6/15/2025

Rev. Dr. Carlan Helgeson

**“FAITH BY EXAMPLE”**

1 Thessalonians 1: 2-10

 Before I launch into today’s sermon I want to acknowledge the fathers in the congregation on this Father’s Day. It has been rightly said, “Any guy can *become* a father, but it takes a special person to *be* a father.” We salute those men here today who took the time, made the effort, and kept the commitment necessary to be good fathers. Our world is a better place because of you.

 To all our oldest members who are here today, male and female, I want to say thank you for making the special effort so that we might honor you. We have mentioned by name those who are 90 and older this year because they are older than the rest of us; but many of you are closing in on that elite group, and we are honoring you, too.

 How do you get to be old? A couple of decades ago the world’s oldest person was Maria Esther Capovilla from Ecuador at age 116. She boasted that she never drank alcohol or chased men. On the other hand, Lucy d’Abreu, an Indian-born English lady, lived to be 113 and attributed her long life to a daily shot of brandy. And our own nation’s oldest person a couple of decades ago was Mary Dorothy Christian, who died at age 112, indulging often in Kentucky Fried Chicken and Hostess Twinkies! Right now the oldest living person in the world is Ethel Caterham from England who is 115. She asserts that the key to her longevity is to never argue with anyone, but rather listen politely to them and do what you want!

 Want to live long? Take your pick of advice! On the other hand, many of us know what old is without having to count candles. Here are some definitions of old:

 You know you are old when your back goes out more than you do, when everything hurts, and what doesn’t hurt, doesn’t work.

 You know you’re getting old when you feel like the morning after the night before and you haven’t been anywhere. You know you’re old when you can’t wait for Publix to come out with oat-bran ice cream, when you play the slot machines on the cruise chip and they come up three prunes.

You know you’re old when a fortune teller offers to read your face, when you need glasses to find your glasses, when you try to straighten the wrinkles in your socks and find out you’re not wearing any.

 You know you’re old when ‘Getting a little action’ means you don’t need to take a laxative today, when an ‘All nighter’ means not getting up to use the bathroom until morning, when you’re 17 around the neck, 44 around the waist, and 126 around the golf course.

 Are you old? I don’t know. One thing I can say, though, is that it happens to the best of us, and it happens so subtly. Have you ever been to a new doctor and wondered who the kid in the white coat was! When did everyone around us get so young anyway?

 Today we are honoring those who have lived a good, long while before us and have taught us faithfulness by the example of their lives. Today we celebrate you, and we are grateful.

 The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica with great fondness. His affection for them was evident as he began his letter with these words: **“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

 What beautiful words those are—words of affirmation, an expression of gratitude. Today we people of Nativity Lutheran also give thanks. We give thanks for those of you who have taught us faithfulness by the example of your lives.

 We give thanks for your work of faith.

 For some the combination of the two words “work” and “faith” may seem to be a contradiction. We always thought faith was something on the inside and work was something you could see. But the Scriptures have no illusions about the difficulty of faith. Faith is not just some mental concept, not just some attitude shift that comes upon you one day and you never have another doubt. Faith takes work to maintain! That’s why some who began in faith have dropped out of the race. They didn’t keep their faith in shape, and they had to quit when the track got too steep.

 The work of faith takes memory. Many people assert that in the aging process, your memory is the first thing to go.

 A very well-dressed gentleman in his mid-nineties with well-groomed hair, a great looking suit, flower in his lapel, and smelling of expensive cologne walks into an upscale cocktail lounge. Seated at the bar is a lady in her mid-eighties. The gentleman walks over, sits next to her, orders a drink, takes a sip, then turns to her and says, “So tell me, do I come here often?”

 An 80-year-old man’s golf game was hampered by his poor eyesight. He could hit the ball well, but he couldn’t see where it went. His doctor teamed him up with a 90-year-old man who had perfect eyesight and was willing to go along to serve as a spotter. It seemed like the perfect solution. The 80-year-old hit the first ball and asked his companion, “Did you see where it landed?”

 “Yep,” said the 90-year-old.

 “Where did it go then?” asked the 80-year-old.

 “Can’t remember,” replied the elderly spotter.

 There are some things which older people can’t remember; but then, there are a lot of things that the rest of us can’t remember either! One thing that you *do* remember that has meant a lot to us is the faith that you were taught. You remember what Jesus has done for you. You remember the promises of God. You remember your calling as Christians. The Apostle Paul wrote, **“For we know, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”** In spite of all the lapses of memory in other areas, you have remembered who you are and Whose you are. You have lived before us as God’s chosen people, ever tending the flame of faith within you.

 Out of this work of faith has come power.

