

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

November 4, 2007
Rev. Robin Long

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

Come on, you guys. Move over. Make room. For Pete's sake, I'm trying to lead a service here. Of all people, you three should understand this best. I need to focus, I need some breathing space. You guys have got to back off. I know you're here every week but you're not usually this pushy. What's up? Oh, I know. It's All Saints Day and you want to make sure I remember you. Okay, okay, I remember you. I still love you. But you've had your time—I know, I know, your time came to an end while you still had many sermons in you, but no one here can hear you—or even see you for that matter. So will you please just knock it off. Okay, okay. You can stay up here. But you can't stand here in the pulpit. It's too crowded. How about I just set up some chairs right up front for you—that's right—right up front so you have a bird's eye view of everything. There—now, just all three of you have a seat and will you please, please stop talking.

One of you once asked me if I get my sermons off the internet. It's kind of a compliment that you would think that but no, I don't get my sermons off the internet—a quote or illustration here or there—but never a sermon and always attribute anything that's not mine to its rightful owner. And many of you have mentioned that you think most ministers recycle old sermons and so I must too. But no, I don't do that either—at least not on purpose. If you're preaching to the same group of people week in and week out you're bound to repeat a story here and there, but I never do it intentionally. I think of a sermon as a sand castle—it's built for a particular time and place but it's not something to be preserved. By noon on a Sunday that morning's sermon has begun to wash away and I've begun gathering the sand for the following week's message. So no, I don't recycle my sermons. But I admit that I do have a habit in sermon writing that some might find dubious. I admit that I do allow other people to help me write my sermons. Now admittedly, these people are all dead, but there's not one Sunday during the year that these three aren't up here with me—in some form or another. And since you are listening to sermons partially crafted by them, I guess I ought to at least introduce them.

Now, the short lady up here in the teal dress with the flaming red hair—that's Coral Schmidt. I've known her since I was in high school. She was one of the licensed lay ministers for my denomination in Northwest Ohio where I grew up. By week Coral was a CPA and by weekend she was the pastor of Pilgrim United Church of Christ in Toledo, Ohio. Now, if you could see her you would realize that she is up here making funny faces at me, her red hair bopping around and her long giraffe earrings that hang nearly to her shoulders swinging. I met Coral when she was my ride to a national church meeting in St. Louis. We drove for hours and hours together over the flatlands of the Midwest. But the trip didn't seem to take all that long because as she drove she regaled me with stories that left me laughing until I cried. Until I met Coral, I didn't know a pastor could be so fun—or so wild! And, until I met Coral, I didn't know a pastor, or any other person for that matter, could be so brave.

I met Coral when she was in remission. For years she had battled cancer. I can't remember what kind of cancer she lived with, but whatever it was it caused her to need courses of chemotherapy and

radiation that nearly killed her. But she was a survivor. For years, she survived. And in the midst of her struggles, she went to the Lay Ministry School and became a Lay Minister. And in the midst of her struggles, she continued to be work as a CPA, doing pro bono work for friends and neighbors in her struggling neighborhood on the south side of Toledo. And in the midst of her struggles, she took a young woman who wanted to be a minister under her wing and let her know that God chooses all kinds of people for ministry, even people like me.

Sadly, Coral died while I was away at seminary. I never got to say good-bye or go to her funeral. But what I have heard about—over and over again—is what a party Coral’s funeral was. There was a Dixie Land Jazz Band, dancing, and great thanksgiving among those gathered. I guess her funeral reflected her life—a joy-filled, bittersweet kind of a thing. And Coral, I guess it’s okay that I never got to say good-bye because, each and every Sunday, it’s clear to me that you’re never really gone away—you’re just here in a different way—inspiring me to inspire others to live the kind of life you lived. And just in case I ever begin to forget, I have your Book of Worship here. Thanks for leaving it to me. Every time I baptize a baby or preside over communion or marry a couple or bury a beloved church friend—you’re right here with me—through all the joys and sorrows. And by the way you lived and the way you died you help me to remember that God, too, is always with us—through all the joys and sorrows of life. And, that even as we suffer, there is still so much for which we can be grateful and so much to celebrate.

