**“It Wasn’t Just Words”**

September 15, 2019 Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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Introduction to Scripture

 Paul the Apostle founded churches throughout what we now today as Turkey and Greece, and as he moved on he would keep in touch with other churches by mail, sending letters in response to questions those churches had for him about issues that had come up. Today’s reading is from the first letter of Paul we still have, written about 52 CE, to a church he had founded in the Greek city of Thessalonica.

 As you listen, put yourself in the shoes of that gathered congregation in Thessalonica. Imagine the excitement in the room when it is announced that a letter has arrived from the founder of their church; try to picture what it would have been like to hear his words to them for the first time, read aloud for all to hear.

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 Many of us here today are of a pre-digital age, a time long before instant messaging and texting and e-mails, a bygone era when people wrote one another letters. Whether they were long-hand or typed, receiving a letter was a big deal. It meant that the letter writer had taken the time to sit down at their desk, or at the kitchen table, pull out a card or a piece of stationary and put thoughts down in black and white, thoughts that were meant for you. The letter was not just words, it was more than that, it was a window into the mind of the sender, a signal that what they had to say was important, a sign that you mattered. And more than that, it brought the writer into your presence, you could almost hear the words, and remember what they looked like.

 My grandfather treasured letters, so much so that he would take them, after they had been read and re-read, and place them in the volumes that lined his vast bookshelves. He loved to read, and loved to re-read his books, and so when he pulled a favorite volume off the shelf, he would find a letter from years before between its pages. And he would be transported back in time, and find himself with an old friend, and read about what was going on it their life years earlier.

 You know that it wasn’t “just words.” When you were stationed overseas during the war and mail call came and there was a letter for you, you held in your hands a piece of home. When you were off in college, away from home for the first time, that letter from mom was a 7 ½’’ by 11” parchment of love.

 And so it was for that gathered church in Thessalonica.

 It wasn’t just words. Paul’s letters were understood by those who received him, and by the church down the centuries, as not just words, but as conveyors of the Gospel, clues to the Good News of Jesus Christ being lived out in new communities of faith struggling to make it real in their time and place.

 And here, in his first letter, Paul reminds a church he had founded that the Good News of Jesus Christ was in and of itself not just words. “When the Message was preached to you, it wasn’t just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions.”

 It wasn’t just words, Paul tells the Thessalonians. The change produced by the Gospel in their lives is visible for the world to see. The inner change is reflected in outward behavior. Paul writes, “You don’t even have to say anything anymore – *you’re* the message!”

 As St. Francis of Assisi told his friars as he sent them off to distant cities and towns, “Preach the Gospel at all times – and if necessary, use words.”

 That lived example, Paul tells us, is not our doing. As Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much, but also has put his hand on you for something special.” We often don’t think of the Gospel like that, we think it is God’s word to us, God’s words for us, words that we are to listen to, digest, think upon. But Paul says it is more than that, more than just words – it is as if God has laid God’s hand on your shoulder, empowering you, commissioning you, for something special. You are transformed, and now can do far more than you ever imagined was possible. Call it grace, amazing grace.

 And so it was in Thessalonica. So much so that people come up to Paul, Timothy and Silas and tell them what they have heard about that church up in Thessalonica, how it is so welcoming and inclusive, how its members lived dramatically changed lives, turning away from the worship of dead idols to the living and true God.

 And so it is in West Barnstable. No one would say that we are a perfect church, and God knows that we know that the road is long and the journey is hard, and yet today I would like to put on a little bit of Paul the Apostle and tell you the word is getting around, and people are looking up to you, and folk from across the Cape and the state and the national setting of the UCC are taking notice of what this 403 year-old congregation is doing.

People are saying – and they have said this for a long time now – that our Rooster Crows Fair is the best church fair on the Cape, not just because of the savory lobster rolls and the beautiful hand-made crafts and the variety of Silent Auction items, but because everyone is so friendly and welcoming.

People are talking about our caring ministries, about how we rally around each other when someone is ill, about our lay caregiver ministry, about our new support group for caregivers.

The word is out across the UCC, at the state and even national level, about our innovative, growing Saturday contemporary service, about how while church schools are drying up everywhere, ours is expanding.

Young families are talking up our caring, professional, excellently run and staffed Family School, so much so that it is full to capacity and with a waiting list.

People come to the Outreach summer yard sale and go away raving about how kind everyone is, about how generous we are because we are such kind hagglers, about how we go the extra mile, as exemplified by Bruce Benwood loading a huge piece of exercise equipment into his pickup to deliver to a West Barnstable resident.

Five evenings a week Jenkins Hall is packed to the gills with folk here for the AA meeting, thankful that we are willing to host what for many is a lifeline to new life.

The church’s sister organization here on this hill in West Barnstable, the 1717 Meetinghouse Foundations, invites in the community for a variety of musical performances, lectures and debates, poetry readings and historic reenactments.

The word is getting out, about how this gathered fellowship of Jesus Christ is both of and for the community.

It is true for this church community, and it is true for its members, as well. You have known, in your life, that the Holy Spirit has indeed put steel in your convictions. That when it seemed that you were alone, you felt a presence buoying you up, equipping you for the challenges life was dishing out. That when you felt you had come to the rope and were ready to give into that addiction, you found the strength to say no. That when a new opportunity for service rose up and you feared you had nothing left to give, you found that willingness to say yes and found out you were so glad you did.

 That enlivening presence, that empowering spirit, that unexpected strengthening of will, all more than just words. Something happened in you, something happened in this body of Christ. Its grace, amazing grace, how sweet the sound. Amen.