 In Hershey, Pennsylvania, an elderly woman in a Mercedes had been waiting patiently for a place to park in a crowded shopping mall lot. She spotted a man with a load of packages heading for a car; so she drove up the row, parked behind him, and waited as he put away his packages and got into his vehicle. He backed out of the stall, but just before the woman could drive into the vacant space, a young man in a shiny Mustang convertible zipped past and got around her, pulling into the empty spot. He got out and started walking away when the elderly woman shouted, “Hey, I’ve been waiting for that parking place!"

 "Sorry, lady," responded the college-aged man. “That’s how it is when you’re young and quick.”

 At that moment the woman put her Mercedes into gear, pushed the pedal to the floor, and crashed into the rear fender of the flashy convertible. The man came running back, jumping up and down, and crying, “Hey, you can’t do that!”

 The lady in the Mercedes replied, “That’s how it is when you’re old and rich!”

 Power! Did you know that Baby Boomers have the highest net worth of any U.S. generation, and that they, along with the Silent Generation (those we are honoring today), control the majority of this country’s wealth? But the kind of power Paul is speaking about is not financial power, but spiritual power. It is the power that comes not from one’s own initiative, but rather from God’s gracious hand. We have seen that power at work in you who still, to this day, read daily devotionals in your home. After all these years you still return to your Creator each day, and by your words, you prove your trust in the Lord.

 You have taught us about the Holy Spirit. I marvel at the joy of those who are mostly shut-in and can no longer drive at night or participate in all the activities of the church they once enjoyed. Even so, their smiles are infectious! Where does joy come from when you can no longer do what your heart desires to do? Surely from the Holy Spirit, whose filling brings the fruit of joy!

 Comedian Michael Pritchard quipped,
“You don’t stop laughing because you grow old; you grow old because you stop laughing.” We are grateful to those of you who have not stopped laughing in spite of the challenges of your life. We are grateful to you, who, by your sense of humor and love of life, have proven your faith and revealed that God is at work in you though the Holy Spirit. We revel in the wisdom that comes from the wounded in body who say, “God is my joy and strength each day.”

 Your work of faith, your fanning the flames of a long-ago conversion to the Lord, has taught us conviction. You have shown it by your life and incredible determination to stay faithful to what we know is true.

 When I think about those who have not been in worship for a long while out of laziness or lack of interest, I marvel at you who hobble into the sanctuary on Sunday mornings with walkers, canes, and oxygen tanks. It would be so much easier just to stay home, and no one would question your excuses. But you prove by your work of faith that God is important in your life. By your example, many of us are ashamed of thinking that church attendance is of little value.

The same could be said of those who weekly sit before a television screen to watch the Sunday service live or on video. If you have ever watched a tape of the service, you know how tedious it can sometimes be. Why do they do it? Because they are convinced that it is important in their lives! They are working out their faith. Thank you for the example of your work of faith!

We give thanks for your labor of love.

In today’s culture it is hard to define “love.” There are so many variations, so many shades of meaning and distortions of what the Bible terms love. In our Epistle lesson for today, however, Paul masterfully weeds out many of the phony definitions of love by using a simple word: labor. The love he is talking about is not some ecstatic feeling, not some emotional lift devoid of commitment, but rather a love that demonstrates itself in plain hard work.

Love that does not show itself in labor is not love. Who of you is satisfied with what just looks good?

A doctor was talking to a woman about the condition of her husband who was in the hospital for a medical evaluation. “Frankly, I don’t like the looks of your husband,” the physician admitted gravely.

“Oh, I don’t either,” replied the wife, “but he’s got a wonderful personality and has been a good provider.”

Speaking of the faithful witness of the Thessalonian Christians, the Apostle Paul wrote, **“In spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”** Their faith became known not by their words, but by their example. Their lives became visible labors of love.

That’s the kind of examples that we are grateful for this morning among our own—the model of a life that reflects the very character of Jesus. Sometimes this example is dramatic, when people surrender their lives to help another. Sometimes the example is quiet and invisible to those who are not paying attention.

I don’t have any illusions about the work it takes to maintain love. Some of the people I have married in the past have divorced within months. They wanted to be takers, not givers; they wanted to enjoy the rewards without doing any of the work. But love is work, darn hard work sometimes! Jill and I celebrated our 48th anniversary this past week. Just ask her how challenging it has been to put up with me!

Love takes work. It’s no different in the church of Jesus. To love means to sacrifice—sacrifice your feelings when others don’t show any gratitude for what you’ve done, sacrifice your opinion when the church votes differently from you, sacrifice your time and physical labor when others seem only to sit on the sidelines and criticize.

