

“Living Messages”
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Last week, in the first part of this series on community, I spoke about the early church: how they experienced great joy which stemmed from the shared conviction that they’d been freed from fear, from shame, and from self-centeredness. As I prepared this second installment in the series, a variety of situations surfaced as possible illustrations about community. I thought about the Red Sox and their ability to work as a team and to overcome great obstacles, but decided, why cause added pain for all you Rays and Yankees and Dodgers fans? Of course, there is the political realm as well, but given the bombardment of ads and mailings and so on, I figured we could all use a little break from such illustrations.

As I continued to consider this theme of community, with such questions as “does community matter?” and, “how do we build on and strengthen our sense of community?,” two differing elements started to wrestle in my mind. One was this rich heritage from the early church and all that it has to teach us. The other was what has slowly been unfolding in the courthouse in Hillsville, Virginia over the past few months. I realized that the two were coming together. Isa’s family had invited me to write a letter to the driver of the car that hit Isa, Jorge, and Coleen, to be delivered this Tuesday at the court hearing along with their own letters. And so what follows is a draft of my letter.

“Mr. Hicinbothem,

As you begin to serve your time in prison I feel compelled to share my thoughts with you.

Family members will no doubt share in their letters many things about Isa, Jorge and Coleen – so many reasons that these were special, beloved, wonderful human beings. They will likely share their pain as well. They are a good, loving family, and the devastation that began last March 22nd has been profound, defying imagination and description. I have been told you now express remorse for your actions and I frankly hope that is true. The choices you made which resulted in the wreck that day took from us very dear friends, cherished ones who had brought boundless laughter, music, generosity, passion and love to the lives of countless people. I hope you now feel great, deep remorse. But my purpose in writing is not to yell or scold or punish, as much as I might like to.

No, my purpose is to extend to you an invitation. By the close of this letter, that invitation will be more clear. But first, I want to tell you a little about the congregation where I serve as pastor, the congregation that had welcomed Isa and Jorge and had quickly come to love them. The congregation where Isa and Jorge said they had finally found a home after years of feeling a bit like wanderers in the wilderness.

To understand where our strength lies as a church, to understand the Source that transforms and heals us and is helping us get through our loss, it helps to look back to much earlier times. Long, long ago, there was a little congregation of believers. They came from all walks of life, different faiths, different races and backgrounds and stages. But together, they found a sense

of belonging, found enough courage to calm their fears, the strength to leave behind false idols and a way of life that distracted and drained them, and great joy in being together. Their way of being together, of caring for each other and the lost and forgotten ones, their willingness to break bread with anyone regardless of social status or reputation, caused a stir in their region. Some in the wider community even complained to government officials that “those people who’ve been turning the world upside down have come here also.” But even though some saw this little church as different, strange, wrong, this Thessalonian church was lifted up by the apostle Paul for their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.” They were living messages of God’s power to change lives, to heal and make whole. They knew God didn’t give up on anyone.

We are not a perfect church, Mr. Hicinbothem, and there are no perfect people here. But like that early church of long ago, we work pretty hard to live our faith, to love one another, to be steadfast in hope. And as imperfect as we are, we are living messages. Not of holiness or great wisdom or super-charged Christian faith. We are living messages of what grace looks like, of forgiveness that is offered and forgiveness received, of love that feels its wounds deeply yet goes on trusting that love in the only way that matters. We are a people who know the healing that comes through the most broken and hurting places. And we have come to know – in utter astonishment – that there is no person, no hurt and broken place, no past or present or future that lies outside the realm of God’s love and grace. No one – not you, not me, not whoever in your past may have wounded you – no one can wander so far that God cannot reach. God gives up on no one.

And so my invitation. Let this tragedy, let the families, let this faith community be for you a living message: that God is yet at work in your life. God is at work in the deepest parts of your soul, in the darkest corners of your being, in the seed of goodness God planted in you long ago.

As you lie awake at night, as the quiet weighs in upon you, I invite – no I implore you, to open your life to God’s transforming power.

As we continue to do the hard work of trying to forgive you, of releasing our anger, we will continue to pray for you, that you will discover new life in Christ, the life you were meant to live, the reason for which God put you on this earth. We pray that you too may find that labor of love that God will surface in your heart, so that you will help bring God’s greater good out of the pain. This may not be easy, but it will fill your life with new joy, new purpose, and new peace.

God be with you. God already is. Our lives are forever intertwined, Mr. Hicinbothem. In the days and years to come, may that connection become a source of God’s healing and grace for all.”

Note: A briefer version of this letter was delivered to Gary Hicinbothem at the hearing in the Carroll County Courthouse on Tuesday, October 21, 2008, with letters from Isa’s brother and three sisters, along with a Bible from the family. He is now serving an 18 month sentence.

This sermon was preached by the Rev. Julie Peebles on Sunday, October 19, 2008
Congregational United Church of Christ