

Toad Kissing
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
11/16/08 - Mike Magee
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Collect

We gather together, God, as your faithful people, secure in salvation, drawn to our destiny. You are the light. You are love. Come, Lord Jesus. Wrath is not your intended destiny for our lives. You want to find us, rescue us, save us. We are sinners. Call us into the light of your most holy day. Amen.

We are discouraged

Paul dictates a letter to the people of the European city of Thessalonica. He says, "There is peace and security, and then sudden destruction will come, ... and there will be no escape."

Sometimes we're like the battered fighter: He heard his trainer say between rounds, "Champ, you're going great! His aim laid a glove on you!" The champ says, "Well, you better keep an eye on the referee then, because somebody in this ring is beating the daylights outta me."

Some of us don't know how we got where we are, but we feel like we are getting the daylights beat out of us.

Jerry Clower tells a story about one of his friends going raccoon hunting. They take some coon dogs at night, and they start barking at the foot of a tree. His friend goes up the tree to get the coon and finds a mountain lion. Between the mountain lion screams and his friend's screams Jerry freezes, and does not know what to do. Finally there is a lull in the screams, and his friend calls down to Jerry and asks him to shoot the mountain lion. Jerry yells back up that he can't, that he might hit his friend. Jerry's friend yells back down, to just go ahead and shoot, that one of them, his friend or the mountain lion, one of them has got to have some relief.

A comedian once said, "Lotta self-help tapes out there. Bought one called "How to Handle Disappointment." I got it home and the box was empty."

Humanism tells us we can do pull out of our blue funk all by ourselves. Scripture tells us we can't. We need help both from God and from other people.

One fellow was asked by an acquaintance, "What are you thinking of, my friend? You look so depressed." "My future," came the reply. "Well, what makes it look so hopeless and dismal?" asked his friend. "My past," he replied glumly.

Sometimes we are so caught up in our past we forget what scripture tells us. That God promises us that tomorrow is not going to be a repeat of today, unless we refuse the companionship of other people and of God.

But sometimes we cannot find that companionship.

We suffer from compassion fatigue

A city fellow came to a fork in the road. An old farmer was standing in a field nearby. "Hey, old-timer," shouted the man, "does it make any difference which road I take?" The old man answered, "Not to me, it doesn't."

You may have heard about a woman who rounded the street corner and came upon a man with a heart attack lying on the sidewalk. Suddenly, she was grateful for the CPR course she had recently completed at the Y. "I was going for a walk today," she told her husband later, "and saw this poor man lying on the sidewalk who had just had a cardiac arrest." "Then," she continued, "all my first-aid training came back to me, and I bent down and put my head between my knees to keep from fainting!"

A rabbit being chased by a dog through the countryside was observed by a crowd enjoying a family picnic. They cheered for the rabbit as he swiftly hopped from side to side, masterfully eluding his attacker. Then the rabbit pulled away from the dog a great distance, looked at the crowd and said, "I appreciate your encouragement, but shoot the dog!"

We live in a generation of me, myself, and I. It is all about us. We cannot see other people and their needs. We suffer from compassion fatigue. But Paul tells the church at Thessalonica not to fall asleep, but to keep awake. Keep a look out for those who need companionship.

In a delightful PEANUTS cartoon strip, Lucy says, "Guess what...If you don't tell me that you love me, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to hold my breath until I pass out!" Looking up from his piano, Schroeder informs her, "Breath-holding children is an interesting phenomenon... It could indicate a metabolic disorder... A forty milligram dose of Vitamin B6 twice a day might be helpful...I think that's probably it... You need Vitamin B6...you might also consider eating more bananas, avocados and beef liver..." As he goes back to his piano, Lucy sighs, "I ask for love, and all I get is beef liver!"

Sometimes all we need to do to help another is to listen. All we need to do is listen. Not prescribe beef liver. Not give advice. Not show off. Just listen.

A mother was telling her young daughter of the passion and death of Jesus. She explained how people were upset with Jesus, how they wanted to punish him, how they

crowned him with thorns, how they whipped him, how they forced him to carry a cross, and how finally, they nailed him to the cross and killed him.

The little girl thought for a moment and then asked: "Mommy, why were they so hard on Him? Couldn't they have just sent Him to His room?"

God feels our pain both as our crucified God, and as the parent of a child who suffers. So if the creator and ruler of the entire universe, who has a lot more on his plate than just you and me, if he can feel our pain, why can't you and I? Why can't you and I feel the pain of the person sitting in the pew next to us, of our fellow worker, of our family member?

Yes, you and I make the time to listen. Listen to the stranger. Listen to the friend. Listen to our spouse. Listen to our children. Listen to ourselves. Listen to God. Because God calls us to be with each other.

God calls us to be with each other

A dejected basketball coach entered a telephone booth after losing a recent high school tournament. When he lacked the 35 cents, he called to a passing student, "Hey, lend me 35 cents so I can call a friend."

Grinning sourly, the student reached in his pocket and handed the coach two quarters and two dimes. "Here's seventy cents, Coach; call all your friends."

In a church we have many friends. More than just one or two.

There is a story about two sociologists walking down the street. They see a man lying at the curb who is covered with cuts and bruises from a terrible mugging. One of the sociologists turns to his colleague and says, "Whoever did this terrible deed really needs our help."

