

King's Chapel

330th Anniversary of King's Chapel

June 12, 2016

A sermon by the Rev. Shawn M. Fiedler, Assistant Minister

1 Thessalonians 1:1-9

Letters

When I was younger than I am now, my mother would task me with what I thought was the worst chore. If ever I had received a gift or an invitation to a friend's home or a birthday card in the mail, I knew this task was coming. No matter how hard I tried to hide from the task at hand, I could not escape her eye. I would emerge from my bedroom in the morning and next to my breakfast would be a pen and paper: *thank you notes*.

I dreaded them. While I was grateful, thank you notes were tedious, boring and difficult to write. What made it worse was that I was convinced that if I wrote those thank you notes, those letters, the receiver would think I wanted to keep up the correspondence. I feared that if I wrote them back, they would write back, and so on. I was convinced that I alone (by charge of my mother) was keeping the United States Postal Service alive.

Now, I realize what my mother was doing. There is something special about receiving a note in the mail. Something that a passing conversation or a telephone call just can't accomplish. I think you know what I mean.

When we look around or open our post box or ask if the mail has arrived, we aren't looking for store catalogues or bills. We are hoping for a note, a card, a letter from a loved one.

Throughout human history, letters have kept us going. They have provided hope. Whether it was an update from an old friend who has since moved away, or a love letter from our beloved who we are not yet united with, or news from a loved one on the front lines of battle.

Letters are special. They are unique.

Saint Paul was charged with a mission—to plant churches around the Mediterranean—from the coast of Greece, to Rome, from Jerusalem to Syria. Paul traveled spreading the message of an unknown Jesus Christ and planting Christian communities with nothing but a new image of God and of creation.

Christianity was still in its infancy. We were still learning the language, the customs, the stories. The Gospels, those stories of Jesus, were taught simply by word of mouth. There was no structure, no grand buildings, no prayerbook. There was little tradition to keep these fragile communities bound to one another or bound to other Christian communities around the region. Aside from God, Paul was the common denominator—the one who connected, who held the churches together. And while these fledgling communities might have benefited from having Paul stay with them—his mission was to plant, to nurture, then move on and start again. So as

Paul went from community to community, he stayed in contact with them. Offering advice, giving guidance, reminding them of their commitment to God and to one another.

So when that letter arrived in Thessaloniki it was a special occasion. This particular letter is most likely the first letter to ever arrive to any of the churches Paul worked with.¹ And so it is very likely that this letter, the first letter to the Thessalonians is the oldest piece of writing in the New Testament—older even than the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.² But that's not what made it special.

What makes this letter special is who it came from and what is said.

When Paul left them, he said he would write them. When he left those early Christians he reminded them of all that they had been through together. How hard he had pushed them day and night to start this new way of being. How he had revealed to them a God that took their breath away—and inspired them to live lives modeled by the example of Jesus. As Paul left, he looked them in the eye and said he would write.³

Finally that letter had arrived. And the one to first receive it exclaimed, “A Letter from Paul!” So within minutes I'm sure news began to spread. The Christians around the region started to gather, crowding into a small room, as a literate one among them took the parchment in hand and began to read: *Grace and Peace*.

The reader reads aloud the words of Paul and the gathered ones hold their breath. Paul compliments them on their works of faith, their labor of love, their steadfast hope. He encourages them. He tells that what they are doing matters, that the Christian lives they are living matters. He tells them of what he has heard about them, of their faith, of their welcome. And they felt loved.

I'm sure this was not the last time this letter was read aloud. The letter was tucked away, put into safe keeping, Then taken out to be read again and again. Encouragement. Hope.

¹ 52 A.D.

² *Although some scholars disagree, the vast majority of researchers believe that Mark was the first Gospel to be written, sometime around the year 70. This scholarly consensus holds that the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke were composed, independently of one another, sometime in the 80s or 90s. Both used a written form of the Gospel of Mark as source material for their own narratives. In addition, because both Matthew and Luke contain a large amount of material in common that is not found in Mark, most researchers hold that both Evangelists also had a collection of Jesus' sayings that they incorporated into their works. This saying source is known as "Q" and was likely assembled in the 40s or 50s. This understanding of the origins of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke explains why they are similar yet different from one another. The arrangement is called "The Two-Source Hypothesis" because Matthew and Luke are seen to have two written sources, Mark and Q.* (Boston College, The Dating of the Gospels)

³ Thoughts adapted from sermon given by the Rev. Brent Damrow, October 16, 2011

We kept letters. Perhaps we store them in a shoebox in the hall closet. Or perhaps we delicately wrap them in string, placed in our dressers drawers. When a parent or grandparents dies, we often find letters. Treasured and kept. Yellowed and worn. And when a 94 year old woman I came to know was nearing her time on earth, she asked for many things. She asked for prayers and for anointing, but she also asked that in her waning moments we read aloud letters her beloved—who had long been gone— had wrote her as he was stationed overseas at war.

