

**Talk given by Rev Olivia Mae Dawson, Chaplain, University of Otago at Knox Church 160th AGM. Wednesday 28 October 2020, Knox Church, Dunedin**

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***Scripture Reading – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, the Message***

<sup>1</sup> I, Paul, together here with Silas and Timothy, send greetings to the church at Thessalonica, Christians assembled by God the Father and by the Master, Jesus Christ. God's amazing grace be with you! God's robust peace!

<sup>2-5</sup> Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you're in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following our Master, Jesus Christ, before God our Father. It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions.

<sup>5-6</sup> You paid careful attention to the way we lived among you, and determined to live that way yourselves. In imitating us, you imitated the Master. Although great trouble accompanied the Word, you were able to take great joy from the Holy Spirit!—taking the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble.

<sup>7-10</sup> Do you know that all over the provinces of both Macedonia and Achaia believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master's Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore—*you're* the message! People come up and tell us how you received us with open arms, how you deserted the dead idols of your old life so you could embrace and serve God, the true God. They marvel at how expectantly you await the arrival of his Son, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescued us from certain doom.

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Teaching Nora how to wave, crawl, blow kisses.

I have three children. Micah 8, Lyla 5, and Nora almost 1. They do a lot of their learning by imitating their dad and me. Usually it's sweet when we hear Lyla echo our voice talking to her baby sister. Or when Micah helps Lyla find her favorite shows on the tablet like we do for him so often. Or when we overhear Lyla singing one of my favorite worship songs that I had stuck in my head and had been unconsciously singing. Or Micah's prayers using similar words and phrases that we use in our prayers. But having young children learn from your own behaviours also means that when you tell your kids to clean up their rooms they respond with the remark, "why should we clean our room when your room is messy?" Or when you hear big brother correcting little sister's behaviour in an impatient parental tone. Or when a certain word escapes the mouth of one of the children in a frustrated moment and when it's caught the response is but I hear you say it sometimes. Our children remind us that whether we want to be or not, in our good and in our less good moments as parents and as Christians and as humans...we are models, being watched by imitators.

If you haven't already I invite you to open your Bible or pull up the passage on your phone. Paul's letter that we just read was written to Thessalonian Christians who were facing extremely perilous times. Paul was praising them for their ability to function at an admirable and constructive rate – taking the trouble with joy, the joy with trouble as the message says or as the NRSV says, "you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit" vs 6. Within 20 years of the estimated writing of this letter warfare and rebellion would erupt across the region resulting in the dramatic and disastrous destruction of the temple.

And the movements that culminated to this had already begun when this letter was written. There were feelings of unsettledness and experiences of persecution among the church that Paul refers to in his letter.

And based on how the church has handled and navigated these difficult times, Paul thanks this church. Profusely. Everyday in his prayers. And Paul is particularly thankful to this church for 3 things: their faith, their love, and their hope.

More specifically, it is faith which works, a love which labors, and a hope which endures. The great motives of Christian life according to Paul, those which are worthy of imitation, are true faith, love born of the spirit, and a hope in the coming Christ.

What is a working faith? Paul summarizes in vs 9: turning to God from idols...to serve the living and true God. What does this look like? Well I see it like this...the world is distracting us constantly with things demanding our attention. We see it a lot during a year like this--- an election year here and in the States! We're demanded to take sides on social issues...we get caught staring at these important issues...glancing up to God to reveal to us how we should respond how we should care...but our focus...is here...on the issue...and we're only glancing toward God. A working faith is one that has focus on God, not the issues and the distractions. Not the idols. Has focus on God trusting that God will reveal the issues that need our attention. Eyes on God, not on the constant issues that are presented to us. Working faith is something that changes you. It turns you to God from the idols.

Labor of love was next. Paul offers us three steps to describe love at work. There's an attitude change....it's not one of complaint about afflictions but "joy

inspired by the Holy Spirit.” Second, the Good news was shared throughout the land...throughout Macedonia and Achaia. They shared with their neighbors and friends what God had done and was doing in their lives. They were contagious...their joy and their love were contagious...everyone was talking about it and familiar with it. Thirdly, you get to the point where words become unnecessary because you’re lives and actions are loud enough. As the message translation says, “The news of your faith in God is out. We don’t even have to say anything anymore—*you’re* the message!”

