in. Truth for sale always feels gross. We've all heard it, and seen it:

The pastor on television calling for donations to be "sown into the kingdom" just before climbing into their private jet to retreat in a secluded vacation home in the tropics. I googled it. There are at least ten pastors in North America who own at least one private jet. One claimed that he needed it because too many people were asking him to pray for them on commercial airlines! Such behaviour gives not only the pastor a bad reputation, but also reflects on the church, and most importantly, on our God. It makes trust impossible to build.

So, Paul emphasizes how he approached the Thessalonians.

Paul went out of his way to protect the integrity of the gospel. Instead of taking liberty with the truth, he was very careful about how he spoke about God – with integrity, honesty, and forthrightness.

Rather than seeking to convert people for profit he was very careful and transparent about financial matters, not linking his own livelihood to the decisions of his audience.

Rather than using his platform as a public speaker to gain a reputation for himself, he acted like a little child, dependent on the goodness of his hosts for his ministry. In fact, he didn't even use the resume he had to gain credibility. He simply went and lived with the Thessalonians.

That last idea is pretty huge. Where many travelling philosophers would work a crowd until there were no more coins to be had and then move to richer fields, Paul lives out his message, giving not only the word, but his very being to the Thessalonians.

This is what puts it over the top. There are lots of businesses that take care of people professionally. Massage therapists, doctors, counsellors, all of them are intimately involved in people's lives. Yet they work hard to maintain a professional distance.

Not so with Paul. He says that they shared their very lives with the people. This is interesting to me.

I was in a conversation with a few pastors during one of my classes, and we were being asked to discuss the priority of speaking the gospel or care for their physical concerns. The debate was robust, and the opinions varied. I can't help but think that Paul and Jesus together might have been rolling their eyes at us. Verse 9: "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well." Friends, there is no distinction in Paul's life between his teaching and his life. The church is not a professional place. It is an intensely personal one.

The metaphors that Paul uses here, of a nursing mother, and an involved father, are not professional roles. In ancient Thessalonica, before the advent of other feeding options, a good mother feeds the baby from the nutrients of her own body. She gives it everything she possibly can. Without her, human life on earth would end within one generation.

What does a good father do? He is present in the child's life, correcting, encouraging, and picking them up when they fail. I know that these are outdated gender roles in our culture. But Paul is describing a metaphor of how he feels about the church. For Paul, parents are safety nets to the child. Good parents provide not only the financial and physical resources of life. They give of themselves to their families, going without so that their families can go with.

It is love that drives them.

One of the most famous chapters in scripture is the love chapter. Let's read part of it today.

Having just described amazing, miraculous powers gifted through the Holy Spirit, Paul goes on to say this in 1 Cor. 12:31:

And yet I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is intense, costly, personal, vulnerable, vital, in the church, if we are to fulfill the role of being a family together.

Why is it worth it? I get, now, why people have more than one child. Beyond the fact that that lawn isn't going to mow itself, I mean. It is love.

But why the church? Why would Paul risk another beating, another stretch in the slammer, another brush with death, for the church?

God's glory.

This is a phrase that we talk about all the time, but I got to wondering this week as I wrote this sermon, what does God's glory even mean?

Mark Clarke of Village Church came to my rescue with a definition.

God's glory is the weighty thickness of God's presence. It is like his mass, his gravitas. One writer likens it to a boulder falling from a cliff into a stream. If the boulder has more glory than the water, then the water is displaced, and the boulder remains.

Tell me, can you imagine a more compelling picture than this?

People from all walks of life, backgrounds, and family experiences come to the church to experience the glory of God. They've been fed a steady diet of charlatans and tricksters, pyramid schemes and exploitation. Their family was traumatic, their jobs reducing them to a number. Slowly, they've come to believe that this is who they are – a number in a long list of other numbers, good only to be used or abused, alone and lonely.

But in the church, they encounter people like you. People who show them a better way. Who not only share good, truthful teaching, but your very lives with them. Eating and sleeping, working and playing, the sheer glory of the people of God pushes out all of

the lies that they have been fed, until they understand the truth of their creation: they are loved. Not just by people, but by God's people, by God.

Is that you? You don't know how you've come to this YouTube video, or you have no idea why you keep tuning in. Disappointment is too mild a word. You've been hurt more by followers of Jesus than you have been helped, or you've yet to find that kind of church. For this, I would ask your forgiveness, on behalf of the church. I would pray that you would find this kind of true, redeeming expression of God's family, and that it would draw you into the love of the eternal God.

Bruce spoke a couple of years ago about a picture he had in his mind of First Baptist Church people as hundreds of little lights shining all over the place in Lethbridge. Today, under the threat of global sickness, we are those lights, and not just in Lethbridge, but in Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Arizona, and more. Amazing! Little boulders displacing the lies and darkness around you, bringing the glory of the living God into your home, your neighborhood, your world.

Is this true of you? What stops us from being vulnerable like a child, from loving and giving ourselves away like a nursing mother, from encouraging, comforting, and urging righteousness like a good father? I pray that the glory of God would first heal, transform, and push out these things that block you, and then use you to do the same for others.

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First Baptist Church
1614 – 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
troy@firstb.net