Letters have kept the tale of human history going. They have often been the key source for weaving together the story of our existence as a people.

The story of King's Chapel—of our founding, of our struggles, of our new beginnings—has been fashioned and told through letters. If you had the chance to dwell within our archives or to thumb through our history books you would find thousands of letters.

It begins with the letters of the puritan establishment—those who founded Boston—writing one another with fear and trembling as the Mother Country and the Mother Church sent it's first Anglican minister to New England with the puritan banned prayerbook in tow!

Letters sent back and forth to officials in England as our first minister tried to plant and grow the Church of England in hostile soil.

Letters to friend and foe alike as this newborn community was trying to find its way amidst great opposition

Letters from the Crown and from the Church as we ascended to a political and religious power in British Boston.

News of birth or death, of wars and battles, of the coronation of kings and newly sought independence, all told through letters.

And when the tide changed and we fell from influence and prominence in this budding democracy, when it looked like our days were done, a letter to a young 20-something seminarian requesting his leadership brought this place back to life.⁴

Yes, King's Chapel, we are a people whose story has been told through letters.

And in continues. We receive countless letters, cards, notes (and emails). And your clergy and staff have the humbling opportunity to read them.

We receive letters from around the world: Letters from clerics and scholars, letters from our Partner Church in Kolosvar and from our Mother Church in England, letters from visitors who came to our worship, heard our music, learned our history. We receive letters from those who wish they lived closer—and those who doubt we should exist, letters from those whose ancestors

⁴ Letter from Senior Warden Bulfinch to James Freeman, September 8, 1782.

have been carried by the prayers of this church—baptized, married, buried, letters from those whom we have touched in ways unimaginable.

Then there are letters we have received, I have received, that shake me to my core. Letters you might not know about. Letters, emails, I receive nearly every few weeks. In fact, one just this week. And they sound a lot like this:

Dear Sir, Dear Reverend Fiedler, Dear Shawn,

The reason I'm sending this letter, this email, is not all that clear. I found your name through the King's Chapel website. I wish so much that a church like this existed near me. I wish so much that a church as beautiful as yours, with venerable music as yours, with a history as fascinating as yours, existed where I live. But most of all, I wish a church like yours—a church that gives the freedom and grace—to live as God created me to be. I struggle, Reverend Fiedler, Shawn, because I am a Christian, but I also think I'm gay. There have been more nights than not when I wish I could take it away. I wish I could extract this part of me. I wish this identity, this life of mine would die, would fade away. I wish beyond all of my being that I could change. I have felt so disordered. I have felt so wrong. I have thought perhaps I should end this, throw myself away. Perhaps if I did that, my friends would notice me, my parents wouldn't love me more.

Then, through some miracle, I found out about churches like yours—churches that with the very grace of God open their hearts and minds, open their doors to those who feel lost. Those who feel unwelcomed. Those who feel rejected. And it gave me hope to get through, to live another day.

I hope to have the chance to visit one day.

Grace and Peace.

And because my mother thought me that no gift, no letter goes unanswered, we respond. On behalf of you, I respond. I tell them what you would want them to know: that they are loved, of great value, and worth. I tell them that they should repeat that to themselves as many times as they can stand it. I tell them to keep up their hope. I tell them that when I feel down and out, when I feel hopeless, when I feel the world getting darker—I am reminded of *you*, the people of King's Chapel, you who take on the very identity of God.

I am reminded of you who make music that carries us to the very throne of heaven and of you who makes sure not one person leaves without being offered a sweet treat of cup of coffee after worship. I am reminded of those who will not stop fighting until homelessness ends. I am reminded of those of you who walk and march for peace, for hunger, for the dignity of all. I am reminded of those who write and take meals, and call upon those members and friends of ours who are ill, or homebound, or having a tough time. I am reminded of those who take it as their responsibility, their call to approach those fresh faces those newcomers standing alone after the service—to welcome, to embrace.

I tell them about you—*the living love letters from God*—bringing more grace and peace into the world. I tell them about you, King's Chapel, because you stand as a beacon of light and hope in a world that needs it.

Letters. They are open diaries. They are portals to our pulsing hearts. They tell of our fears, our loves, our passions, and desires. The letters we receive bound us to those who sent them. And the letters we send bound us to those who receive them.

Letters tell a story, not just about what we write, but how we live.

And you, King's Chapel, live in such a way, *shine* in such a way, that those from far away can notice, can feel it, are given hope—hope to live another day.

330 years. 330 years giving hope. 330 years bold.

Well done, King's Chapel. Well done. Happy Birthday.

Thanks be to God. Amen.