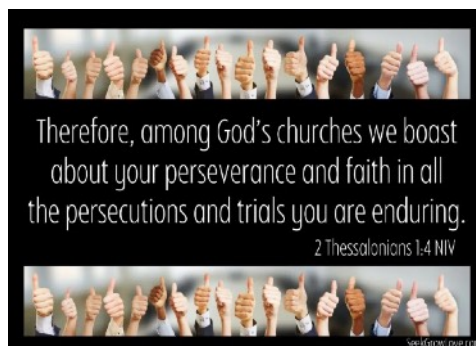


**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ**  
**Sunday, October 30, 2022**  
**Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost**  
**The Rev Dr Scott Couper**  
**“Acts Prompted by Faith Despite Trials”**  
**Third of four in a sermon series entitled**  
**“From Bread to Cup to Faith and Giving”**  
**Christian Scripture: II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12**



All of us have faced trials in our lives. Some of us have lost an important job. After eighteen years of service, I remember being devastated when Global Ministries informed me that if my children were to remain in their schools and my wife in her job, that I would have to continue working for three years *without a salary*. Some of us have experienced divorce and we suffered while being unable to make the relationship work. Some of us have been troubled with illnesses or injuries that debilitated us in some way. Some of us are recovering from crime. Many of us cannot pay the bills at the end of the month (especially in this time of high inflation). Sadly, no one escapes, as Paul termed them, ‘tribulations’ and ‘afflictions’ – even ‘persecutions’.

Churches are no different than people. The Christians in Thessalonica during the first century were similar to many of us. They suffered failings. Low self-esteem wounded them. They second-guessed themselves. They doubted a positive future could be possible. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church to affirm them (I Thessalonians). In his second follow-up letter in Paul's name (II Thessalonians), the author praised their faithfulness despite "the persecutions and trials" that they faced.

The Thessalonians were a relatively small band of believers in the way of Jesus Christ. They held together tightly while surrounded by a vast sea of people and nations of other faiths. Empires rose and fell following battles while the 'dogs of war' trampled innocent populations. Many during the first century were suspicious of Christians because what they did not understand, they feared or ridiculed. When the writer of the second letter to the Thessalonians encouraged them, persecutions of Christians were just beginning to foment.<sup>1</sup> Distances were vast between other churches. And leaders were few and far between; support was sparse. Paul, the standard-bearer for the Gentile believers, took months and even years to visit the churches he planted. The Thessalonians often felt alone, insecure, bewildered, unsure, and vulnerable. They questioned that which they

---

<sup>1</sup> Leander Keck, "The Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians" in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles Laymon, (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1989), 877.

had previously been taught and even at times doubted the substance of their faith.

Let us fast-forward to the twenty-first century, to our context. A little bit of research reveals that Vermont and Maine are tied for the second most secular states in our country (after Massachusetts and New Hampshire who are tied for first).<sup>2</sup> Our region is the most difficult in the country to maintain a faith community. Some additional research reveals that mainline denominations, of which the United Church of Christ (UCC) is one, are showing drops of 15 percent, 25 percent, and even 40 percent over the span of the last decade.<sup>3</sup> The UCC lost 1.135 million members, more than half its membership, in under fifty years - from 1970 to 2018! At this loss is not simply a phenomenon of mainline churches, so-called 'evangelical' churches are declining as well.

Our own local church reflects, and perhaps even exceeds, these national trends. For example, between 2010 and 2018, before I became the minister, Centre Church lost 234 members. In almost ten years prior to my coming to Centre, 2/3rds of our membership departed! The news about our church's context

---

<sup>2</sup> "Most Religious States 2020", <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/most-religious-states>, accessed October 28, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan P. Burge, "Mainline Protestants Are Still Declining, But That's Not Good News for Evangelicals", *Christianity Today*, July 13, 2021. Found at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/july/mainline-protestant-evangelical-decline-survey-us-nones.html>, accessed October 28, 2022.

is as sobering to the treasurer as it is to the minister. According to the *New York Times*, between 1990 and 2015 the share of overall donations in the USA going to faith-based institutions dropped 50%.<sup>4</sup> The percentage of people who tithed is down to less than 5%. Since the year 2000, the number of people who seldom attend church or rarely attend has risen from 40% to 54%.<sup>5</sup> With fewer people going to church and fewer people donating, it is more difficult than ever before to encourage people to give to faith communities.