And next to Coral is Gary Hodges. I’ve talked about Gary before. He was my minister while I was growing up. About a year ago his widow mailed me his green stole—the stole I’m wearing today—and the first time I wore it during church I kept getting choked up on my tears because I just miss him so much. And though I still miss him, at least I can talk about him without crying.

Gary was amazing. Not just because he was a spirited preacher, a faithful servant, and a gifted musician, but also because he had an incredible knack for making me feel like I was the most special person he ever met. He used to call me “one neat girl.” When I was very young—about five—there was a family roller skating party for church. I had never been roller skating. But that didn’t stop Pastor Gary from grabbing my hand, dragging me out onto the rink, and holding me up as we skated circles—actually, I think he was skating and I was just kind of being carried. But it made such an impact that I still remember it today—I felt like the most special girl in the world—that he would pick me to skate with! The same guy who stood up in the pulpit on Sunday mornings would choose me, little ol’ me who couldn’t skate nearly as well as the other kids, to be his partner for the couple skate.

Now, the only problem with this was, as I grew up, I learned that Gary made every other kid in the church feel that special. At some point he had skated with Katie and Susan and Heather and Hope and Claire and Kim and he had played kick ball with Kevin and Chris and Eddie and Eric and Doug. And somehow, he made each one of us feel special, and loved, and like a “really neat kid.” And even though I’ve since learned that I wasn’t his special pet, that the other kids felt special too, I don’t feel any less special. I know you loved me, and you loved all of them too. You had enough love to go around—just like God does.

And next to Gary is Ted Lovejoy. Now Ted’s death is a little too fresh for me to talk about. In fact, I sometimes have to stop and remind myself that Ted died this past summer. So Ted’s presence is just now making itself comfortable in the pulpit in my mind and Gary and Coral and I still getting used to having him around. So, some other time, when it’s not so fresh, I’ll tell you about Ted and why he’s one

of my saints. But not today, not just yet. And Ted, although I'm so sorry about your death, I'm really glad that you're here.

Coral and Gary and Ted and all the saints of our lives put the flesh on the bones of scripture. We know a lot of what this old book says, it doesn't come as a surprise to us. We know the skeletal system of scripture. We know the psalmist writes, "Lo, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." I knew that verse by rote, but I didn't know it by heart until I met Coral and became acquainted with a woman who, for many of the years of her adult life, faced the valley of the shadow of death and yet she did not let the fear paralyze her or defeat her or overwhelm her for she knew, she knew that God was there to comfort her. And so she did not live a life of fear but rather a life of joy and thanksgiving. Coral put the flesh on the bones of scripture and because she walked through that valley without fear, I can walk through it with a little less fear.

And Gary. He took the bone of scripture from Matthew's gospel that says "Well done, good and faithful servant" and he put flesh on it at the roller rink and the ball field and in confirmation class. When he looked upon us with love and kindness, well, it must be something like what it's going to feel like when God looks upon us with love and kindness. Instead of a "Well done, good and faithful servant" from Gary I got a "Robin, you're a neat girl" from Gary but to me, they are one in the same. And because I know the warmth and joy I felt from Gary's words of acceptance and affirmation, I am all the more dedicated to living a life of service so that when my time comes to join these three I too might hear the words "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Indeed it is true, as we read in today's bulletin quote, "that no one's death comes to pass without making some impression, that those close to the deceased inherit part of the liberated soul and become richer in their humanness." Thank God for our saints—for those who have gone before and shown us the way—who have put flesh on the bones of scripture—who have made the faith come alive for us. May we be as they have been so that upon our deaths we may hear those words we long to hear "Well done, good and faithful servant."