

**“Thanks to God for All of You”**

**1 Thessalonians 1.1–5**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 16 October 2005**

Those are the earliest words of the New Testament. Paul wrote them in the early 50s, roughly 20 years after Jesus died. And while he intended his letters to be read in public, he certainly never thought they would be considered scripture; that happened because of the reverence with which the early Christian communities viewed them. Paul founded and nurtured communities in the Greece, Turkey, and Italy, which is a pretty amazing feat for someone without wealth, power, or frequent flyer miles.

Paul writes in his letter, “We always give thanks to God for all of you.” Too often clergyfolks forget to do that: to thank God for the people with whom they minister. And I do give thanks to God for you at Plymouth. You’ve given me a tremendous opportunity during the past three years to help lead you in new directions. I’ve a member of six UCC congregations, and you are the most vital. We are a progressive, well educated congregation that isn’t afraid to venture in directions that some might call heretical and others just plain crazy. And we do that in response to our faith.

So, on this New Member Sunday, what does it mean to **you** to be part of this community of faith? Think about that for a moment. *What does it mean to you to be part of this community of faith?* [pause] Do you feel lukewarm...as if you could just as well be at another church in town? No? What about Plymouth stirs your passion? Does Plymouth mean being a beacon of progressive Protestantism with a unique message about the good news of the kingdom of God? Does it mean helping to give a faith grounding to our young people? Does it mean that you have a way to approach the sacred with both head and heart? Does it mean receiving care from one of our Calling Ministers or our clergy? I’ll bet it means something just a bit different to each of us.

Each of us who are members enters a covenant with this church – the same covenant our new members [will enter] entered into this morning:

In the presence of God and these witnesses, I give myself unreservedly to God's service and take this to be my church. Ever mindful of the welfare of my brother and sister members, I promise to walk with them in faithfulness and Christian love. I promise, so far as I am able, to attend the services of this church, observe its sacraments, support its benevolences and endeavor to make it a fruitful body of Christian people.

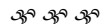
When you look at it carefully, it’s a pretty tall order. Each of us has given ourselves *without reservation* to the service of God. *Without reservation*. Those are strong words. I feel fairly certain that none of us does it all the time. There are times when I think about the cost to myself and hold back, *before* I think about the benefits for God’s world. (...that would be a reservation.)

I know this will surprise you, but I have observed moments when folks in our congregation don’t demonstrate the Christian love that we share, and times when we’re less mindful about other members than we are about ourselves. But far more frequently, I see tangible acts of caring and compassion.

Roughly 60 percent of our members will pass through our doors this morning. (That’s actually considered strong attendance in a mainline church.) Some of us are away, some of us are ill or immobile. Rather than laying a guilt trip on anyone, I would rather encourage you to come because you might just have an encounter with the sacred. And

when you aren't here, we aren't complete as a family of faith; every person is an essential part in this community of faith.

In terms of benevolences, this year 212 households among our 500+ members pledged to keep Plymouth going and growing, committing nearly \$400,000 our ministry and mission. Somebody asked me recently why it's important to pledge. Here are two reasons: first, it's important spiritually that each of us makes a commitment to return thanks to God through our giving to the church. Second, it's the only way our budget and finance committee can estimate what next year's income will be and then draw up a budget for our various ministries and missions. Plymouth is also a volunteer-driven church, where each of us gives time as well as money.



So, if Paul were to write a letter from afar to us at Plymouth, what do you think he'd write? Would he complement us on our great education programs? What might he say about our commitment to initiate a capital campaign to continue building up our community? Would he find room for critique?

What does it mean to be faithful in our context? When do we, like the early Christians in Thessalonica, need to go against the current of our culture...even when our friends and family think we're nuts? Some of us who have gone to divinity school made the closest folks to us wonder, but what have you done lately *because of your faith* that makes people wonder if you're a bit crazy? I remember someone posing a question: If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

What would it take to make you do something that others thought odd, because your faith called you to do it? Would people think you were a bit fanatical if you took time out to pray six times a day, as Muslims do? Does your personal financial advisor think you're off balance for giving so much money away? Would your parents think you were a bit crazy standing out on the corner of College and Mulberry protesting the war in Iraq?

