

Acts 17:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1
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I Want to Be Famous

This morning we catch a glimpse of the early church from the vantage point of Acts and 1 Thessalonians, as we journey with the Apostle Paul. Paul—known as Saul initially—arrives on the scene earlier in Acts when he is introduced as the chief persecutor of those who follow Jesus. He is a powerful and highly educated Jewish leader who is determined to wipe out every last Jesus follower because he views them as heretics and threats to Judaism, until he is greeted by the risen Christ in a vision on his way to Damascus. In that moment, he is utterly changed and becomes a devoted Jesus follower himself. Chapters later, we learn that he is also known as Paul and that he is determined to form communities of Jesus followers throughout the Empire, in Judea and beyond.

Paul's letters are written earlier than the gospels and the book of Acts. Acts was written around 80 or 90 CE, whereas Paul's letters date from around the year 50, two decades or so after Jesus' death and resurrection. It is believed that the letter we will hear from this morning is his first letter, his first published communication with one of the many communities he started and sought to encourage as he continued his journeys. Acts and Paul's letters do not line up perfectly. With three or four decades separating them, it's understandable. Taken together, they combine to give us a sense of how the early church took shape in the face of significant opposition from inside and out. We'll begin with hearing the author's account of Paul's time in Thessalonica [Read Acts 17:1-9].

These people are turning the world upside down by claiming Jesus—and not the emperor—as king. This devotion is so threatening to those in the synagogue who cannot wrap their heads around this that they recruit ruffians to put a dramatic stop to it. It's important to recognize that this is *some* of the Jewish community in Thessalonica at the time—not all. Some heard Paul's testimony and were convinced. Others were not. Thessalonica was a bustling, cosmopolitan city. To be Jewish in that context was to be in the minority. Acts is written after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70. It is incredibly risky for anyone—Jew or Greek or anything else—to associate with, let alone side with any group that proclaims anyone other than Caesar as Lord, as King. Perhaps the ones who recruited the ruffians were acting out of genuine fear for their lives and those of their families. Perhaps it is their fear that leads them to cause an uproar, to turn the city upside down in their own way with violence and threats. The Good News of a crucified, risen, love-proclaiming, death-defeating Savior is more disruptive than we often realize. I'm not thrilled with the way these jealous ones respond. I do however think they grasp the power of Jesus in a way we too often water down and diminish. The Gospel does in fact turn the world upside down, and quite often the world—or significant parts of that world—does not like it.

And yet, there are those who embrace this topsy-turvy gospel along with those who bring it, such as Jason. We only hear the name Jason here and at the end of Romans. Scholars believe this is likely the same person. Either way, this Jason risks everything to welcome Paul and Silas, going to jail when the mob can't find the traveling troublemakers. And this risk, this emboldened hospitality becomes one of the primary things the church in that place is famous for. [Read 1 Thessalonians 1]

Jason is a saint in several Christian traditions.¹ There is a monastery in modern day Thessaloniki built where his home supposedly stood. Along with fourteen other buildings and monuments in Thessaloniki, the monastery is a world heritage site “because of its Byzantine architecture and [the] importance of Thessaloniki during early and medieval Christianity.”² But that is not why the church at Thessalonica is famous in Paul’s mind. No, the church community there, the one Jason is a part of is known throughout the region for its welcome, its fearless and faithful hospitality. Jason and the others do not dodge the mob and point the jealous ones in Paul’s direction. Paul praises them for their receiving the Gospel not simply in word but “with full conviction.”³ They embody their faith by welcoming Paul and Silas fully, not by sneaking them in under the cover of darkness, not by denying any association with them when the mob comes calling, but by hosting them fully and well and going to jail in their place. And at least in Paul’s estimation they are famous for it.

One of my favorite poets, Naomi Shihab Nye wrote a poem entitled, “Famous.” A portion of it reads:

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence,

which knew it would inherit the earth

before anybody said so...

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it

and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jason_of_Thessalonica

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vlatades_Monastery

³ 1 Thessalonians 1: 5, NRSVue

I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.⁴

You may have seen interviews on Instagram or elsewhere where ordinary people act like reporters on the street interviewing passersby about any number of things. I happen to have one, too. If I were to take my tiny mic out there, into the highways and byways of Concord, I wonder what people might say that FPC is famous for. I'm guessing people might lift up our amazing music, our fabulous preschool, our beautiful memorial garden, or the fact that our campus and the garden are picture-perfect backdrops for wedding and prom photos—all exquisite gifts to the community in which we live. They might highlight our work with Esther's Heart or Habitat or the Night Shelter or Cooperative Christian Ministry. And some might say we're awfully fancy, while others might wonder aloud if they would find a welcome here. I know Ms. Swift has moved on to the realm of Tortured Poetry, but I'm wondering what our Reputation era looks like. I want us to be famous. And—although my friends and family will tell you I have a bit of a competitive streak in me (Go Cats!)—it's not because I want us to be the most popular kid in the class.

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47993/famous>

Paul celebrates the church in Thessalonica for their faithfulness in turning a world of threats, violence, hatred, oppression, and power upside down with their determination to imitate Jesus himself. They are known for reflecting the light and life Christ offers by welcoming strangers and remaining faithful to Jesus in the face of persecution. And Paul makes it clear that his knowing about their faithfulness is not because of a carefully orchestrated PR campaign. Paul keeps hearing about the church in Thessalonica from others as he travels. Word has spread because of what the Thessalonians proclaim in word and deed, by what they say and more importantly because what they say matches what they do. Word has gotten out. The Thessalonians have a reputation not simply for talking about Jesus but for embodying fierce and generous faith in him. They are famous—like the pulley and the buttonhole in Nye’s poem—because they never forget who their one and only King is, because they never forget who and whose they are, and because they never forget what they could do in Christ’s name. We may have a reputation for many things, but it is my prayer that we as a community might be known first and foremost for our bold proclamation of the life-saving, death-defeating, grace-offering Gospel of Jesus Christ, not simply with words in here but with our very lives out there. By the grace of God, may we be that kind of famous, too, not for our glory but for God’s and God’s alone.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.