

Title: “Joy. And Eddie”

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1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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Lesson: *There is joy in knowing that God’s church moves in spite of the events of this world. And, even more amazing, God’s church moves because of the events of this world. Our epistle reading provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the year and count the blessings that we have received from our Father in heaven and to celebrate the joy that he has brought us in new and unexpected ways.*

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly³ mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers⁴ loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

In mid-May, I introduced you to our new puppy: Edison, or Eddie, or Edison Joseph Ryan when he’s in trouble. He was only a few months old at that time and too young to be trusted with the run of the house when we were not around. And so, because of this we would place him in a crate while we were away and when we would return and subsequently free him, he would sprint the entire perimeter of our yard as fast as his little legs could carry him. His mouth would be open wide, his tongue hanging out, and he would be moving! You could just feel the excitement emanate from his little body. He was no longer confined, no longer trapped. He was no longer bound by the constraints of his cage. He was free and he couldn’t help but celebrate it!

Well, our Eddie has grown up and is now a “big boy” who can be trusted in an empty house. He is still as happy as can be and still full of energy. I was watching him one day as he played catch with one of our children and was reminded of the joy that he has created in this family, even in spite of the stress and uncertainty and change that this year has imposed upon us. And then I thought, “If this small dog has brought us joy these past few months, how much more has God brought us?” So, as we look beyond Halloween and towards the Christmas season our Epistle reading provides us

with an opportunity to reflect on the year and count the blessings that we have received from our Father in heaven and to celebrate the joy that he has brought us in new and unexpected ways.

First, there is joy in knowing that God's church moves in *spite* of the events of this world. And, even more amazing, God's church moves *because* of the events of this world. Paul writes, "The gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" and we see today as well. What relationships were strengthened because we began to look in on, and even care for someone who was quarantined alone in their home? Do you remember shopping not only for your own household but for them as well? Or the extra phone calls that we made to loved ones, neighbors, and acquaintances to check up on them and provide to them a listening ear? We can all name at least one person that God has blessed through us. In these ways, sometimes small, we brought the gospel to someone in a way that they had never received it before. And don't, for a moment, dismiss this as anything less than what it is: God used you, in that place, and in that time. He used your relationship with that person to be his hands and his feet. He used your voice to calm the anxious and care for those he loved. He used you to bless others.

He also used this church to bless *you* as well. Reflect back on the early weeks when our worship services were streamed in pastor's office. Before the pandemic what would the reaction have been to that? Would you have felt uncomfortable, maybe even concerned that St. Mark would consider that format a worship service? But, because of the situation, because this was the *only* format that was possible for us at that time, were you challenged to rethink what worship was? Were you able to conclude that it was not about the room, or the music, or the lack of music, or the movement of the participants? It was simply all about God. When everything was removed, all that was left was God - and so we were blessed with this renewed view.

Paul also writes in today's passage this: "For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere." How true that is in the midst of this current environment. *Because* we had to rethink the production of our worship services we are now streaming live, every Sunday. And every week we have visitors and even regulars from around the country that join us. There are some families that "attend" our service who I know personally don't attend church, otherwise! And that does not even include all of the other streaming programs that have started and continue to this day. And we have only just started. Think for a moment what more we could do, who else we could reach with the technology that we have installed?

The disciples of old had "gone forth" by foot, but today we go forth by technology, but we *do* go forth. And we bring with us the good news of the gospel to all those we are now able to reach. How blessed is that?

I would like to get back to Eddie for a moment. At home there are 5 people that he can go to at any time and receive a treat. It doesn't matter how bad he was just a moment ago - he knows that a simple tap with his paw or nudge with his nose is all he needs to receive from us a treat. And he takes advantage of it. You can almost watch as he moves from person to person asking for a special bit of food to eat. And you can see the joy that he experiences when each and every time he asks, he receives. It is as if he spends his life at our feet.

I bring this up because there is a very important lesson in that illustration. We have a blessing that we must never forget; a blessing that didn't materialize because of the troubles of this year. It started as a promise just after the first sin, in the first garden, with the first people and it became the greatest blessing through the obedient death of Jesus on the cross. And because of that act of service each one of us can go to the cross for forgiveness; and we *should*, not once or twice but constantly. And it is there that we find a God that is quick to forgive us all our trespasses, even the ones that we committed on the way there!

And there is one more thing. We have talked this morning about change: change in the world, change in our homes, and change in our church. And even though we find God's blessings in the midst of this change, it is still change and that invites anxiety. And so, I would like to spend just a few moments on this thought: our world may be changing, it may never be the same, but God hasn't changed. He is still the same: the same God, the same Word, the same forgiveness. God doesn't change, but he changes us and we he does it through the relationships that creates and through the life that we live. We have been changed. We have been pulled closer towards him and he has filled us with strength and courage and has sent us out to be his servant. We have changed, but he hasn't. And he never will. And what a blessing it is to know that.

In May I described Eddie's freedom. Today I described his joy. Eddie is joyful. Eddie is blessed. How about you?

Please pray with me.

We are so grateful for the blessings that you have bestowed upon us during this time of uncertainty and change. We pray for the continued strength that you give us, and for the courage to go out into the world and be a blessing to others. We pray for the opportunities this pandemic gives us to guide others into a relationship with you.

Amen.