

“Playing God”
First Thessalonians 1:1-10
October 16, 2005

Reverend Dr. Gordon Butcher
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, IL 60045

“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith, and labor of love, and steadfastness of hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you because our message of the Gospel came to you not in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction.” Thessalonians is one powerful small letter. That power flows because something good is happening in Thessalonica. They are living as a people of faith. That is why Paul is excited. If the New Testament were rearranged according to the date of the writing of each book, First Thessalonians would replace Matthew. Paul wrote this letter around 51 CE which makes it the earliest Christian writing and in fact the earliest evidence we have for the existence of our faith. To understand the importance of this or any of the pastoral letters to those early churches, we need to know how these letters were sent and received. There was no mechanized postal system. Letters were hand-carried and hand-delivered by a courier. The courier, having seen the sender of the letter, was always pumped for information about the condition of the sender. What did they say? How are they doing? Are they ill or well? To receive a letter in those times was to receive the person who sent it. To receive a letter is to receive the being of the sender as well as the message. In another letter Paul tells the Corinthian church that that they are, “a letter of Christ written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

I believe that most of the time people in church see the church’s potential only in the sum of all the human talents that show. The Thessalonian church certainly had its talents, but Paul is not just celebrating in their gifts. What excites him is their faithfulness. All churches possess gifts. But only a few experience the conversion and the blending of those gifts into exciting, competent, and dedicated ministries. Faith is the key that unlocks potential. That means that wherever we see potential fulfilled and realized, we know that somewhere in the past some brave person decided to live by faith alone and acted by faith and thus the seeds were planted. This usually happens in a time of chaos and disarray. It is during those times of powerlessness when all human effort seems futile, that clean, clear faith is most likely to emerge. We turn to prayer because we have tried every other human option and nothing works, and we are out of ideas. This is similar to those moments when the doctor will say there is nothing more that I can do; she is now in God’s hands. The family will think and pray, and what follows will be either death or life, she will enter eternal rest, or open her eyes snap out of the coma, sit up in her bed and ask for water, or live on in a comatose state. The truth is that we all live by faith through grace alone,

there is very little that we can control. It is that faith that converts human potential into God's own creative power. That God given power releases healing, comfort, wisdom, forgiveness, and a new day before us no matter how difficult the past.

It has been a great joy to watch us grow as we discovered the existence of God's presence lifting us up and calling us to take a higher way. It has been a privilege to be here as we have experienced desperate times, and come face-to-face with the limits of our own humanity. We have learned that there are some challenges that exceed the best of our human wisdom and energy. At those moments we either take the leap of faith and trust God's dream for us or we accept defeat, surrender to chaos, and walk away. Praise God and Halleluiah when you chose to stand and stay, and with that decision the fresh wind of a new day began to move, and we began to feel profound spiritual magnetism. Can we sense God's future unfolding? I believe that we can, and the proof of the validity of our spiritual journey is today.

What a wonderful, joyful, happy day in the life of our church. What a great day to be Presbyterian! Please know that when we talk of this day as a gift of God we do not forget for a moment that God has had a lot of help from dedicated pastors, support staff, church officers, and church family members. Persons who gave up nights and weekends and who prayerfully, thoughtfully, and sensitively listened to the hopes and needs of the congregation. They then converted those hours of patient care into a job description and a spiritual discernment process that guided our pastor nominating committee to Reverend Christine Chakoian and Reverend Christine to us. In his book Flow, Chiczent Mihaly Csikzentmihaly documents and describes the psychology of this "conversion process courage, resilience, perseverance, mature defense or transformational coping are so essential, without them we would be constantly suffering the bombardment of stray psychological meteorites. On the other hand, if we do develop such positive strategies most negative events can be at least neutralized, and possibly even used as challenges that will help make the self stronger and more complex." That is how a psychologist speaks to the reality of the power of conversion.

Notice that Paul's rejoicing is for the faith of the church in Thessalonica and not just for their accomplishments. "You became imitators of the Lord for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Acacia." From my perspective this entire search was an act of faith based on belief that if we waited and listened and prayed, God would guide us. There were times when we shook and quivered. This morning in this hour we now know the truth embedded in the faith that we have inherited from those who have gone before us even back to our Scottish forebears who gave their lives so that we might have the freedom to choose our own pastor. Reverend Christine, welcome. We love your laughter, are touched by your vulnerability, enjoy your intellect, admire your skills and respect your spirituality. That you are a daughter of God

and a sister with Christ there can be no doubt. On this your installation day we hope and pray that the spiritual awakening happening in this place will become normal and not the exception. May God's Reformation of this church not be stillborn, and may we give you the support you need as you give to us the guidance and nourishment and love that we need. What a great day to be part of this church family and what a great day to be Presbyterian.

We will close by taking some liberty with Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. I ask his forgiveness and your forbearance. We always give thanks to God for you Reverend Christine in our prayers constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in him the Lord Jesus Christ for we know Reverend Christine beloved by God, that he has chosen you because our message of the Gospel came to you not in Word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction you have been an example to the believers in Chicago, Portland and Clarendon Hills and now we welcome you as God's called pastor, teacher, and prophet, in this place. Amen