

“Self-concept.” Are you familiar with that term? “Self-concept” is what you think of yourself. It can range from having very positive opinion about yourself to having very negative opinion about yourself. It often depends on what others think of you.

That's why, for a child, a parent's unconditional love is vital. That's why, as you grow up, friends, reputation and peer pressure influence how you see yourself. Even as an adult, you try to be a good worker, a good friend, a good spouse, a good parent, a good neighbor because of the way others compliment you and provide that that positive “self-concept.”

Along those same lines, have you ever wondered what your pastor thinks of you? Interesting question, isn't it? Well, this morning, based on the apostle Paul's words to his members in Thessalonica, I'm going to tell you what I, as your pastor, think about you, the members of St. Paul's, Cudahy. Are you ready? You're sure? Here it is: **Continue ... in Your Faith, Your Love and Your Endurance!**

It was Paul who established this congregation in northern Greece during the second of his three missionary journeys. This would have been about 20 years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection. Sadly, due to persecution by Jewish people living in Thessalonica, Paul had to move on much sooner than he would have liked.

And even though he was away, he kept up on what was happening there and even wrote back to the congregation twice. Those two letters are the NT Bible books of First and Second Thessalonians.

Paul starts off his second letter the same way he started off his first letter, with the names of those who wrote it: **Paul, Silas and Timothy**. Then, the writer(s) would typically identify for whom the letter was intended: **To the church of the Thessalonians**.

Paul tacks on a subtle but descriptive word to explain how tight and close their connection was with God ... *in* ... **God our Father and the Lord Jesus**

**Christ**. “*In*” emphasizes they were safely wrapped up in the loving arms and of the Father and his Son. The triple name for God's Son used 4 times in these verses emphasizes 3 things about him ... **Lord** – *he's the true God*, **Jesus** – *he's the Savior from sin*, and **Christ** – *he's the One chosen by God*.

It never takes long in any of Paul's 13 NT letters to use his favorite words: **Grace and peace**. God's **grace** or undeserved love is the only, only cause for our salvation. **Peace** is the result of our salvation. We're no longer God's enemies. We're now family.

Apparently, the news he had been getting about the Thessalonians since he wrote the first letter was very good. **We are always obligated to thank God for you, brothers, as is fitting, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love that each and every one of you has for one another is increasing.**

They not only were surviving the bitter persecution because of their faith, they were thriving. Each bit of news made Paul realize their faith was **growing** and their love for each other was **increasing**.

What a congregation! No, they weren't perfect. They were imperfect sinners, like us. But they forgave each other for their sins. They overlooked their weaknesses. Difficult times can often make people turn on each other. Their struggles made their faith and their bond with each other stronger.

Getting stronger in their faith and love wasn't something they did on their own. Sure they made faithful use of the Word and Sacraments in worship like Paul urged. But it was the Holy Spirit who continued to work through those means of grace to make them stronger.

Whenever he got a report about them, Paul spoke a prayer of thanks to God for them. Besides speaking words of thanks to God, Paul also spoke to other congregations about their growth. What an inspiring example they were for other Christians ... then and now! You name it – sickness, sadness, poverty, persecution, disappointment – they suffered it. Yet they endured all of it with the faith given to them by God the Holy Spirit.

Their faith in the face of persecution did not go unnoticed. God used it to encourage other congregations going through similar things. And, God used it to encourage the Thessalonians themselves.

There's a lesson here for us. God gives us the ability to grow in faith and love especially in times of trials and personal tragedies, just like the Thessalonians. When troubles come, God doesn't want us to wander off. He expects us to listen more closely to his Word. That's where and when he increases our faith and love.

Two of today's hymns were written in response to personal tragedies. The one we just sang, *"It Is Well with My Soul,"* was written by Horatio Spafford. He and his wife Anna had a son and four daughters. He lost his 4-year old son to scarlet fever, and within a matter of weeks lost all four daughters when the boat Anna and his daughters were on heading for England sank in the Atlantic Ocean. He wrote the words we sang as he headed for England to reunite with his wife, one of only a handful of survivors.

The one we'll sing next, *"What a Friend We Have in Jesus,"* was written by Joseph Scriven after losing his bride-to-be the day before their wedding when she drowned in a boating accident.

In their personal tragedies neither pushed God away, both turned to God. How many times have those hymns have been sung and tears shed? How many times have their words have given comfort, courage and strength to other Christians?

It's easy for Christians who are undergoing trials to think of them as somehow God is punishing them for their sins. Persecution is actually the proof that they belong to Christ. If we didn't belong to Christ, we wouldn't be suffering for being a Christian. Paul points to our trials as: **evidence of God's righteous verdict that resulted in your being counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you also suffer that our God will make you worthy of your calling.** By faith in Jesus both they and you are declared **"worthy," of God's kingdom and of your calling.** Or, to use the words of Luther we confessed earlier: *"to live under him in his kingdom and serve him."*

To live for and serve your Savior and King is your calling.

What did Pastor Paul think about his congregation? He appreciated them for three things, really: **their FAITH is growing, their LOVE is increasing and their ENDURANCE in all persecutions and trials.**

How about your pastor? What do I think of you? I'm appreciative, too!

- When I come to work each day, I think about the privilege you've given me to serve you with the good news of Jesus.
- When we gather for worship, I'm so glad to see you here.
- When we cross paths in public you always say *"Hi, pastor."* That brings a smile to my face.

I'm thankful for you as your pastor for the same reasons Pastor Paul was thankful for his congregation ... that you **continue in your faith, your love, and your endurance.**

- I'm thankful that, when you're here, it's evidence of your faith in Jesus. And you're safely wrapped up in the loving arms of the Father and his Son.
- I'm thankful for your love for one another. Love that leads you to gather together, to sing, to confess, to pray and to listen together week after week.
- I'm thankful for your endurance. Although we don't face the same sort of persecution the Thessalonians faced, it's become less common in our culture to gather together for worship. And yet you do it. And I'm very thankful for that.

So, what is your "self-concept"? What do you think about yourself? To be honest, it doesn't matter what you or I or anyone else thinks about you. What matters is what God thinks about you.

- He thinks you're great! Jesus' perfectly accomplished what you never could.
- He thinks you're flawless! Jesus' innocent suffering and death made the sins you committed disappear.
- He thinks you're the best! You're worth every drop of Jesus' holy precious blood.