Some of the wrinkled hands around you have put in hundreds of hours of physical labor and spiritual dedication to keep this congregation doing well for the past 40 years. They have pounded nails, moved boxes, climbed ladders, washed floors, made food, washed dishes, taught children, and taken positions of responsibility when others feared to lead. They have been deacons, Assistant Ministers, Communion Visitors, Council members, committee chairpersons, food pantry volunteers, musicians, teachers, and leaders in women’s ministries. These saints have labored long. They have raised money and counted money and given money. And many still do! Their responsibility to make Nativity Lutheran successful goes beyond even their ability to attend. Even from nursing homes and retirement homes, they keep supporting this ministry. Even when they receive less in benefits than the rest of us, they still give with joy.

Sometimes we get this foolish idea in our heads that the oldest members of an organization have nothing left to give, that they are no longer valuable, that their day of contributing to the church is past. This is plain foolishness!

A lady sued the city of New York because a drunken police officer had struck and killed her 71-year-old husband with his patrol car. She argued that the city had deprived her of her husband’s future earnings potential. The city argued that, at age 71, he had little earnings potential left. They thought they had a pretty good case against her; but in the end, they settled out of court for a whopping two million dollars. Why the change of heart? Her case was vigorously defended by an 88-year-old attorney! The city never had a chance!

Moses was 80 years old and his brother Aaron was 83 when God called them to lead hundreds of thousands of Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. Many of you are just as old and are leading people out of bondage to foolishness and selfishness by your service in the church. All of this is to say: Don’t give up before your time! George Burns quipped, “You can’t help getting older, but you don’t have to get old!” One of the things I like about living in Florida is that people don’t seem old because there are so many of them doing incredible things; I’m constantly astonished when I find out how many birthdays they’ve had and, quite frankly, I’m always shocked when they die in the midst of an active life. Yes, there is a time to let the younger generation take the reins, but don’t use that excuse to put out your light. You have given much and still have much to give.

Thank you for your work of faith! Thank you for your labor of love.

Lastly, we give thanks for your steadfastness of hope.

Just before a funeral service the undertaker came up to the elderly widow and said, “I understand your husband was ninety-eight years old.”

“Yes, ninety-eight,” she replied. “Two years older than me.”

“So, you’re ninety-six?” the mortician commented.

“Yes,” she responded. Then she added, “Hardly worth going home, is it?”

I know people like that, people who have given up on life, people who are always asking “Why doesn’t the Lord come and take me home?” Don’t let yourself get into thinking like that. You have so much left to give!

A few years ago a group of psychologists, anthropologists, and therapists discovered an amazing thing: that old age was often a time *not* defined by sorrow, dread, and regret, but rather by peace, gratitude, and fulfillment. They attributed this unexpected attitude to a few things common to the elderly: The elderly knew from experience how to separate what is really important from what is not worthy of worry. The elderly stopped beating their heads against the wall for failures and enjoyed the freedom of not having to try to impress anyone. The elderly had an ability to normalize crises because they had weathered so many of them; they were no longer controlled by disappointment.

When I read that, all I could think was “Wow! What a wonderful sense of balance and hope!”

As I stood, looking at the smoldering ashes of the sanctuary of one of my previous churches, thinking about all that was lost for me and the congregation; one of the oldest members came alongside me and said, “We’ll get through this.” I’ll never forget those words of encouragement, and the new sanctuary we built was the most beautiful of all.

If ever you feel discouraged in life and don’t know what to do, go straight to the oldest members and listen to them. They have been through a lifetime of trials. They have failed, have lived through wars and disasters, diseases and despair, lived through the deaths of those they loved the most. And yet they still have hope—wonderful, beautiful, life-giving hope. Their gray hair is not a symbol of defeat, but of endurance against the odds. It is the silver crown of faithfulness which they wear until they exchange it someday for the golden crown of heaven.

Those we honor today are living examples of what hope can do—many are crippled from arthritis, others are living with coronary bypasses and pacemakers, some are dependent on heart medications, insulin, and pain killers just to make it through the day. Every way they turn it seems like they are facing into the wind; and yet, they keep on waiting, waiting patiently in hope, living in confidence in spite of all the threats. They show us what is means to live with a future.

Paul wrote about those who **turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.**

That’s what these elderly members are like. They have had a long history; but what is more evident in their lives is they have a long future. Jesus is their hope. Like Simeon and Anna in the temple, waiting to see the Savior, they don’t give up. They live out their lives in the presence of the One who shall abide with them today, tomorrow, and forever. Today we thank you for that steadfastness of hope. You may well reach heaven’s gates before we do, but we shall always remember your hope. It is our inspiration.

And so we say to the oldest members of Nativity Lutheran today: “Thank you for teaching us faithfulness by example. We have seen your work of faith, your labor of love, and your steadfastness of hope. We honor you. We appreciate you. We love you. And when the next generation looks back upon *our* lives, we pray that we shall be the examples to them that you have been to us.”

Amen.