

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

If someone is described as being different, it usually is not a compliment! Most of us would not like to be thought of as “different!” Therefore, it is a challenge that as Christians, we are to be different. We are called to live by God’s values and standards, which often times is different from that of our culture. We are to seek the common good, not just our own. We have a responsibility for the community. We are to have a special concern for the vulnerable, just as God does. We are not to be served, but to serve others. We are to love others, not hate. We are to welcome people, not exclude. We are to pray for our enemies.

Granted, living by God’s values and standards can be a challenge. The rich young man asked Jesus what he must do to “have eternal life,” there was some discussion going back and forth. Eventually, Jesus told the rich young man to sell all he had, and give the proceeds to the poor. That rich young man “went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” Jesus is not necessarily asking each and every one of us to do the same. It does illustrate that trying to live by the values and standards of God may be a challenge for us.

It was just as difficult a challenge for the Christians of the first century. Thessalonica was one of the more favored cities of the Roman Empire. There were close ties to Rome and, thus, to the standards and values of the Roman Empire. Like today, the values and standards of the Roman Empire could be in conflict with God’s standards and values. The Roman Emperor was given divine status. The Emperor was god. Thus, for Christians to claim Jesus as Lord was a dangerous act! The Roman Empire was run on a system that benefited the rich, and took advantage of the

vulnerable. In his letter, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to be steadfast to God and to resist the peer pressure to return to the Empire's values and standards. There was also sexual license in that culture. Paul admonishes the Thessalonians to live pure lives, exhorts them to purity. He informs them that such a challenge is something to be expected. Paul encourages them to maintain their distinction from the ways of the Empire. We are to be different.

However, Paul did mention a difference that is not a challenge, but encouragement for us. Being different is good. Another theme in this letter was a question about the end times, specifically dealing with the resurrection. Paul is not dealing with the details about the resurrection. He does not answer any questions about what happens at the moment of death or the nature of the resurrection body. His focus is on hope, hope in the resurrection. Because the Thessalonians believed that Christ would return soon, they wondered what would happen to the Christians who died before Christ's return. Paul is addressing their concern for "those who have died." He answers their question by declaring that those who have died before Christ's return will be raised. Thus, Paul encourages them, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." "So that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope!" This too is a part of our identity! Yes, we are different, and one of those differences is that we have hope!

As Christians, we have hope. Audrey West, shares a story about her mother-in-law's last week of her life. She had been fine only a week before. Sure, life at age 89 moved at a slower pace, but her mother-in-law still managed to work the daily

crossword in ink and share lunch with friends. The text messages they received one morning were entirely unexpected. Mama's at the hospital...Doctor says she's dying...Get here as soon as you can." When tests indicated a massive, systemic infection, including the beginning of organ failure, she did not hesitate in her instructions to the doctors. There would be no heroic measures. They pressed her to be sure she understood the implications of her choice. Yes, she said. I'm dying. It's okay. As her children and their families gathered at her bedside, for as long as she still had the strength, her words expressed unwavering love for them. She was sorry to leave, she said, but she was eager to be reunited with her husband and to be, finally, in the nearer presence of Jesus.

We may wish we have that same kind of strong faith. As Anne Lamott, a Christian author says, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty." She adds, "I remembered something Father Tom had told me--that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns." As Paul Tillich, a well-known and respected theologian says, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." We need to stop treating doubt as if it is the enemy of faith. Questions need to be asked by us to make faith our own. Doubt is not deadly to faith. When a father brought his epileptic child to Jesus to be healed, Jesus responded, "All things can be done for the one who believes," the father responded, "I believe; help my unbelief." The child was healed. Doubt is a part of faith. Doubt is a part of unbelief. We can have our hope and our doubts, even about the resurrection.

We live in the shadow of death. We cannot escape death. As one pastor is fond of saying, the mortality rate for human beings is hovering around 100 percent. We grieve, but not as others do, for we are the people of hope. That does not mean that as Christians we do not grieve. We do grieve. Jesus grieved. When Jesus went to see Mary and Martha at the death of their brother Lazarus, we read that Jesus wept when he arrived at their home. Surely, Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, yet he too wept, he too grieved. Grief is a normal, natural, human response to any kind of loss. However, as Christians, we grieve with hope.

Brian Erickson shares a story about Nancy and her son Tripp, who suffered from cystic fibrosis. As Tripp lay in the hospital in his final days, Nancy asked him if she could read Scripture to him. She wasn't sure what to read him, and he could sense that, so he told her to turn to page 1649. The numbers 16 and 49 were two of his favorites, since Joe Montana was number 16 and he played for the 49ers. She flipped open her Bible, but it ended on page 1334. There was no page 1649, because the New Testament started over with page 1. She was about to tell Tripp to try again, when she did the math in her head and realized that page 315 of the New Testament would have been page 1649, so she turned there. There she found these words, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." Tripp turned to his mother, his CO₂ level rising and his lungs failing, and he said, "Mommy, those are the sweetest verses."

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever. Amen.