

The Day's New Testament reading was from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians (1: 1-10).

The Reverend Doctor James McLean's Sermon follows:

I pose to you a simple question; what is a Thessalonian? And it has a simple answer; a Thessalonian is a person who lives—or lived—in Thessalonica. And since we heard about Thessalonians, who lived in Thessalonica, in the New Testament reading, let me tell you where it is. Maybe some of you have been there. If you can picture a map of Greece—well, to the east of Greece, a peninsula nation, is the Aegean Sea. And up to the North on an Aegean Bay is the ancient city, still lived in, of Thessalonica. In its early days it was a very important port city.

Okay, boys and girls, let's see what we've got here.

- 1) We've got a city on a peninsula—are you with me?
- 2) We've got a city on a large body of water.
- 3) It's on a bay.
- 4) And in its day, it was an important port.

Okay—question number two; are you thinking what I'm thinking? Oh, but wait. In this city on the northern part of a peninsula, on a bay of a large body of water that was once an important port, Paul is writing to a small congregation. How small was it? Anywhere, probably, from 30 to 60. So it looks to me like Paul was writing to a small congregation

that had an amazing number of similarities to, dare I say it, us! As in St. Christopher's!

Paul was a fairly busy guy. He was occupied with turning Christianity from a Jewish sect into a global church. Why would he write to a very small group of Christians on a peninsula on an Aegean bay when he had so many crucial things to attend to? Let me put before you two reasons: First, he founded the congregation. He cared about the church, he cared about the people, he cared about the Gospel, he cared about their mission. And a 2<sup>nd</sup> reason was that he thought the congregation was important.

The New Testament is one of the most significant writings in the world's history. Of the New Testament's table of contents, there are 27 books and 14 are attributed to St. Paul. My arithmetic says Paul, therefore, wrote over half the books of the New Testament. 11 of those books were addressed to small congregations—the other books were about congregations.

Congregational life, congregational well-being, were priorities for St. Paul. He knew that a congregation is where the faithful are baptized, where the Eucharist is celebrated, where the Gospel is proclaimed and lived out. The congregation is where the scriptures are read and studied and where the church's mission is developed and carried out. So if the New Testament has anything to say, it's this great emphasis from Paul

on the centrality and prominence of the local congregation. And in today's reading we see how central and how prominent the SMALL local congregation is.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is brief—it's 5 concise chapters; but it's full of Paul's wisdom, it's loaded with sound, practical advice. But it's really topped off by a mutual encouragement. Paul says how encouraged he's been by them. Timothy told Paul how strong faith and love were in this small church and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter Paul says, "We have been encouraged about you through your faith." In other words, he felt they "walked the talk".

And although we don't know, it's safe to assume that the Christians who lived in Thessalonica were greatly encouraged by Paul's letter, encouraged by his confidence in what they were doing. There's no doubt about it—encouragement goes a long way! We all need to be encouraged. And what better source of encouragement can there be than the Apostle Paul?

The leadership of St. Christopher's toward the year's end will once again look to the future and chart a course for this congregation. And this leadership task is important, because our church is important, significant, paramount; and they need to be encouraged. St. Paul is a notable encourager, but another source of encouragement is US! So, leaders, listen up. We're behind you. We're with you. Keep on

keeping on. We have worship that needs to be sustained and a sense of community that needs to be maintained. So help us walk the talk and keep the faith. We'll be grateful.

And what will make our leadership grateful? You already know—it's your generous gifts made in relation to all the things that God has given you. And, in relation to that, a pledge given in a timely and cheerful way. And the cheerful part is not unimportant.

When we came here, I guess, about ten years ago, we had a choice about where to worship. We were retired and were open to a long drive if that was necessary. But we felt this was a good place for our church home in Northern Michigan. We still do.

A number of years ago, the lay leader in charge of stewardship asked me, and about 3 others, to give a 5 minute talk about St. Christopher's. It's hard for a clergy to talk that briefly—but I managed. I said that one of the things I admired about St. Christopher's was stability. Stability is a strength not valued nearly enough. In the spirituality of Benedictine monasticism, stability is paramount, it's a cardinal virtue—and St. Benedict got that right. And you know he was right when you live in an environment that's destructively unstable. Stability is a virtue indeed.

That talk was a number of years ago—today we find ourselves without a Priest and Rector. We aren't alone in that—it's a reality for

many churches. But the stability that characterizes our Church is still with us. Every Sunday we gather together in the Lord's name—and we are, still, together. And every once in a while, new people wander in to participate in that togetherness. I've seen no evidence of apathy or rancor in our midst. Stability is, indeed, a gift.

I hope you've found the parallels between Thessalonica and Northport to be as fascinating as I have. But if you don't, hold on to the fact that Paul was writing to a small congregation and saying that the faith among them was anything BUT small.

It was a good message to hear then; and perhaps even better to hear now.