

## **The Art of Leaving Well**

### **Thessalonians 2:17-3:13**

Reverend Theresa Latini, Ph.D.

In his best-selling book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam refers to American life as a nomadic existence.<sup>1</sup> Others have called our time as one of “homelessness,”<sup>2</sup> and a time in which “friendship is tethered to loss.”<sup>3</sup> “Nearly one in five of us move each year, and having done so, are likely to pick up and move again. More than two in five of us expect to move in the next five years.”<sup>4</sup> We have shorter tenure at our jobs and more temporary jobs than ever before.<sup>5</sup> While we might expect the church to be a center of stability and permanence, it too experiences perpetual transition. According to the Barna Group, pastors, on average, leave a congregation after 4-5 years of service.<sup>6</sup> This late modern phenomenon in the West raises many critical questions, one of which is, How do ministers of the Gospel leave well? How does a pastor or seminary president or professor leave well?

While this question can hardly be answered fully in one short homily, we can gain insights by reflecting on scripture through the lens of transition and conversely by reflecting on

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 204.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Berger, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Tall, “Dwelling: Making Peace with Space and Place” in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, eds. William Vitek, Wes Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 107.

<sup>4</sup> Putnam, 204.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>6</sup> The Barna Group, [www.barnagroup.org](http://www.barnagroup.org); accessed November 29, 2007.

pastoral transition through the lens of scripture.<sup>7</sup> Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonian church is particularly illuminating in this regard, as it depicts the relationship between pastor and congregation as one of mutual love, intimacy and integrity – a love, intimacy and integrity that have their origin and *telos* in the love of God.

For over half of this letter, Paul celebrates and mourns his connection with the Thessalonians. He, Silas and Timothy have left this fledgling group of believers. Yet this leaving, like all leaving, is not a one-time event. Leaving is a process, an unfolding event in their lives and in the life of the Thessalonian church. In this letter, Paul continues the process of leaving, and I would argue, leaving well.

Leaving well is not akin to cutting-off. Much of today's prevailing wisdom admonishes pastors to leave once and for all, even to sever ties with former parishioners. Yet this kind of drastic disconnect actually keeps the congregation and pastor bound to each other rather than enabling both of them to connect in new ways over time. Neither party grows but remains stuck in the past. Edwin Friedman, author of *Generation to Generation*, writes that "...continuing to relate to members of a former congregation in a detriangling manner *after* one has taken a new post can further facilitate the separation."<sup>8</sup> The art of leaving is not akin to cutting-off.

The art of leaving well also accepts ambiguity and mystery. Scripture gives little concrete detail regarding the circumstances of Paul's, Silas' and Timothy's departure. Paul had received a very clear vision to go to Macedonia, the capital of which is Thessalonica. He saw a man beckoning him to come. But there is no mention of a corollary vision calling him to leave.

---

<sup>7</sup> Craig Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition* (VA: The Alban Institute, 2005), 21-39.

<sup>8</sup> Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press), 260.

Scripture does not explain God's role in their departure either. Had God called them to another place? Had God allowed persecution to drive them onto their next task? Did they leave with certainty or perplexity in their hearts? The answers to these questions remain a mystery. We are cautioned against using definitive pronouncements about God's will to gloss over our grief and anxiety in the midst of transitions. Even if our leaving creates crises of understanding, if others get "lost in a spiraling stream of consciousness in which one unanswered question leads to another" (13), then we are called to be with them in it, to continue our ministry of presence in their midst. Leaving well acknowledges ambiguity and mystery.

Leaving well entails authentic lament. Paul neither planned nor wanted to leave to the church at Thessalonica when he did. "We were made orphans," he writes. He is bereft, like a child who has lost those who have given him life and then nurtured that life. His separation from them is like a death. His unfulfilled longing to fellowship face-to-face with them seems unbearable; he feels anguish. And he is not ashamed to mourn publicly and passionately.

Paul's grief flows from his love for the Thessalonian congregation, a love that he celebrates in this letter. Tender affection flows from the fount of his pen. Commentators throughout church history have called this epistle a love letter. For in no other letter does Paul express a prayer-wish for reunion with a congregation. In no other letter, does he spend so much time recalling the life-giving connection he experienced with a congregation. In no other letter, does he write that he shared not only the Gospel but also his very heart and soul with a congregation. He had opened his life to the Thessalonians; and they had opened theirs to him. Paul Silas Timothy share their very selves, or in the Greek, their very souls, with the Thessalonians. Their hearts are knit together. They belong to one another.

Paul takes risks in this expression of affection for the Thessalonians. His boldness challenges cultural norms when he compares himself to a wet-nurse in chapter 2 verse 7. Wet-nurses were common in the Graeco-Roman world among all social classes. They were beloved and honored by men and women alike. But for a man to express his tender desire for others by comparing himself to a breast-feeding woman was unheard of (as it remains today!). The art of leaving well mourns and celebrates in public and with passion.

Leaving well ultimately calls us to turn our gaze toward the Triune God from whom all love flows. Life-giving communion between a pastor and her congregation, a professor and his colleagues and students, is a gift from God. By allowing ourselves to mourn, we ironically open ourselves to overflowing gladness and gratitude. We experience, if but for a moment, the reality of *koinonia*, our union and communion with Christ, and through Christ, our union and communion with God and with each other. This communion of saints, my friends, knows no bounds; it crosses all barriers of time and place. When we leave we know that ultimately we are not separated but joined together for eternity. We leave anticipating the day when this union and communion will be consummated at a great feast of celebration.

As we prepare our hearts to come to this table, we anticipate that heavenly banquet. We lament that we will be separated from each other, because in a relatively short time, we have allowed our lives to be woven together in service, in study, in worship, in laughter. We have been nourished by mutual support, affirmation, and love. Because that love has its origin and *telos* in God, it remains with us even when we part and promises to bring us together again in new and perhaps unexpected ways. Amen.