

**Doing A New Thing Over and Over Again  
II Thessalonians 3:6-13  
Isaiah 65:17-25**

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Loyal Workers 100th Anniversary Celebration**

From time to time someone will ask me, “What is the difference between Baptists and some other denomination?” It is easy.

Freedom!

Baptists are freedom people. It is in our DNA. It is what makes us unique and difficult and argumentative and O so wonderful!

Baptist believe in soul freedom—that your choice of faith or no faith is totally yours. No one can choose it for you. Not the state, or your parents or your preacher or your spouse. You alone can choose.

Baptist believe in church freedom—that no other entity can tell a local church what they have to do, or can't do. Every congregation can choose to be a part, or we can just go PHHHTTTTT!

Baptists believe in religious freedom—that everyone has the right to worship, or not worship. The government can't decide what is acceptable or unacceptable. A real Baptist might think that you are wrong, crazy, out of touch with reality, but will fight to defend your right to be wrong crazy and out of touch!

And Baptists believe in Bible freedom—that everyone has the right and responsibility to read the Bible and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit interpret the Bible for themselves.

That last one is testing my Baptistness!

I believe it. I believe in Bible freedom deeply!

I don't want anyone telling me what the Bible HAS to mean. I never want you to fall into the heresy of thinking that my interpretation of the text is the ONLY way to read it. I mean, I have been surprised too many times by a text that I thought I knew!

I really do believe in Bible freedom.....but

There are times when some people have so misused scripture that I wonder whether the Holy Spirit might have been on a holiday! Have you ever had that thought? How often have you heard of people using the Bible to justify things that Jesus would never do:

Using the God who brought us out of bondage—isn't that the word we have heard for the past few weeks—that same God keeping females in oppression forever?

Using seven random verses in the Bible taken out of context to deny basic human right to people whose sexual orientation might be different from mine?

Using the Bible to argue that the very signs the earth gives us are not right because it doesn't line up with a timeline in the Bible?

Using non-Biblical terms to read into the Bible a fear based misguided view of the future?

Using the Bible to keep us from ever taking out loans or lending money or eating lobster—no! We would never do that!

See what I mean?

As much as I believe in Bible freedom there are times when I almost want to agree with those who think it is time to lock up the Bible and only let select learned people read it. It is just too dangerous in the hands of common folk like us!

The passage we heard this morning from Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica is one of those passages. Scholars believe that this is the earliest writing we have in the New Testament. There are some concerns that Paul seems to be addressing, but we need to remember that we are only seeing one side of this correspondence. There are other letters, other conversations going on, so we are forced to read between the lines.

It seems that Paul is doing theology. There are some in the church who have died and the believers there are worried about what will happen to them when Jesus returns. That was a real concern for the early church. They were expecting Jesus to return any day. That is what he had said, wasn't it? Getting ready for his return was what was motivating them. They wanted to be ready for Jesus' return.

But now, brother Bartholomew and sister Agnes had died. What will happen to them? Earlier in the letters Paul assures them that they won't be forgotten, or left behind.

This is the only reference to what has been called the rapture. The word doesn't appear in the Bible, and the idea didn't appear until 1833 but somehow this apocalyptic idea has taken hold of how many read the Bible. It has become a threat to nonbelievers! If you aren't a Christian when the rapture comes you will be left behind! But when Paul talked about it, this idea was not a threat, but a word meant to comfort the church. No one is going to be left behind, even if you are dead!

In the passage we heard this morning the concern is a bit more practical. It seems that there were those who weren't carrying their share of the load at the church. It could be that they just really believed that Jesus was coming back any day so why bother?<sup>1</sup> We see that played out in our world by those who ignore God's call to justice, mercy and love; who say there is no need to worry about climate change—Jesus is coming soon so why bother?

It could be that these "freeloaders" were those in the congregation who were actually wealthy and felt like they didn't need to do anything else! I mean, they had opened their house for the church to gather for worship. They gave money. You actually expect me

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<sup>1</sup> Grateful to Edward Pillar for these insights. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4278](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4278)

to wash dishes, or go and take meals? Or perhaps it worked the other way. I have washed dishes and baked bread and visited the sick. And you expect me to give money too?