Well, I don't know what Paul would write to us, but here is a selection from my epistle to Plymouth:

Hal, a servant of God, to the United Church in Fort Collins, in God's name and in Christ and the Holy Spirit: grace to you and peace.

We, most of us, live affluently, and we should be always mindful of those who are not. And we should focus our efforts on addressing the *root causes* at the heart of systemic problems: poverty, racism, and inadequate education, to name a few.

We need to learn to see and appreciate the bounty God has provided and avoid a scarcity mentality (as though we never seem to have enough). God has provided us with "more than we could ask or imagine" on this planet. And we need to respond with deep stewardship of the environment, as well as responding to God with thanksgiving and countercultural generosity.

We need to step back more frequently to find our quiet center and to find the richness of our faith. We need to be more intentional about being attentive to our prayer lives. (You may not even know you have such a thing as a prayer life.)

We need to listen carefully for the whisperings of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

I give thanks to God for all of you:

You take stands for social justice – stands that are grounded in your Christian faith.

You bring your brain to church on Sunday morning.

You openly talk about "difficult" issues that most churches scrupulously avoid.

You welcome visitors and new members.

You give a damn about the world around you.

You are a church community that is dynamic, not static; that is of the movement, not the establishment.

And you've decided to take a risk on a capital campaign and step forward in faith.  
Beloved, pray for us – the clergy and laity who lead this church.  
The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.  
I give thanks to God for you, and I'll be praying for you.

To close, I'd like to share with a short story with you that you might have heard before. It's about community and living with others in our midst. It was written by Francis Dorff, the priest with whom Sharon and I were on retreat last week, and it's called "The Rabbi's Gift."

There was a famous monastery, which had fallen on very hard times. Formerly its many buildings were filled with young monks and the church resounded with the chant. But now it was deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. A handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters and praised their God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared the word would be passed from monk to monk: "The rabbi walks in the woods." "The rabbi walks in the woods." And, for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and to open his heart to him. So, after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome. It was as though he had been waiting there for some time. The two embraced like long-lost brothers. Then they stepped back and just stood there, smiling at one another with smiles their faces could hardly contain.

After a while the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter. In the middle of the room was a wooden table with the Scriptures open on it. They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the Word. Then the rabbi began to cry. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and began to cry, too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their sobs and wetting the Word with their tears.

After the tears had ceased to flow, and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head. "You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts," he said. "You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must say it aloud again."

The rabbi gazed at the abbot and said, "The Messiah is among you."

For a while, all was silent. Then the rabbi said, "Now you can go home." The abbot left without a word and without ever looking back.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room. He told them he had received a teaching from "the rabbi who walks in the woods" and that his teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at each of his brothers and said, "The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah."

The monks were startled by this teaching. "What could it mean?" they asked themselves. "Is Brother John the Messiah? Or Father Matthew? Or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah? What could this mean?" They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a very special reverence. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human quality about them now which was

hard to describe, but easy to notice. They lived with one another as men who had finally *found* something. But they prayed the Scriptures together as men who were always *looking* for something. Occasional visitors found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Before long, people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks and young men were asking, once again, to live with the monks for a lifetime.

In those days, the rabbi no longer waked in the woods. His hut had fallen into ruins. But, somehow or other, the old monks who had taken his teaching to heart still felt sustained by his prayerful presence. They still felt sustained by his prayerful presence...<sup>1</sup>

As the monks did, so may we take the rabbi's teaching to heart and learn to see the messiah in each other. And our community will continue to grow in numbers and in the Spirit.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Rabbi's Gift," Francis Dorff, O. Praem., originally published in *The New Catholic World*.