

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Idle to Vital”

November 14, 2010

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### **2 Thessalonians 3:6-13**

*6 Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. <sup>7</sup>For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup>and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. <sup>9</sup>This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. <sup>10</sup>For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. <sup>11</sup>For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. <sup>12</sup>Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. <sup>13</sup>Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.*

My daughter Maren directed me toward a rather interesting website this past week. The topic came up in her World Religions class at Ball State University. The website is [aftertherapturepetcare.com](http://aftertherapturepetcare.com). Although you might not believe it, you can probably guess by the title what the website is about. It seems that there is a business established to provide for the care of pets of those persons who will suddenly disappear from the earth at the time of the rapture. Although the business started years ago in England as a joke, its American counterpart appears to be a very serious thing. The information presented talks about how born again people can be assured of their salvation in Jesus Christ. They can be certain that they will be whisked away to be with him prior to the time of great trial and tribulation upon the earth. However these believers will be leaving behind beloved pets. Who will care for them? Once you pay a \$10 registration fee, a fee established to discourage all pranksters, you will be able to assure that your pets are cared for following the rapture for another \$100 fee. Rest assured that the caregivers are strict atheists, fully vetted to insure their lack of belief in God. Therefore you need not worry that they will be swept up with you in the rapture. And for another small fee, you can put a locator chip in your pet to assure that the pre-assigned atheist caregivers will find your dog or cat quickly. The good news is that as of this week, the service is available in the state of Michigan! I don't know about you but I have always believed in a God so good and gracious that in God's time, my pets are going to heaven with me, and some of them are there now waiting for me.

The Scripture reading assigned to this particular Sunday was written to a group of believers who probably would have purchased such post-rapture insurance. Paul

had done an excellent job writing an earlier letter to the Thessalonian church. At that time the people were very discouraged, wondering if Jesus' return was just a myth. How could they believe in this new Christian faith when what was promised had not come true? Paul's first letter was one of encouragement. Christ would return soon and the community should live in expectation of that day, building up one another in anticipation of the event.

Guess what! Apparently for some it worked. Paul was now writing to some members of the congregation who expected Christ to return very soon. They believed so strongly that for many people, all of their life preparation and all of their life functions were centered on the imminent arrival of the Christ. Many were so determined in their belief that the world would end soon that they lost all hope in the significance of their daily tasks. Some of the members of the church were so certain that Christ would arrive the very next day that they determined it was folly to engage in any kind of work. Some were so focused on getting to tomorrow that they lived as if today was a waste of their time. Why plant a field when there will be no harvest? Why crush grain into flour when there will be no one around to make the flour into bread? Why plane the wood of a tree into a usable door when no one will be entering or leaving the house in a matter of days? Why read the newspaper when what happens today is of no concern to what will happen tomorrow? Paul was writing to people who had deliberately dropped out of the normal ways of providing for themselves in anticipation of the inevitable return of Christ and the establishment of the messianic kingdom on earth. They were confused by the events of their time and in their confusion they kicked back in either apathy or hopelessness and took advantage of others.

The end of Daylight Savings Time tends to diminish feelings of hope in me. While I enjoy the extra hour of sleep, turning back the clock turns off some spark of energy and encourages idleness within me. It means an early evening and a sober reminder of the inevitable advance of winter. The cold, dark days make me want to hunker down and just "get through" the winter. For some, this season of darkness produces a deep seasonal depression which upsets the normal rhythms of life. For most of us it may be just a bit harder to get motivated these days. Despite our splendid fall weather we know that there are more gray skies than blue skies in our immediate future. It is more difficult to get out of bed and onto the snowy highways. It is hard to be encouraged about the future of our work when the economic forecast remains so dismal. Keeping motivated and giving all that we have to our families, our work, our community, and our church is not easy under these cloudy conditions. At this time of year our schedules may be full but our lives may feel a little empty. Even here at church we are plenty busy in activity. Just consider the length of our announcements lately! But does such activity always seem to be fulfilling the purposes of God?

Child psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes that when a person is waiting for something difficult to end or looking for something better to happen in the future, there are two possible outcomes. One is negotiated hope, an intentional plan that places meaning upon each and every action. You wait, living confidently and actively in a promise. We continue to be active because we find such activity points toward that which we desire. The other outcome is a sense of emptiness. You don't do anything because you are waiting for something to change before you act. Time is not a gift to use but a burden that must be lived through. You live life as a spectator, quick to judge

and criticize, and slow to sacrifice and labor. The lack of that which you desire or anticipate creates boredom, idleness, hopelessness.

Paul warned the Thessalonian church about idleness. He was extremely direct and rather blunt with his words. "Keep away from believers who are living in idleness." "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." "For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work."

It is hard to hear this passage without thinking of the lesson of the story of The Little Red Hen or Aesop's fable of the ants and the grasshopper. The fun-loving grasshopper wasted his summer days of ease enjoying life as it came, apparently wasting his time in song. The ants worked to prepare for what was yet to come, spending at least part of their time in labor. When the winter winds came, the grasshopper had no food and no shelter. He showed up at the door of the ant's home looking for help. They sent him away chastising him for his laziness and his unwillingness to prepare.

I think it is important to note that Paul wasn't calling anyone lazy in this letter. He wasn't interested in making commentary on politics or the welfare system. His term idle is defined as something broader than that. Those who were idle were those who lived in God's grace without a sense of thanksgiving. The idle recognized God's goodness but did not recognize that such goodness demanded a response of faith. The idle engaged in gossip and other harmful behaviors because they had no sense of responsibility to the well-being of those around them. The idle believed that if one did not have to labor to earn salvation, and in Christ- God had already taken care of that, one did not need to labor at all. The idle lived with a passive faith.

Paul used his own behavior as an example. He spoke about his toil and labor, done with the confidence that the Kingdom was about to burst forth, yet done with the knowledge that he was part of that promise. He worked, day-by-day, because he saw his labor as an act of thanksgiving for what God had done and what God continued to do. He kept a focus on the values of God in the present, not allowing himself idle time to lapse into behavior that tears down and reaps a bitter harvest. Paul understood that there would be places in our Christian journey where we will need to talk ourselves into hope and when we will need to take action to avoid the pitfalls of idleness. The heart of his message was that each of us are to live out our lives in faithful testimony to the grace of God as we have found it in Jesus the Christ.

Reformer Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew the world was going to come to an end tomorrow. Luther's answer, "I would go and plant a tree." Such is our hope and our incentive in days and time in which it seems labor is foolish and action is in vain. We live, we love, we share, and we labor- in thankful recognition of what God has done for us and what God can do for the world through us.