How often do we hear people say, or even say it ourselves, I really am doing enough! And now they want me to do more? This passage really is a challenge to us to remember that we are called to humility in the work for righteousness and justice.

And it could very well be that there were those who had become a part of the community because of the way that the church had exhibited care and kindness, goodness and generosity, a sense of acceptance and love. They had been drawn into this community but now were being a drain on it! Gimme gimme gimme!

And at some level, aren't we all guilty of this? Whether it is wanting people to help us out, or avoiding carrying our share, or wanting our hymns and our tradition—the danger is always in front of us to fall into our own self-orbit and ignore the needs of others.

This was the issue facing the church and so they asked Paul what they should do. Maybe he had had a bad day. Maybe he was tired. Maybe he was just exasperated. And he dashed off, *"If they don't want to work, don't let them eat!"*<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever said such a thing? Maybe to your children when they are complaining about having to do something around the house? Our daughters' job was to load and unload the dishwasher. Whenever they would complain about that job, and demand to know why they had to do it I would simply explain. *"I didn't want children, but your mother said that if we would have them then they would load and unload the dishwasher!"*

I could say that because I never worried that my words might someday be the Bible! And I don't think Paul did either! Yet how often is THAT the line we have heard?

From Lenin on the left to Bernier on the right, there are always people demanding that we earn our way! That we work because, otherwise we don't get to eat! This verse has been pulled out of context, and misinterpreted, and ignored, by pretty much everyone!

All the while ignoring the verse just below. *"Brothers and sisters, don't be weary in doing what is right."* What if we read that verse? What if that verse became the focus of our attention?

I wonder if that was the verse 100 years ago when that group of women got together. That is how our Loyal Workers started, you know. They didn't start out as Soup Makers or Ministry Funders. They started out as a Bible Study. They started out reading the Bible!

And look what happened!

This group of women moved from reading the Bible to living the Bible. They have worked to make sure that so many of us can eat! In all kinds of weather!

Anita and I tell the story of our first Soup and Chowder luncheon. We were Canadian newbies. It was January and it was snowing! Not a skiff of snow either! It was big snow! Sideways snow! A whack of snow! But it was Wednesday and we were having a luncheon and I told Anita we needed to go, because no one else would!

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<sup>2</sup> II Thessalonians 3:10b

Shocker!

The parking lot was full, there were no seats left!

Our Loyal Workers were working to make sure people were fed!

And it hasn't just been their luncheons. They continue to meet to explore our history, to hear from the past how we might move into the future.

And it hasn't just been luncheons and meetings! They have, and continue to be major funders of the ministry of our church. We recently had a dedication of our vestry, which they funded. That action transformed a "dungeon" (someone else's word) into a vital space in our church.

But it isn't just that! Have you seen the carpet in the south entry way?

Have you looked at the improvements over the years to our kitchen?

These are just a few of the ways in which this group continues to bring life to our congregation, our community and literally our world.

Last Wednesday evening at our congregational meeting we heard a positive report of our church finances, we approved a budget for next year. What was not in that report was the substantial financial contribution our Loyal Workers continue to make. Over the past 10 years they have contributed over \$41,000 to the life and ministry of our congregation!

That is reason to celebrate!

That is reason to say thank you!

But it is also a reason to look ahead. At a recent luncheon where our Deacons said thank you to them, I was aware of many who are no longer able to come to meetings, to help out in the kitchen on luncheon day. As I have read the history I am aware of the saints who from their labors are resting. As much as we want and expect it, I doubt that Myrtle will be leading this group in 25 years!

So who will?

Right now we only have 10 active members of our Loyal Workers. Who will step up? The question before us is not only how will we as a congregation, not only celebrate this incredible legacy, but continue it?

The world is a different place than when this group started 100 years ago. It has changed, and it will change again in the next 5, 10 years! The challenge for our Loyal Workers, for us, for the church, is to recognize that fact. But not to fear it!

To recognize that 100 years ago, our Loyal Workers were a new thing! And look what God has done in and through them!

God continues to do a new thing! God is doing a new thing that will transform the way we see our world, our church, ourselves....if we are faithful to see it. If we are courageous enough to live into it!

I pray that we are!