

*"We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ"- 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 (NRSV)*

1 Thessalonians is one of the most tender and devoted letters of Christian love found in the New Testament. Many biblical scholars believe that this letter was written to a community of believers in the Roman-occupied city of Thessalonica somewhere around 51 CE, just two decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. Facing serious trouble and opposition because of their Christian beliefs and practices, this community found themselves living in a time of great unknowing. Amidst these significant concerns, the authors of the letter, Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus (Silas) express a sense of thanksgiving and appreciation for the Christian family that still resonates in our hearts today.

The letter's writers express a sense of profound encouragement for the community to continue standing firm in their faith while maintaining love for one another, despite their struggles. Indeed, during these present days of COVID-19, our community of Grace-Kirkwood, our diocese, and the larger Church is learning to live into a time of great unknowing. Our church family has all viscerally come to meet this great unknowing in one way or another. We are equally in need of encouragement to continue to be the disciples that God has called us to be. In a time when we cannot gather together safely as we are used to, we now ask ourselves: Where do we hear God's voice amidst our present struggles? What does it mean to share the Good News in a time of sickness and to pray in times of vulnerability? How are we called to align ourselves to God's voice together and turn to Jesus Christ during a global pandemic? Does seeking and serving Jesus in all persons mean something different in these present times?

Over the last several months, I have had the great pleasure and real challenge of engaging in ministries of technology at Grace, specifically in filming and editing our Sunday worship services. Although I previously worked as a public affairs professional in the military, I was not fully equipped to meet the many difficulties of technology ministries. Frankly, I had no idea just how much effort went into recording services. I'm incredibly thankful for all of the ministers, lay and ordained, that continue to contribute a wealth of gifts, allowing us the opportunity to worship together in the best way presently can. As a whole, I feel immensely blessed to be a part of a congregation committed to working through our current challenges with the unique kind of faith, labor, and love that only comes from knowing and embracing Christ with open arms (and perhaps open cameras and computers).

Engaging in new ministries can be especially tricky. For me, this difficulty has come from learning numerous new computer video editing software, and learning how to properly operate the tiniest camera I think I've ever seen. However, turning (or in my case, clicking) to Scripture during times of difficulty has always inspired me to sense God's presence in my life, enduring through struggle. We are in just as much need of hope and encouragement today as the Christian community addressed in 1 Thessalonians. God's voice continues to speak to us through these ancient texts just as strongly as they did then. In praying with this text, I'm reminded that God's presence can be found in all aspects of our life, including our labors and difficulties. God invites and transforms our work to be faithful and loving responses of thanksgiving. Even though we are all struggling in the places of great unknowing during this time of COVID-19, may we strengthen one another to see our work and labor as expressions of faith and love to God and each other.

My friends, it is true that we are living in a time of great unknowing. However, we *will* endure this incredibly hard time. We will endure because we are a community inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. We will endure because together, we will stand firm in our faith and maintain love for one another in this time of challenge. While we might presently be apart from one another, may our labors apart remind us that together, we are never far from the heart of God. Where do you sense God's presence in this time of great unknowing? Perhaps you are only a click away from finding out.