

“Good Times”

Sermon – November 16, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

Some people have noted that I have a tendency to have a lot of pop culture references—movies, TV, songs. From the *last century*, that is. Today is no different.

When I was reading the lectionary passages for today my mind went to a *Saturday Night Live* sketch routine from the 1990s with Ana Gasteyer and Molly Shannon who played NPR radio talk show hosts. They would talk about nerdy things and in that NPR quiet, earnest voice.

Their conversation would start off with a dialogue that would devolve and inevitably lead to an uncomfortable or awkward moment in which they would pause and tie it off saying, “Good times. Yeah, good times.”

That’s how I felt about today’s scriptures. The Old Testament and epistle lessons promising this future vision in the context of how bad things are now. And the gospel lesson saying you’ll be betrayed even by family and friends and everyone will hate you. Yeah, good times.

You might recall last week’s Old Testament lesson from Haggai encouraging the leaders and people to rebuild the temple that the Babylonians destroyed. I then discussed how it was Herod the Great who built this ginormous, “glorious” temple complex for the largest religious center in the world at that time, to match his ego, not his faith. In today’s gospel lesson the disciples are so impressed with this magnificent structure. Jesus essentially tells them, “Enjoy it now, cuz it’s going to be razed to the ground.” Which, as we discussed last week, the Romans do less than three decades after Jesus’ death after crushing the Jewish revolt.

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Then Jesus goes into this apocalyptic description of things to come: Jesus impersonators, wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, and dreadful portents and signs from heaven (whatever those might be).

But wait, the “good news” appears to be that his followers won’t have to worry about it—because before that they will be arrested, imprisoned, put on trial, and some of them put to death. But hang in there, Jesus says. Good times.

Now my wife doesn’t believe me but I really don’t go looking for depressing, dispiriting passages to preach on. But neither do I look to preach a message of “don’t worry, be happy.” Because neither did Jesus.

Jesus preached a message of hope to the marginalized and of rebuke to those in power.

Today many Christians seem to have forgotten the context of passages like these and see themselves as the marginalized rather than ones in power.

In Jesus time the marginalized were the poor, the oppressed, the ostracized. The ones in power were ultimately the Romans but also Jewish leaders, like the Sadducees we discussed last week, and the rich.

In our world today, the marginalized are the poor, the oppressed, the ostracized. And the ones in power are ostensibly Christian and, of course, the rich.

When Christians today complain that their religious beliefs are being violated, they are inevitably saying their doctrine—not their faith—is being attacked.

Jesus had little to say about doctrine; he didn’t write any policy papers or instruction manuals. However, he did talk a lot about what to do. He was concerned about life lived in humility, empathy, and community.

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When he talks about apocalyptic themes it is to give his followers a heads-up, not for them to give up. Jesus continually tells the disciples to follow him means to do what he does: help the poor, feed the hungry, comfort those who weep.

The real message of today’s gospel passage is the assurance of God’s faithfulness to us in the face of difficult times.

It is not proclaiming God’s judgment on society. Rather, the passage warns us about becoming too fixated on temporary human institutions. It exhorts us to be firm in our trust in God when calamity and persecution strike.

Despite its language and imagery of destruction, it is ultimately a passage grounded in hope — in the hope that God remains present in the world and in one’s life even when things have gotten so bad that it feels like the world is closing in on us.

The Old Testament passage today from Isaiah 65 also gives a message and paints a picture of hope for those who trust in God.

With the Babylonian conquest and exile, Israel had suffered greatly. In the context of today’s passage, they are trying to rebuild after being freed by the Persians, but are still dealing with the unbelievable trauma.

They know that their children have died of malnutrition on account of the injustices under foreign rule. They know that their labor has been exploited to build the homes of their oppressors rather than their own homes. In short, they lived in a land without empathy.

While foreign oppressors have been replaced by their leadership who returned home with them, they still live in a land without empathy. The prophet has to paint a picture what a land with empathy would look like

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for them: a land without violence and destruction where the wolf and lamb or the lion and ox will live peacefully together.

The key to this vision is a lack of vengeance. God does not call the remnant in Jerusalem to learn from their oppressors or adopt the way of their oppressor. Isaiah [65:24] articulates what is so badly needed in any society: the need to speak and be heard. Whether we call it gaslighting or prevaricating, few things are as maddening as to cry out in distress and see the situation remain unresolved.

The end of the book of Isaiah is dealing with a situation in which empathy walls built by oppressors remain in spite of the return of the Jewish leadership to Jerusalem.

This oracle from Isaiah calls upon us to consider the situation in our own country with empathy walls being actively built up in the United States—by so-called Christians. Even going as far to discuss the oxymoron of “toxic empathy.”

We see that people suffering from the growing and chronic inequality in the U.S. provide many of the greatest adherents of these movements. There is a desperate need to build empathy bridges between the polarized groups in the U.S.

That is exactly what we see happening in this oracle from Isaiah. Rather than declaring one group right and punishing the other group, this oracle imagines a world in which both these groups coexist peacefully. They still have their salient characteristics: a lion is still a lion as well as a lamb being a lamb, but they coexist.

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We overcome polarization and hatred when we can see the world as God sees it. If we see humans as God does, we will be able to live with the gladness, joy, and delight of verse 18.