And then Paul describes an enduring hope...or a steadfastness of hope. Described in verse 10 as Paul wrote, “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” Actively believing and participating in a hope that is bigger than any of us...that connects us with others all over the world and connects us with God. Participating in a hope of something new and better. Of something more whole than what we experience.

Three things Paul is praising this church for: working faith – a faith that turns to God from idols. Labor of love....so obvious and contagious that words aren’t even necessary. Enduring hope...an active participation in a new creation.

Working faith, labors of love, enduring hope. All requiring a belief in God that results in action. Action so contagious that others want to imitate.

Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians is praising the church leaders for being great imitators of Christ... great model leaders to the community. So I wonder, what would the letter sound like that Paul would write to Knox church? Would you be praised and thanked for your Christ like way? Would you be acknowledged for living in such a way that attracted others to live the same? If there was

another church that imitated what Knox church does, like how my children imitate me, would you be proud?

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What words would you use to describe Knox?

What are you most proud of that Knox accomplished this year? And what message does that send out to the world?

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Tonight you're reviewing your year...how as a church your money was spent, how your time was spent, how your energy was spent.

What messages are you sending to your community? What would people say is important to you based on your time and money spent?

Now I don't know the ins and outs of the ministries at Knox but since I work with Jordan at the University I get to see a bit. I enjoyed reading the "what's our flavour" section of your website...reading words like "diversity" "exploration" "inclusion" "engaging". I also read through some of your orders of service and especially your service a couple weeks ago on the 18<sup>th</sup> that encompassed readings from a variety of religions...inclusion and diversity indeed! I also know that you hosted soup dinners and conversations on Sunday evenings this winter focusing on relevant topics that allowed space for a wide range of opinions to be expressed. So, from an outsiders perspective, you seem to practice what you preach.

Paul reminds us that we are to live in such a way that invites others to join. That motivates the desire in others to imitate our way.

This is an important reminder for churches, for leaders, for parents, for anyone everyday. Challenging every word we choose to speak and every action we choose to live. Knowing that there are imitators closely observing.

May we live and speak and act in a way that is deserving of a letter from Paul with the words, “we thank God for you...for your work of faith, your labor of love, your patience of hope...imitating the Master. Believers look up to you, your lives are echoing the Master’s Word. People come up and tell us how you received them with open arms, how you embrace and serve God.” May these be Paul’s words to this church, to each one of us.

Let us be deserving of such an observation. Let us earn these words. Let us know that we are called to create a new Way worthy of imitation.

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Thank you God for Knox Church. For the leaders, for the members, for the visitors. For the weekly attenders and the occasional attenders. For those family members, friends and neighbors of members who hear about the goings on of Knox but may not experience it themselves. May what is heard and what is experienced here at Knox be pleasing to you.

There are many things about this church that we love and that keep people returning week after week, motivated to participate in the mission and ministries here. We pause now, to say aloud those characteristics that we are especially grateful for and appreciate about Knox.....

We thank you God for the many things mentioned and unmentioned.

May we strive to be a church like the one Paul describes...focused on being active in our faith, love, and hope. May Knox be a church that other churches want to imitate. May we as individuals live our lives in a way that brings people in...may our faith and love and hope be contagious.

Bless this gathering tonight. May our conversations be fruitful and encouraging. May those in attendance be motivated to participate in Your mission. Amen.

Receive these words from St. Teresa of Avila as our benediction:

*Christ has no body but yours,*

*No hands, no feet on earth but yours,*

*Yours are the eyes with which he looks*

*Compassion on this world,*

*Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,*

*Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.*

*Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,*

*Yours are the eyes, you are his body.*

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

*May we use our body, our feet, our eyes and hands in a way that it worthy of imitation.  
Amen.*

## **KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**

***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,  
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



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