
The Joy of Preparation

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
2 Thessalonians 3. 6-13

For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

2

Thessalonians 3.11-13

On Friday morning, I noticed that my kitchen table was set with plates, glasses, knives and forks. This was unusual. Our children are all away in college, and we rarely set the table anymore. When my wife and I are at home, we eat together by taking our plates from the shelf at the last minute, serving ourselves at the stove, and then, finally, sitting at the kitchen table.

But the table was already set on Friday morning, set sweetly indeed. In fact, company was coming for lunch. My wife had prepared the table, and that setting served as a pleasant reminder that company was coming. Maybe it was a simple act, but I marveled at my wife's sense of preparation.

Preparation. The joy of life is in preparation.

Certainly our retail stores and merchants know this. We have all noticed by now that the Halloween merchandise disappeared overnight and was replaced by Thanksgiving baskets and foods. Yes, even the Christmas fare is being displayed. As soon as Christmas is over, I suppose we will be preparing for New Year's Day, and then Martin Luther King weekend, and then Valentine's Day.

I think that the true reason we have holidays is so that we can prepare for them. The real reason we have festivities is so that we can prepare for them.

Yesterday, I watched all sorts of cars and trucks leaving Atlanta for Auburn! (the football game). They all had those little pennants and flags waving from their windows. They had spent the early morning packing coolers and stocking baskets. They were going tailgating, and they were leaving early. (We won't talk about the football game today.) Suffice it to say: much of the fun of college football is in the preparation.

I went to a small birthday party on Friday night. Someone had bought the cake, prepared the decorations, prepared the dinner itself. The preparation may have lasted longer than the party. Almost everything we do in life is preparation of some sort or another.

There's a roadside sign out in the farmland of rural Georgia, and its message has always fascinated me. "Prepare to Meet

Your Maker" it proclaims. I believe that sign. We should be preparing to meet our Maker. But we sure do have different and odd ways of doing that, don't we?

One of the early Christian churches had a problem in this regard. There was the church in a place called Thessalonica. Most folks in that church were expecting the Lord Jesus to return soon.

I know we all think Jesus is going to return someday, but the Thessalonians thought Jesus was going to return, in literal body, within their lifetimes. Before they died, they thought, Jesus would snatch them up into the air. But because of that expectation, some of the Thessalonians were preparing badly. In fact, you could say they weren't preparing at all. They were depending on other people to get the work done.

They were still helping themselves to the common meals, they were eating their share, but they weren't giving their share. They were not preparing the food. They weren't working at all. They were just waiting in idleness, said St. Paul, mere busybodies.

I like the way St. Paul puts those two words together. Did you notice in Second Thessalonians 3.11? Paul says these persons are living in "idleness," but they are "busybodies." We all know that type, don't we? Idle people have too much time on their hands. They have so little to do that they are busy about doing things that do not need to be done!

The word Paul uses here is delightful. It is used nowhere else in the New Testament: it is *periergozomai*, "to bustle about uselessly, to busy one's self about trifling, needless, useless matters; used apparently of a person officiously inquisitive about other's affairs." (Thayer's Greek lexicon) It's not used elsewhere in the New Testament, but we sure have come to know that person in our communities!

St. Paul teaches a powerful lesson to the Thessalonians. If we are preparing to meet our maker, and at some point all of us are - then real Christian community is not sitting around with nothing to do. Real Christian community is not sitting around waiting for someone else to do the work. It is not being idle, waiting for someone else to prepare the food, waiting for someone else to feed us, waiting for someone else to do the giving, waiting for someone else to do the teaching, while we then sit back in idle pestering and complaint.

Christian community is supposed to be fun. The Christian Church is supposed to be fun. And the fun of Christian community is in what? It is in the preparation! Consider some of the ministries that make a church work: Working on the altar guild, preparing a Sunday school lesson, ushering friends and strangers, preparing food for the homeless, calling others on the telephone tree, getting children fed and dressed for church. I know that last one is not always fun!

But, generally speaking, the fun of being together as Church is in the preparation. Getting ready for the event, getting ready for the class. We even say that our worship is a form of preparing. We are preparing for that glorious day in heaven when we truly and purely enjoy the presence of God.

All of what we do in the Christian Church, and outside the church, in life itself, is a form of preparing. So, I ask today: What are you preparing for?

Some folks are preparing for disaster. These are the ones who talk of division and calamity. They talk of earthquakes and tragedy.

Yes, we know that tragedy and ill befall us on this earth. But here's the twist: The best way to prepare for tragedy and death is actually to prepare for celebration and life. When we know how to celebrate, then we also know genuinely how to deal with tragedy. When we have prepared for life, then we can deal with death.

Prepare for fun, and then we can deal with things that are not fun. Prepare for life, and -behold!- we are prepared also for death!

So, even today, families are planning, aren't we? Where will you spend the Thanksgiving feast? Will you be traveling to be with your parents, with your children? You who have few family, will you be arranging a meal with friends?

What do we need holidays for? To have something to prepare for!

We are all preparing, finally, for the grandest celebration of all. We are preparing for that grand banquet. Some call it "the grand reckoning." Some call it "Judgment Day." Some call it the kingdom of God. Some look forward to it. Some dread it.

For those who have been preparing for it, it is not something to dread at all. In Christ, the last days are not dreadful at all. They are what we are supposed to be preparing for every day of our lives.

The joy of life is preparation. Get ready, said Jesus. Be alert. Prepare. The joy of life is finding that in our preparation is the great celebration. Setting the table for company is itself the sweet sign that Jesus is already among us. When we gather together to prepare for the love of God, behold, the love of God is already here among us.

So, we might say that the real reason Jesus came among us was so that we might prepare for Jesus to come again. That birth of Jesus was glorious. But as we prepare for Jesus to return, Jesus does return, again and again. The joy of Jesus -today!--is in our preparation for him.

AMEN

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