

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8
Message: A Ministry of Caring
May 5, 2019; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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The first time I heard a sermon on these verses from 1 Thessalonians 2 was when I was being installed as a minister in a previous congregation. The officiating pastor was a colleague who had also been my supervisor for a summer assignment when I was a Seminary student. I don't remember everything that he said, but I remember something about how these verses described my relationship with the congregation: I was to love and serve them like a mother caring for her child.

I remember appreciating his words. Obviously so, because I can still recall them. And I can respect how these verses can describe the relationship between a Pastor and the congregation.

But I also recall feeling a little uncomfortable. It seemed that he was saying, or I was hearing him say, that it was the minister's responsibility to care for the congregation. As if it was not anyone else's responsibility. I'm not so sure about that.

As we identify Caring as a value at Bethel, I'm quite sure it must be more than just the minister who does the caring. As we dig a bit deeper into the context and teaching of these verses, we can see how that works out.

For the apostle Paul, these verses are expressing a defense of his ministry. There were people who were opposed to Paul and his preaching. We only need to remember that he came from Philippi before he went to Thessalonica on this teaching journey. In Philippi he had been arrested, beaten and thrown in prison. Some of those opponents followed him to Thessalonica where they continued to spread false rumours about Paul and Silas and Timothy.

Now Paul writes this letter to answer some of those false accusations. He did not come for profit. He was not doing ministry to make money for himself. Nor did he come in arrogance. He came as a humble servant of the Lord Jesus.

Paul points out that his message was the good news which had come directly from God. Paul was not speaking a message about himself or his own ideas. It was a message entrusted to him from another, which he was passing on. God himself had placed his trust in Paul to be a faithful servant. Therefore the people could also trust his message.

Paul's *motive* in presenting this message was most unselfish. He expresses himself in self-sacrificing love, the attitude of a father or of a mother toward their own children. Paul had nothing to gain from his preaching except the satisfaction of knowing he was true to his Lord, and others were being filled with joy in believing. He was not looking for praise of people. He was not looking for monetary gain. He wanted to help others.

Paul's *method* of presenting this good news was above reproach. He came with gentleness to show them the compassion of God. He did not use flattery, nor trick his hearers. He was honest and true in what he said.

When Paul was going around to the churches, there were a lot of false teachers going around as well. There were people trying to make quick money by taking advantage of this new movement of Jesus followers, or the followers of the Way. Who could you believe anymore? Paul challenges his hearers to look at the consistency between his message and his life. He was living what he was teaching.

And there lies our message. This passage speaks loud and clear to myself as Pastor and leader in this congregation. It challenges me to look at my motive and method in ministry as I serve the Lord of the church.

It also challenges those who have other leadership positions in the church. It challenges the Elders and Deacons and Pastoral Care Workers, the Kids Club leaders, the Cadets and GEMS counsellors and study group leaders, anyone who has a position of influence over others in the name of Christ. Do you carry out your position in the self-sacrificing attitude which Paul describes in this passage? Are you living what you are teaching and saying, and what you are calling others to live?

But then I also come back to that idea that it's not just the minister who is responsible to care for the congregation. It's not just the other leaders who care for the members of the church. Every person who comes to Jesus is anointed by the Spirit to serve our Lord in this world.

This passage speaks to every believer in Jesus Christ. Each one of us who accepts Jesus as Saviour and follows him as Lord has been entrusted with the good news. We are called to care for those around us, to show this good news in how we live, as well as speak it with our words.

That's where this passage informs our core value of Caring. Core values express the

identity of this church. Core values are not saying “what we hope to be,” but they identify that which defines us, “who we are.” Values identify the foundation, the root, the strengths that determine action.

When we identify Caring as a core value, it is an expression of who we are. We care for one another. Paul describes that attitude of caring as being that of a mother caring for her little children. A mother, in nursing her child, makes no show of authority and does not stand on any dignity. As if to say, “Look, child, I am giving up so much for you. I am so important. You should respect and appreciate me.”

A gentle mother reveals a wonderful and extraordinary love, because she gives of herself to care for her children. It’s not always easy, but this caring love is at the heart of the relationship between a mother and child.

May that be the attitude with which we express this value of caring. As we look out for one another within this congregation, may we have this caring attitude of self-giving. As we interact with our neighbours, may we have this caring attitude of self-giving. As we meet new people coming through our doors to worship or for some event during the week, may we have this caring attitude of self-giving.

When we see a need, we don’t first count the cost or inconvenience that it will cause us; we care. We don’t first determine how we will benefit; we care. When we care for someone, we don’t let them know how obligated they should be or how guilty they should feel; that person will experience sincere care, being given the sense that they are important.

The values which we have named as forming the identify of Bethel Church came from hearing stories that many different people told of how they experienced God at work in this congregation. The stories that were told which identified the value of caring were stories that spoke of support and help that was willingly given and thankfully received. They were stories of visits being made where care was expressed. Caring was experienced when people took time to listen, more than give advice. Or when they gave encouragement, more than direction.

Each of those actions: support, help, visit, listen, encourage, speak of a self-giving attitude, where the other person is more important.

That same intensity is expressed in Paul’s words (v. 8): “We loved you so much we shared not only the gospel, but our lives as well.” They gave their whole selves. Nothing is kept back. If we wish to continue growing strong as a church or if we wish to make an impact

on our community, we must not hold back from giving of our selves.

There is no hiding the fact that caring is costly. When you give of yourself, it takes time and energy and commitment and sometimes even money. True caring gives willingly, knowing the generosity of God's blessings to us.

There is a lot of suspicion of the church and church leaders. There is bad press of corruption and inappropriate behaviour and lack of caring within the church. Unfortunately, the stories are true. What will speak to people is not an attitude of denial or a defensive attitude. We do not ignore or downplay the wrongs that the church may have done. We can show people that there is more to the church than just those stories of wrongs. What will speak to people is an attitude of humility and sincere caring, without any ulterior motive.

There is appreciation for people who live with honesty and integrity, with a wholeness or completeness in their lives. This means that the message that someone speaks must be consistent with their life. If you speak of the love of God, you must be showing that love to those in your family, your church, your school, your workplace, your neighbourhood, your craft group, your coffee shop, everywhere. Otherwise that message of caring doesn't mean much.

When we say that Caring is a value of our church, we are identifying this as something all of us participate in. It's not just up to the minister or others with a designated office to be caring for others. Nor can those in a particular designated office think that they are the only ones who can or should do all the caring. Bethel Church is a caring congregation, all of us, together.

In our hearts and lives, let us surrender ourselves to the purpose of God through us, being radically open to God. Let us be attentive to God's leading to see the needs around us. Then we can bring God's care and love into those needs.

When we care with an openness to God, we allow God's power and grace to flow through us. How will people know that we are Jesus's disciples? What did Jesus say in John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples" By what, by our doctrine? By our building? "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

The Lord Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. The apostle Paul did not come to Thessalonica to exert his authority, but to bring the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. He cared for them.

Live the value of caring for one another with the good news of God's care for us.

Amen.