

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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Strengthened in Holiness

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 • First Sunday in Advent

Christians enjoy getting together. Every Sunday people gather to worship. It's no wonder that Paul prays that God would guide him back to Thessalonika. In the narthex or fellowship hall you find groups of people talking and hugging, laughing and occasionally even crying. There we greet old friends. We swap stories about what's going on in our lives. We catch up on what's happened since we last saw each other. Simply put, we enjoy getting together with family and friends.

Here in worship we repeat that same scenario in a conversation with our God. We begin with a greeting as we're called to worship. Then we confess our sin before God and each other, which is like swapping stories about what we did or didn't do since we last met together. We Hear of God's forgiveness, that our sin has not broken our relationship after all; and we sing a joyful refrain. Then we listen to God's side of the conversation, where we learn from Scripture and get instructions for right living. In many ways our worship is like a family reunion, God's family reunion. We even gather around a table to celebrate with a meal.

And when we're not together, we're praying for each other until we can get together again. Every holiday includes prayers for travelers' safety. When we're apart from each other we can hardly wait for the phone to ring telling us of a call that bridges the gap. With our computer and modem, one of the first things we do every morning is check for email and read the papers. Every email, every letter, every phone call, every note includes a wish that we will see each other again soon. When we're not together, we're praying for God to bring us together. Indeed, our prayers are one additional bit of togetherness.

And when we pray, we place our desires under God's will. When we pray, we're expressing our deepest longings to God, but we're also entrusting those desires to God. Isn't that what Jesus meant when he taught us to pray "Thy will be done?" When we pray, we're asking God not merely to answer our prayers in accord with our wishes, but to answer them in a way that is in accord with God's will. Sure, sometimes we toss our prayers off as if they were little more than phone-in orders to the nearest delivery service. But we know better. We're not praying to a cosmic answering service. We're praying to the God of justice and mercy whose ways are not our ways. We're praying to the one who promises to transform our lives and the lives of every person by the power of his love.

So even when our prayers are answered immediately, the answer often catches us by surprise. Rarely is the answer to our prayers exactly what we had in mind from the start. At the presidential inauguration in 1988, after a long, hard campaign, the first President Bush looked quite somber before his swearing-in. One commentator quipped: "George Bush looks like a man who got what he prayed for." Indeed, all of us who get what we pray for often realize it wasn't exactly what we had in mind. When we pray, we consciously yield ourselves to the will of another. Even when our prayers are answered immediately, there's often an interesting twist. God's ways are not our ways. God's will is not our will. When we pray we choose to trust God. We subordinate our will to God's.

And just what is God's will for us? What does God desire of us? Justice? Yes. Righteousness? Certainly. Most of all, God desires that we love God and each other. Remember Jesus' great commandment? Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. That's God's will for us. Indeed, if we

do that, if we seriously love God and each other, justice and righteousness will follow. We don't know how that will play out in the future. We can't say whether we'll live through the next year or not. We don't know what God's will holds for us tomorrow. Not the specifics anyway. But we do know this: God's will is that we love God and each other. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, God has worked to provide companionship among people. It is not good, says the voice of God in Genesis, for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable helper for him. Then God created the animals for our companions. And when God observed that animals were not suitable companions, God created the woman. Loving human companionship was God's will for us from the beginning.

To Abraham and Sarah, God said simply: I will make you a great nation. But God's promise to Abraham and Sarah went beyond that. It ends with this marvelous statement: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." All the families of the earth! God's will is not only that we love each other, God intends our love for each other to spill over into the entire world. That, too, ought to be quite clear from Scripture. When Jesus was born it wasn't only Jewish shepherds that gathered round his crib. Magi from the east, meaning Gentiles from afar, immigrants from the corners of the earth if you please, gathered to make offering to him.

When he began his ministry, Jesus touched lepers, outcasts forbidden to touch anyone — talk about a portrait of isolation and loneliness! Jesus brought them out of their prison and into the hope of companionship, fresh human contact. He was specifically criticized for eating with sinners, with ordinary folk like us, and even less ordinary folk like prostitutes and even thieves. All the families of the earth are included in God's plan. The vision of the end in the Revelation to St. John, is of all people together in one city: "See," says the angel, "the home of God is among humans."

So set the stage for the grandest reunion of all. Advent is a time for preparations. We are not only preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Lord. We also anticipate his return to judge the earth. Thus we are preparing to welcome him back at the end of time. What was that the prophet Isaiah said? "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." It's time to get ready. Clean up the house. We don't want any dust around. We don't want any trash to mar the scene. We want this place to look ship-shape.

Indeed, we want ourselves to be in ship-shape. It's time to clean up our lives. Sand the rough edges. Tone up the flabby muscles. Sharpen up our image. And pray. Yes, pray. Pray that God will speed the dawn of that day. Pray that God will guard the journey of all that are coming. Pray for their safe-travel, all those whom God has invited to the party. Pray that we may provide a warm welcome, a welcome worthy of a world-class event. There's lots of work to be done.

We Christians love a party. That's what we're getting ready for — a grand reunion banquet around our Lord's table. Meanwhile, pray that our love will increase, not only for each other, but for all the people God has invited to the party. Pray that our hearts may be strengthened in holiness, that we may be cleansed and ready to come to the ball. Pray that God's will may soon be done, that the hungry will be fed, the homeless housed, the sick healed, and the migrant welcome. That's where we're headed you know. That's God's will for all of us. And when that day comes, the whole world will glorify God, accepting Christ's invitation to peace with God and with each other. We Christians love being together. Invite your friends to join us. We're going to have a ball.