

Suttons Bay Congregational Church

November 13, 2005

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

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1Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. 4But you, brothers and sisters are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. 7For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 8But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 9For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Alma Jean Smith was my college voice teacher. She was wonderfully eccentric. She wore vibrant clothes, caring little about how colors or patterns clashed. Her jewelry was big, sparkly, and outrageous. She had a flare for drama and was forever throwing a scarf around her neck in an act of theatrical grandeur. Earlier in her life her name had been the answer to a clue in the New York Times crossword puzzle and she had been a leading soprano on the Munich opera scene—both of these were things you learned about her within the first couple of minutes of meeting her. And, if you stuck around and got to know her just a little bit better, you would learn that she had, at one point, been Pavarotti's mistress. Now, I don't in anyway condone adultery, but I was fascinated by her affair with an opera superstar and felt that, since she was my voice teacher and Pavarotti had liked her then surely, if he ever had the chance to meet me, he'd like me to.

I learned a lot from Alma Jean. The most important lesson I learned from her, came from a story she told me about Pavarotti. During one of my lessons, I was

really frustrated because it seemed that I had been working on the same portion of a song for weeks, and it still wasn't right. In exasperation I asked Alma Jean, "When am I going to be a good singer?" She smiled and told me that there's not some kind of magical line I would step over and suddenly I'd be a good singer. It was a lifelong endeavor of practicing and learning. She then told me this story. She and Pavarotti were on an airplane and he was listening to something with headphones. He was getting agitated by what he was hearing. Curious about all the fuss, Alma Jean asked him what he was listening to. It was a recording of his previous night's performance. He was upset with what he heard and went on and on about how many things he had messed up.

It was an important lesson—not just about singing but about any worthwhile pursuit in this life. There isn't a magic line we cross, we never do—as it is called—"arrive." Even Pavarotti struggles to improve. This isn't to say that we're a bunch of nothings who can't do anything right. For surely Pavarotti had already accomplished so much in his life. But, there was still so much he had not yet done. He, like all of us, lives in a state of "Already and Not Yet."

This "Already and Not Yet" is a state of being well-appreciated by the Thessalonians, the folks in the church to whom Paul's letter that was read from today was addressed. They had already seen so much of what God had accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and it had all happened in their parents or grandparents' generation. It was still big news and their church was very young. They knew that, in terms of the Kingdom of God, a lot had already happened. However, they were also very aware that there were many things that had not yet happened. They lived in a time when the second-coming of Christ was forecasted to happen at any moment—it was just around the corner. But, the details were not known, and that is why Paul tells them that

Christ's return will come like a thief in the night—a surprise to them all. And yet all of them, including Paul, were sure that Christ would come again in their own lifetimes. There was an emphasis on being ready—Paul tells those early believers in the church in Thessaloniki to be alert and self-controlled. It reminds me of when our babysitter would tell my brother and me—after an evening of relaxed rules and childhood debauchery—that we better get cleaned up and ready for bed because our parents would be home “at any minute.” And knowing that their return was imminent, we cleaned up, washed up, and straightened up so we'd be ready when they walked through the door. And Paul is telling the Thessalonians the same—to clean-up, wash up, and straighten up because Christ was coming back at any minute now.

But, the time between the “Already” of Christ's life, death, and resurrection and the “Not Yet” of Christ's return that will usher in the Kingdom of God—that time between drags on, from the time of Paul to today. We are all living in the “Already and Not Yet”—as a church and as individuals. We know what to do and how to be, and yet we often don't feel an urgent and compelling reason to always do and be what we know we ought to do and be because we figure we've got plenty of time to do and be the things we ought to do and be and so for now we might as well just enjoy ourselves, we'll make up for it later. This is the very attitude that Paul is encouraging the Thessalonians—and us—to put behind us.

It may be tempting to think that Paul's message is one of *Carpe Diem*—or seize the day. And, in a way it is. But it's not in the same way we think of it—as a “live for today to heck with our responsibilities, a temporary respite from the routine of our lives” kind of message. Rather, it is a seize the day for God kind of a message. It's a “You've got a terminal illness and have three weeks to live so get your affairs in order” kind of a message. It's a “don't rest on your laurels of what

you've already done, but look forward to what you've not yet accomplished" kind of a message. It's a message of living each and every moment for God because you are so grateful for what God has already done for you and you're eager to see what God has yet to do in your life.

Perhaps you're younger and your "Already" list is noticeably shorter than your "Not Yet" list. Or, maybe you're somewhere in the middle—you've seen and done a lot but you feel there's still a lot left for you to do. Or you may be among our more seasoned members whose "Already" list stretches across the span of a long life well-lived—but even then, and perhaps especially then, the promise of God's "Not Yet" still applies to you and all of us—there is glory and love and peace that has not yet come, but we've been promised that it will—whether in this lifetime or the next.

As a church, we've a long list of "Already's." Now I could have looked through annual reports and committee meeting minutes to get a sense of what God has already done in the life of this church—but I'd rather hear it from all of you. Go ahead, call them out so that we all can hear—what has God already done in the life of this church—whether it was yesterday or a hundred years ago.

Surely God has done a lot in this place. But there is still so much that we have not yet done. We have not yet had an adult mission trip. We have not yet re-established a youth group. We have not yet issued an invitation to the people in this community who are looking for a faith family like ours to join us here. The list could go on and on of the things we have not yet done.

But the key word is "Yet." I have every confidence that we will be able to continue to live out our mission of welcoming those seeking a diverse and

supportive family in Christ, of reaching out as a church and cooperatively to serve others, of growing and sharing our faith, and of making Christ known through our acts and deeds. We already live out our mission with God's help and a lot of our time and talents and treasure. But, we can and will do more, we'll do those things we've not yet done. Because we are an "Already and Not yet" people.

I'm grateful to Alma Jean for teaching me how to be a better singer, but I'm even more thankful that she helped me to understand that this life we live is one in which we're in a constant state of "Already and Not Yet." Living in the Already and Not Yet is edgy, it requires us to, in the words of St. Paul, stay alert and self-controlled. It's living in a state of constant gratitude for the "Already" and a state of constant preparation for the "Not Yet." And that is a state of grace, knowing of God's provision in the past, experiencing it in the present, and resting assured that it will continue in the future. Thanks be to God for the "Already and Not Yet."