Sometimes we worry more about the perpetrator than about the victims.

"The Lottery" is short story about a small farming community with a dark secret. Every year, the people conduct a lottery; the "winner" of the lottery is stoned to death in the town square. The townspeople view this ritual of human sacrifice as a necessary way of maintaining their way of life. "The Lottery" was originally written to demonstrate the evils of blindly following society's morals. It was written four years after the end of World War II, when the world was still grappling with the horrors of Nazism, and a whole German culture that condoned the massacre of 6 million Jews. But here's what is disturbing. One teacher reports that her well-educated college students weren't really disturbed by the ending of the story. In fact, few of them considered it wrong. One

student commented, "If it's part of a person's culture . . . and if it has worked for them," then how can we call it wrong?

Sometimes we focus more on society problems than on the person suffering in front of us.

There is some ugliness we do not wish to condone. We do not condone murder. We do not condone pedophiles or other sexual predators. We do not condone the atrocities of Nazi Germany. Or the atrocities of our own country in the Trail of Tears. These are not behaviors we condone. Jesus tells us to hate the sin and love the sinner, but we CAN build up people without encouraging their antisocial behavior. I am not suggesting we hug and kiss Ted Bundy or Pac Man Jones. But we CAN accept them as children of God without accepting their BEHAVIOR. And we can strengthen them by modeling and encouraging responsible behavior.

Apostle Paul tells the Thessalonians to encourage one another. The English word, encourage, is a translation of the Greek in which he dictated the letter, the Greek word, *parakaleo*. Note the similarity with the New Testament name for God's Holy Spirit, *parakletos* God the Holy Comforter who inspires us. Paul's word, the Greek word *parakaleo* means to come to one's side. To comfort, cheer up, and instill courage. Paul tells the Thessalonians, and us, that when we see someone who is grieving over what life has handed them, we do not to run the other way. We go to their side. We comfort, cheer up, and instill courage. It is in this way our brokenness is finally healed.

Paul also tells the Thessalonians to build up each other. Again, looking at the Greek in which he dictated his letter is helpful. The word he used is *oikodomeo*. It is from this Greek word we get our English words for domicile and edify. *oikodomeo* is used in reference to constructing a physical building, but also in the transcendent sense to build up. To build up a congregation by constructing a spiritual house. And to improve one's ability to live responsibly and effectively by strengthening one another.

Paul tells the church at Thessalonica to "Put on the breast plate of faith and love." And when crisis comes, to show this love to one another. "To encourage the faint hearted. To help the weak." But there is another one who encourages and builds us up.

God is with us

A retired minister tells the story of how he learned to ice-skate on a frozen pond in Michigan. He and his grandson went out to the pond shortly before dusk hoping that no one in the neighborhood would see them learning to skate. They drove the car practically to the edge of the ice. The minister put his skates on while sitting in the front seat of the car. When he was ready he hollered to his grandson, "Are you ready to go!"

His grandson said, "Pop, you go first."

The minister learned about skating in an ice-skating arena. When you learn to ice-skate in an arena you begin by holding onto the rails. But on a frozen pond in Michigan there are no rails to hold onto.

So the minister was thinking, "How do I get started? Maybe by holding onto the side of the car and giving myself a push." So he pushes off from the car and guess what happens--he lands flat on his behind. He tries to get up but can't--his feet keep sliding every which-way and there are no rails to grab onto to help pull him up.

Just then some neighborhood kids from the church come by. They have been watching the minister struggling in vain to get back up on his feet. Finally, one boy shouts, "Reverend, if you want to stand up and skate, you have to get on your knees first."

God's Holy Spirit is not a separate God. The Triune nature of God is neither three Gods nor one God with three faces. You have heard of team spirit, and how we catch the spirit at church. Of how some people are mean spirited, and how some people have a sweet spirit. God's Spirit is kind of like our Spirit. But God's Spirit, what in New Testament Greek is called God's $\rho\alpha\upsilon\sigma\mu\alpha$ comforts us when we need it, and calls us out of our past into tomorrow. Children, when they hear the word $\rho\alpha\upsilon\sigma\mu\alpha$ think immediately of parakeet. If you wish to think of God's Spirit as a parakeet, that is fine. God's Spirit outside us, between us, and within us. God's Spirit which cheerfully sings us into wholeness. As Paul tells the church in Thessalonica, and us, "For God has destined us not for wrath, but for salvation from our brokenness through our Lord Jesus Christ."

So it is with us. We do not have to do life by ourselves. We have our church friends. And even more, we have the sweet Spirit of God.

Conclusion

I am sure that each of you has heard the story of the beautiful princess who kissed the ugly toad. You will remember the toad is really a handsome prince changed into a toad by a wicked witch. It seems to be an irrevocable curse since the only way to break the spell is for someone to kiss the toad. Irrevocable because there's not usually a long line waiting to kiss toads. Think of a toad with warts. But the princess kisses the toad out of the depth of her **COMPASSION**, and the prince emerges.

What a lesson for us! To free the prince, the princess had to let go of all she'd been taught about ugliness in others. We serve Lord Jesus who was and is in the toad-kissing business. Our faith enables us to abandon all we have been taught about ugliness and unacceptability in others so that we might seek and find the "prince" in each one of them. Because Jesus is in the toad-kissing business. So are we. So are we.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...