

Opposed, Quarantined and Caring for Each Other Like Nurses, based on 1Thessalonians 2:1-8, David Jahnke, 11/2/14

So this is the second week of Thanksgiving with the Thessalonians. Unfortunately the work of the church is often thankless. And that work is bearing the gospel of Jesus to the world. Paul had the best news for his people. The Messiah of God for whom the Jews had been waiting so long had come to Israel and Jerusalem. The leaders there did not recognize him and ended up killing him with Rome's help. But God used this to teach the people that nothing could stop his plan for creation. For God raised this Messiah Jesus from the dead to give the world a glimpse of eternal life. And he appeared to hundreds of people and commissioned them to fulfill Israel's mission of being God's light to the world. And the cross on which the Messiah died became a final altar— a final sacrifice which meant we no longer had to be afraid about our imperfections which so are so often condemned in the world— God would not condemn us for them.

So Paul brought this wonderful news to his own people in Phillipi and Thessalonica and was met not with wonder and hope and new life but with opposition and mistrust and ostracism.

I was reminded of the nurse who made headlines this week after working with ebola patients in Africa. She get sback to her own people and finds herself quarantined. And when she protests this mistreatment, people lambast her for being a “princess who did not get the hero's welcome she expected.” I think she is a hero who did not to be a prisoner upon her return.

I think that she should accept the isolation. But she should be able to do this in her own home. So thank goodness our state eventually got this right and sent her home; although she did not want to stay there and has landed in trouble because she does not want to accept her isolation.

I picked up the theologian Karl Barth who said that the isolation of the Christian in the modern world is a difficult but must be accepted. It has to do with God's separateness and our own sanctification in Him— our being set apart and made citizens of God's Kingdom and thus becoming aliens here on earth. First Peter talks about this.

So when we feel separateness and alienation in this life, the question becomes is that because we are separated from God or separated with God from the world. Opposition from without and even from within as we grow in the world of God should be a reminder that we have been sanctified by God and are growing more committed to His work. Conversely, if we feel no distinction or separation as a Christian; if there is never any struggle for the sake of God, this may point to too much conformity to the world. Like the nurse, we get into trouble when we want to escape the sanctity of the Kingdom of God and return to or live according to the ways of the world.

We, in fact, only accept and endure this isolation because it takes place in the grander context from our quote-unquote homes. In other words, it happens as we are citizens of the Kingdom of heaven which surrounds and affirms us in the struggle. We also have the comfort of our church home- this sanctuary where we come to find healing from the opposition, the gracelessness, the mistrust of the world.

Paul shows us what this looks like, saying to the Thessalonians, “We were gentle among you; we were like a nurse to you tenderly caring for her own children.”

The church recognizes that we are all children of God in need of mutual care and praise and gratitude. And we strive for a spirit of gentleness and trust just as we do toward children; rather than a spirit of accusation and mistrust.

And as our souls are healed, we can go back out into the world with the strength to bear witness to a different way; a way which remains distinct but now has the strength to gently engage and care for the world. We become a part of the redemption that takes place through the divine encounter with the world.

I went for a walk the other night at dusk. It was cool and there were a lot of shadows and it was dinner time so no one was out. I was walking instead of running because of a sore back. All of the Halloween decorations were out and it was quite mysterious and even creepy. There were some of the skeletons coming up from out of the ground. It felt like I was in a Walking Dead episode.

And I got to thinking about how Halloween brings to the surface the dark opposition below— and suddenly I was almost overwhelmed with compassion for the skeletons that were coming out of people’s closets and into their front yards. And I think God has turned this into a good thing; just as God did with Saul’s early opposition to Christ and the opposition that the early church received.

Because even though it may seem like our opponent has been set free for a night on Halloween; is it a hallowed eve, a sanctified night. The darkness comes out but there it meets the divine which redeems it as in the poem that I sent via e-mail on Friday which I will now repeat:

Halloween: an eve when we get it right.
Strangers come to us,
beautiful, ugly, odd or scary,
and we accept them all without question,
compliment them, treat them kindly,
and give them good things.
Why don't we live like that? Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Well we do our best to live like that here. We open our doors to all strangers, accept them with grace and kindness, and offer them good things.

And we do this because God has done this for us. God encountered a profane, dark world in the person of Jesus Christ. He was opposed time and again and yet when that dark opposition seemed to slam the door on his movement; this resulted in the door to the Kingdom of heaven being opened. Upon opening the door, God invites to His banquet table friends and strangers, the beautiful and the scary, the odd and the normal, the righteous and unrighteous; and he says, “no more tricks, my children. Have some treats instead and he offers us all His cup of mercy and the bread of heaven.

So welcome to the table of our Lord and savior. Let us begin our hallowed remembrance by offering our gifts to God and to one another...remembering the words of Jesus to the disciples-- “Freely you have received, freely give.