We will only be able to construct empathy bridges if we have that gladness, joy, and delight of a grace-centered view of the world. The world of sin constructs empathy walls. Today’s passage from Isaiah is a clarion call to tear down these empathy walls so that we can see what another person feels.

Yes, that takes endurance and it risks being rejected. But we do so because of our trust in God.

As David Livingstone, the legendary missionary to Africa, prayed, “Lord, send me anywhere, only go with me. Lay any burden on me, only sustain me.”

And he testified, “What has sustained me is the promise, ‘Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.’”

That is truly, good times.

In the name of the God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.

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“Bacon and Eggs” 11/13/22

On a farm the animals were talking and chicken proudly said,

“I supply the eggs the farmer has every morning for breakfast. The animals nodded. Except the pig, who snorted,

“Well, I supply the bacon. You’re involved; I’m committed.”

Many of you have probably heard this business “fable” to illustrate when management wants people really committed, not just involved.

But it is true in most group activities. Most people are just involved while a minority are committed, that is, will do what they can for the enterprise to be successful—however success is defined.

That’s not necessarily a criticism; if you’re involved in a lot of things you can’t be committed to all of them.

Today’s scripture lessons deal with commitment. Let’s focus with the most troubling one on the surface: the epistle passage from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians in chapter 3, particularly verses 10-11 that say, “For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.”

Wow! That seems counter to other teaching in the New Testament both by Jesus and by Paul. But before people start “proof texting” to “morally” support public policies, you really need to understand the context.

First, this was written to a particular people for a particular issue, not a general dictum for universal application.

As we heard last week in chapter 2, Paul told the believers in Thessalonica that they need to stand firm in their faith, just as they have received it.

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In chapter 3 Paul first asks that they pray for him as he spreads the gospel, and he again reiterates a prayer that they would continue doing the good they have been instructed to do, directing them to the steadfastness of Christ.

Now in verse 6 Paul tells to “keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us.”

The Greek word here for “idle” is *ataktōs* [at-AK-toce] and only appears in these lectionary verses. Outside the New Testament the word means “disorderly or irresponsibly” and is often found within the context of battle imagery, of men not being ready at their post or ready for the fight ahead because of their disorder.

Thus, some of the people within the Thessalonian community have not stayed alert, and slipped into disordered work. Furthermore, they are “busybodies” as we have translated the Greek word *periergazomai* [per-ee-er-GAD-zom-ahee]. This is the only place the word appears in the New Testament and means “to meddle or interfere.”

Thus, we have folks who are not only refusing to do their work, they are meddling in the work of others. So, who are they and why are they acting like this? Well, we don’t know for sure, but there are few reasonable possibilities.

One is these “disorderly meddlers” are either those who believe Christ was coming soon—so why bother doing anything—or those have been led astray that the second coming has already occurred, which we heard last week that some were worried about. Thus, they do not need to hold fast to what they have been taught because the end is already upon them.

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They are no longer standing at the ready, standing fast in Christ because they see no point since Christ has already returned and they missed it. Another possibility is they were preachers or missionaries were coming in and expecting to be supported or actively trying to make a profit. Today we might think of some televangelists.

A third possibility is that they were wealthy people and thought therefore that they have no need to work either because they pay others to do it or were formerly wealthy people who gave away resources to the community, but now are “coasting” on that gift, ordering others around while expecting now to be supported by resources that they still consider, in a way, to be their own.

And there is also the possibility that there are some who came because they liked the message but are now taking advantage of the community because they are not contributing to it as they could but are reaping its benefits.

Whichever of these are the case, Paul tells them in verse 12 to work quietly and eat your own bread. In other words, stop being disruptive in the community either by what you say and do—or not do. Focus on the fulfillment of their calling. That is, work, but the work is for righteousness. To work hard so that the traditions passed on by the apostles, based on the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, might become a reality within our communities and society.

Good deeds, not presumption and meddling, ought to come as a response to God’s grace. People needing welfare is not the problem. People causing chaos in the community is.

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Today’s passage ends with the exhortation, “Do not be weary in doing what is right.” It offers a counterbalance to the idea that “anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” Rather than advising us to pursue ways to stop ourselves from helping others in need, or limiting our help only to those who prove they deserve it, Paul flips it.

He ultimately calls on the Thessalonians, and us today along the lines of:

“Don’t get tired of doing what is right. Don’t get sick of doing good. Keep on keeping on in doing good things. Never stop lifting up those around you if you can. Don’t ever give up on doing good. Do whatever good you can, whenever you can, wherever you can, in whatever ways you can — even if you don’t have to.”

For those who are focused on the end days, rather these days, I ask, “Why? What would you do differently if you knew the ‘day of the Lord’ was tomorrow? Your daily life should already reflect your belief through your actions as well as your words as you live out your faith fearlessly.

The gospel is a free gift, but it should produce a life of good works that build the community. God gifts us all to contribute, in Christian freedom and mutuality, to the good of all. “In the Lord Jesus,” we owe one another our best efforts, doing good work and serving human need out of love for one another and our Lord.

While your financial commitment to this church is important, bringing your talent is critical as well as your time. We are only here today and able to do all that we do disproportionate to our size because you are committed, not just involved; because you are not disorderly meddlers, but joyful workers in the faith, not weary in doing what is right.

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