

The Difference We Can Make
1 Thessalonians 5: 11-19
Don Lincoln

I love those stories that are passed on to me in a variety of ways – sometimes personally, sometimes in a letter, sometimes on the internet that illustrate how the heart CAN lead you and me – if we're open to and looking for an opportunity – how our heart can lead us to build others up; to turn a moment of concern or anxiety or disturbance into an opportunity for blessing or wonder or joy.

At the recent Global Leadership Summit, I heard one of the speakers tell such a story.

Massimo Bottura is the chef and owner of Osteria Francescana, a Michelin 3-star restaurant in Modena, Italy. One of the top 50 restaurants in the world. You can imagine the wait time to get a reservation; but when you do get to go there, imagine how good the food and the service is.

As the chef was walking into the kitchen surveying how things were going that evening, his sous chef, Taka Kondo, accidentally dropped a lemon tart upside down on the plate as he was preparing to serve it. He was mortified. He was not one to make mistakes. He was beside himself. He looked up just as the chef came through the door into the kitchen and he expected a sound chastisement.

But what took place was not a dressing down. "Taka" – said Chef Bottura. You have created our new dessert! **Deconstructed lemon tart.** Brilliant!



Brilliant indeed! The deconstructed Lemon Tart is now the signature dessert of this restaurant; the most iconic and the most ordered dish on the menu.

But imagine what would've happened if Chef Bottura had not been so thoughtful, or open to taking a moment to ponder – "Can I redeem this mistake, can I redeem this circumstance?" Or, if he had simply reacted as so many of us would have expected, or would have ourselves if we had been chef?

Like the following phone call.....wife calling husband.

"Honey, I've been in an accident?"

"What? In the new car? What did you do? Is the car totaled? Don't talk to anyone. Don't admit anything! Where are you, I'll drive right there.

"I don't know where the car is. I'm in the hospital about to go into surgery. I wanted to make sure you knew." OOPS!

What does it mean to transform a difficult situation by your reaction, as Chef Massimo did with his sous chef?

After last week's sermon, suggesting in every interaction you and I either give life, or drain life, I felt nudged to stay the course of that theme. My thinking is that you can't talk about "building up" too many times and emphasize this idea of how can we be an encouragement. Last Sunday was largely about watching your tongue. Be angry; but don't sin. Let no evil come out of your mouth.

Listen again to Paul. "Encourage one another, build up each other as you are doing. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another."

The beginning of the fifth chapter of first Thessalonians is all about the coming day of the Lord – the day Jesus will return – and Paul reminds those in Thessalonica that no one knows when that day is coming. So, Paul says, stop worrying about it, stop fretting about it, stop focusing on it, stop wasting time trying to calculate its exact arrival. Instead, be found doing what it is you have been called to do. Building up and encouraging others.

While I'm loath to compare our time to that time – some of us are feeling like the Thessalonians when it comes to the "day of the end of COVID." When will this all be over? Who knows? It's clear we've been lulled into thinking we knew the end was near, AND IT WASN'T! So – let us be about our tasks in the meantime. Building up one another, praying at all times; encouraging others and giving thanks we have not been abandoned. Listen to how specific Paul gets about what we're supposed to do about folks around us:

Admonish the idlers. Literally, "idlers" is a word used to describe someone insubordinate or undisciplined, like a soldier who has left their post. But you and I shouldn't take it to mean only military personnel. We all know anyone texting while driving has "left their post." And should be admonished.

A refusal to work for the good – to participate – being disorderly or disruptive – not playing well with others – that's the sense of what this verse is about. But instead of immediately imagining the people WE KNOW who don't play well with others – we would all do well to recognize each and every one of us can be guilty of not being an "upbuilder" or an "encourager" as Christ followers.

Encourage the fainthearted. Fainthearted literally means small of soul. This is the only place the word shows up in the entire New Testament. It does show up one time in the Old Testament in the Greek translation – Isaiah 35:4 – "Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear."¹ Encourage or give courage to those who have lost their courage; those who are afraid; those who for whatever reason fear the worst, who need others to be brave **FOR** them and brave **WITH** them.

