

## Year C Proper 28

Isaiah 65:17-25

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” sounds really harsh, especially coming from Paul, who is usually encouraging people to love one another. But let’s take a look at this letter to the Thessalonians, and see what Paul might be referring to.

This epistle, 2 Thessalonians, was written in about the year 50, probably by Paul, or perhaps by one of his followers. There is still some brisk scholarly debate about that. Either way, it is clearly written in the same style as First Thessalonians, even to quoting some of the phrases. It is a typical letter of exhortation and encouragement written to the congregation in Thessalonica, which was (and still is) in northern Greece. The letter deals, firstly, with praising the congregation for their steadfastness in their faith in the face of being persecuted.

Before this passage, Paul (and we’ll call the author Paul for simplicity’s sake) is also describing the apocalyptic expectations of their community: remember that they were expecting Jesus to come again—and soon—certainly in their lifetime. They called the second coming the *parousia*, (you might have heard it pronounced “paroozhayah,” but we’ll say parouSEEyah, because it’s Greek) and it literally means “the presence.” The *parousia* was the time when Jesus would return, and Satan would be overthrown, and all of the faithful would be gathered to Christ in the new kingdom of eternal peace. They expected that to happen at any time, and so wanted to be ready and to live godly lives in the meantime.

But Paul is concerned that people are becoming complacent and idle, instead of working to help one another. Christians were known for helping one another, and helping those who couldn’t help themselves. Paul wants them to continue doing this. He uses himself as an example, reminding them that when he had been with them, he worked to support himself—you might remember that he was a tentmaker by trade (see Acts 18:3). Certainly, as their leader, he deserved to be fed for free, but he wanted to serve as a model of Christian living, so he continued supporting himself with his trade, even as he spread the gospel.

So he expects people to work. But notice here that he says anyone who is **unwilling** to work should not eat. He does **not** say that people who are *unable* to work should not eat. That would fly in the face of the gospel, and be contrary to everything that he had been teaching them. And certainly, there was a strong tradition of hospitality to travelers and strangers in the ancient Near East. Again and again we see incidents in scripture where people are feeding those who are unknown to them. And of course there are the stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes. But the Christians worked, and then pooled their resources in common, so they would cook and eat common meals. What Paul is saying here is that the community should not support idlers, the lazy, the freeloaders. Paul is setting what we might call healthy boundaries. Not everyone gets a handout—only the people who really need it.

Apparently Paul has heard that this is getting to be a problem in the Church in Thessalonica: “some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.” Perhaps some church members were thinking that, since the *parousia* was imminent, there was no need to plan for the future, or to work. Any day now, the world as they knew it might end. Or perhaps people were simply taking advantage of the their brothers’ and sisters’ compassion and generosity. Whatever the reason, the situation is unacceptable to Paul.

And really, it is bad for both the community, and for the individuals in it to allow people who are *able* to do some kind of work, to get out of doing it. That kind of situation justifiably causes resentment among those who do the work, and exposes the freeloaders to the sin pride and conceit. They begin to think that they might actually be better than the others. Life in community means that everyone needs to help out, in whatever way they are **able** to help. So Paul is exhorting the community in Thessalonica to be *genuine* community.

Over the past several days, I have seen community in action, as I attended the 225th annual convention of our diocese. This is the first time I've seen the discussion, the reports, and the voting, and as I watched, I was struck by the sense of community. Clearly, committees and groups had been working hard on various projects all year and were reporting their progress. There was debate about various issues, as well, but it was all very respectful. There seemed to be an overarching concern for improving the health of the diocese, so that the diocese could better support the parishes in it.

Did you know that there are 179 congregations in the Diocese of Virginia? We are **the** largest diocese in the country, with a history going back to the first Eucharist celebrated in James Towne in 1607. Our traditions provide that we are governed by bishops; that's what episcopal refers to, *episcopus* is the Latin word for bishop. So part of the health of our diocese means having bishops to lead us. At convention we celebrated the welcoming of our new assistant bishop, Jennifer Brooke-Davidson, who impressed me with her warmth, and her sense of humor, in addition to the depth of her spiritual life. With a background in law, as well as having been a parish priest, she is also well-fitted for the hard work of being a bishop. It was encouraging to me to watch the work of the diocese in action at the convention, and to imagine Bishop Jennifer's imminent part in it.

And as I return my focus to our part in this diocesan work, and I think of Christ Church's community, I wonder, as Paul urges the congregation in Thessalonica, how we can make it possible to include everyone in the work of the parish. How can we create opportunities to include everyone in service? Are there people who would like to participate who don't see ways to do that? Have *you* wanted to do something, but not been able find a way to do it? It would benefit all of us if you would share your ideas, and time and talents with the congregation. Take a chance and volunteer, even if it's in a small way. If you have an idea for something new, tell us!

C.S. Lewis, the British novelist and theologian said "Next to the blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses." So, Paul would say love your neighbor. Serve your neighbor.

Amen.