With this brief review of mainline Christianity and our own local church's context, I am sure many of you can relate to the faithful in Thessalonica, who the Apostle Paul indicated had endured many trials and afflictions. Like the early Christian church, we struggle with numbers. We battle finances. Instead of the Roman Empire, we are undermined by a very benign, but equally overwhelming, secularism. For a perspective on how our church members struggle with difficulties, ask Nan Mann who is 'hidden' in the catacombs of Christian Education, desperately maintaining a program for children. Fighting in the Colosseum is Bonnie Girvan who against all odds is increasing our church's digital and physical footprint with the 'Green at Centre' initiative. Ask Marion Daley in the far

---

<sup>4</sup> Alina Tugend, "Donations to Religious Institutions Fall as Values Change", *New York Times*, November 3, 2016. Found at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/giving/donations-to-religious-institutions-fall-as-values-change.html>, accessed October 29, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> "Church Tithing Is Suffering: Creating a Tithing Program Is Harder Now Than It Has Ever Been Before", Church Tithing Institute, 2021. Found at: <https://www.churchtithing.org/>, accessed October 29, 2022.

outreaches of Putney about the trials involved in leading Member Care having lost her dear and precious husband and recovering heroically from injuries. Ask Lynn Herzog and Sue Rowell of the burdens they have carried. Like Lydia and Priscilla, two strong women leaders of the early Christian church, Lynn and Sue have steered our ecclesiastical ship through the turbulent COVID waters and led us now into a safe harbor.<sup>6</sup> Ask Robert Pu and April Harkness about the strain of, for approaching two years now, organizing, encouraging, and mapping out a vision for our church. They remind me of the early church leaders Peter and Phoebe. Thank goodness for Dart Everett and Roger Miller, and Peter and Marion Abell, who organized the fixing of our roof and replacement of our fuel tanks. Thank Joy and Kate for serving us as deacons today. Ask any of our faithful members how they have for years endured various difficulties, trials, and afflictions to ensure that our church operates at full capacity despite having diminished human and financial resources.

Today as we read the scriptures and continue discerning to what extent are we able and willing to invest in our beloved Centre Church, I am filled with two sentiments. These two sentiments are the same that the apostle Paul expressed to

---

<sup>6</sup> Tendai Kashiri, "Six Powerful Women in the Bible", *The Collector*, April 7, 2022. Found at: <https://www.thecollector.com/powerful-women-in-christianity-history/>, accessed October 31, 2022.

the church in Thessalonica so long ago: thanksgiving and affirmation.<sup>7</sup> In verse three of the opening chapter Paul gushed, “We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, as is fitting”. This stewardship season, I also am thankful for how relevant, faithful, and dedicated this church has been to the community and to the world these past years despite all the afflictions that troubled us (COVID).

Like Paul, I marvel at your faith that is expressed in love for Centre Church. Paul glowed when he wrote, “we ourselves boast of you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and **faith**” (1:4). Like Paul for the church in Thessalonica, I “pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling [...] and the work of **faith** with power” (1:11).

Like Paul, I have witnessed the trials and afflictions this church has faced. Yet, all of you have remained **faithful**. History tells the story of how twelve disciples formed a community in about 35AD. That community spread and established churches by 50AD. By the second century, those churches ventured out to the farthest parts of the then known world. In the third century, instead of the church submitting to the empire, the empire submitted to the faith through Constantine. Our Christian faith is over 2,000 years old. When we appropriately include our Hebrew roots, the faith dates back over 5,500 years! Friends, never

---

<sup>7</sup> “II Thessalonians: Text, Exegesis, and Exposition” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume 11, (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1993), 317.

did Abraham, never did Moses, never did Jeremiah, never did Jesus, never did Paul, never did the church in Thessalonica move forward while having all the questions answered nor did they move forward certain of their success. Like all of us who experience trials, difficulties, and afflictions in our lives, we nonetheless move forward the best we can, in **faith**. If we stumble, we move forward. If we are wounded, we move forward. If we doubt our abilities, we move forward. If we are unsure of what is to come, we move forward. The realization that we at Centre proclaim this stewardship season is: 'To pledge our giving in the coming year is an act of **faith** despite trials'. We have *faith* that the Holy Spirit will do the rest and our church will continue to be an instrument of God's will and work in the world.

This is the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".