Listening on the news this week I heard of a woman who hadn't been vaccinated because she literally panics at the thought of needles. A friend of hers – a nurse – worked with the woman and her doctor to get her a very mild anti-anxiety drug, and then went with her to the clinic, sat and talked to her and held her hand while the vaccine was given. Encourage the fainthearted.

Instead of the usual reaction – “Stop being such a baby!” – the friend recognized some of us have inordinate fears that are difficult to overcome. Spiders. Mice. Small elevators. Shots. Build one another up. Encourage the fainthearted. How many of us belittle or ignore the fears of our children, forgetting that fear isn't always rational – and can be very real and paralyzing. Encourage the fainthearted, help the weak.

What Paul is saying is don't just make nice with people – to the weak, the fainthearted, the disorderly, the distressed, the susceptible, the faultfinders, the problem pointers – rather he suggests active involvement that seeks their good because their good is going to be good for the whole body.

Scholar NT Wright says – “This is about mutual influence. Each of us has the responsibility to look out for the needs of the others, to give comfort, warning, strengthening and example wherever necessary. We are not to be the people who just avoid trouble and hope for the best. One must actively go after – PURSUE is the operative word – what will be good for others, because what's good for them will ultimately be good for all of us.”²

Concluding ALL of these commendations – Paul writes, “**Be patient with all of them!**” Really? Be patient? “Oh, she does try my patience.” Would you like a list? It can be hard to be patient. How often it is our instinct to do the opposite. How hard not to react to things we consider ignorant, or silly or stupid – and instead, to be patient with them.



To look for another way to encourage somebody – to turn the circumstance around so that something good takes place.

Pope Francis was giving an audience to a group from the Special Olympics. Little Gemma presented Francis with a pair of red sneakers from the Special Olympics team. And instead of returning to her seat as she was supposed to do, she climbed into the bishop's chair behind the Pope spontaneously.

While her parents were shouting from their seats, “Stop!”, “Stop!”, Gemma shook her head and called out “Papa!” to attract the attention of Pope Francis.

You and I should not be surprised that Francis welcomed her to remain, and held her hand.

After all, this is the man who washes not the feet of cardinals on Maundy Thursday but who goes to the prison and washes feet of those incarcerated. Something he's been doing a long time before he became the Pope.

Jesus was ALWAYS surprising others with his unexpected responses. Like a woman caught in adultery. A group of men, fingers curled around stones; "Surely Jesus will let her have it."

Indeed, Jesus deals with the woman accordingly. "Go – and sin no more." But not until he suggests to everyone gathered with a rock in their hand – "Which of you is without sin? Go ahead. Step up to the mound and let it fly." He transformed the circumstance for the good of all.

What if people were surprised by our response to circumstances – even an upside down lemon tart, or a child out of place, or someone scared of shots – because you or I stopped, and took stock – and asked if this was an opportunity to encourage the fainthearted, support the weak, lift up the downtrodden when so many others would just push them out of the way, tell them to buck up, get a life, get out of the way, get a move on?

When Boston Red Sox Player Wade Boggs played third base at Yankee Stadium, one of the Yankee fans made it his mission in life to harass him. The man had a box seat close to the field and would torment Boggs with obscenities and insults for the duration of every game. Finally, Boggs decided he'd had enough.

As the man began with his typical insults while Boggs was out in his warm up routine, Boggs walked directly over to the man and said, "Are you the guy who's always yelling at me?"

"Yeah – it's me. Whatcha gonna do about it?"

Boggs took a brand new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, and tossed it to the man, and went back to the field to continue his pre-game routine. The man became one of Wade Boggs's biggest fans at Yankee Stadium.³ You and I can be agents of transformation by the way we react. You and I can make a difference, building up, encouraging, and changing the trajectory of almost any circumstance.

May it be so! Amen.

1. Beverly Gaventa, Interpretation Commentary on Thessalonians.
2. NT Wright, Paul for Everyone, Commentary on Thessalonians.