

By Deb Richardson-Moore

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I Thessalonians 1: 1-10; 4: 9-10

Prayer: Dear Lord, Help us to hear in Paul's words your insistence that we are to care for one another. In Jesus' holy name, we pray. Amen.

In Thessalonica

In Jerusalem last week, a 92-year-old woman named Melpomeni Dina met the large extended Mordechai family. Afterward, she said, she could "die quietly."

The occasion was the last reunion that will be held at Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. Ms. Dina was among the last of the 27,000 people named Righteous Among the Nations for saving Jews from the Nazis during World War II.

Like our World War II veterans, Jewish survivors and their Gentile rescuers are obviously aging and dying. Organizers think they simply won't be able to travel to any more of these reunions. So these celebrations that have been going on for decades will cease.

But what caught my attention when I read about this particular reunion was where Melpomeni Dina and the Mordechais had lived: Thessalonika, Greece.

I've read a ton of Holocaust fiction and non-fiction, but I'd never read about the Nazi occupation of Greece. Apparently it was brutal. Almost the entire Jewish community was annihilated in the area around the port city of Thessalonika.

When the Nazis began rounding up the Greek Jews for deportation, the Mordechai family's neighbors hid them in the attic of an abandoned mosque. They hid there for almost a year, hearing the screams of their Jewish neighbors as they were targeted for removal.

But the mosque attic was cramped and unventilated, and the family's health began to deteriorate. They knew they had to leave.

That's when the three orphaned Dina sisters took the family of seven into their single-room home on the outskirts of the city. They shared their limited food and medicine. Despite their care, the family's 6-year-old son got sick and died.

An informant told the Nazis about the hidden family, so 17-year-old Melpomeni and her sisters gave them clothes and helped them to separate and flee. Amazingly they made it out of Greece. After the war, they met up in Israel.

Forty family members – survivors and their descendants -- gathered for the Holocaust Memorial ceremony two weeks ago. The survivors saw Ms. Dina for the first time in 75 years.

The oldest of the surviving family, who is now an 86-year-old woman, said she couldn't imagine "the risk they took ... to take in an entire family knowing that it put them and everyone around them in danger.

"Look at all these around us," she said. "We are now a very large and happy family, and it is all thanks to them saving us."

Being the nerd that I am, I find it fascinating to think about the continuity, to think about this relatively modern drama being played out in an ancient city that we read about in our Scripture.

For that same city of Thessalonica was the site of one of Paul's early churches. And the letter he sent to the congregation there is the very earliest book of our New Testament.

In many ways, Paul was laying the groundwork for our faith and our revolutionary Christian Scripture. And we have to look no further than the Dinas and the Righteous Among the Nations to know that his teaching was alive and

well 1,900 years after he wrote it. For the Dinars were caring for their neighbors, as Jesus instructed, and Paul reported.

Let's start by looking at a passage in **I Thessalonians 4: 9-10:**

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, *for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another;*¹⁰ and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. *But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more*

From the earliest book of the New Testament, this new faith that would be known as Christianity was centered on relationship. Centered on our treatment of, our care for, one another.

It was so central, in fact, so obvious, that Paul said he hardly needed to write about it. **“For you ... have been taught by God to love one another.”**

You have been taught by God to love one another.

That's the crux of it right there. *We have been taught by God to love one another.* If we don't understand another thing in our Bible, I hope we understand this.

And when our president or the head of McDonalds or evangelists or anyone else claims Christianity then acts in ways that deny this basic tenet, they are denying the faith. You simply cannot have it both ways.

For we have been taught by God to love one another.

This letter to the new Christians at Thessalonica is actually *not* among the best known of Paul's letters. As the first, it is considered a little less theologically developed than say, Galatians or Romans.

But maybe that's what allows Paul's love of these new converts to shine through. At the time he wrote it, Paul was traveling with Silas, or Silvanus, and Timothy. He was in Corinth in southern Greece, writing to this church on the coast of northern Greece.

The church in Thessalonica had been founded amid strife and persecution and opposition. Paul was worried about how they were faring, so he sent Timothy to see what was going on. And Timothy returned with a positive report.

That prompted Paul to write this letter. And he included in it more thanksgiving than in almost any other. If you'd like to read along, please turn in your Bibles to **I Thessalonians 1: 1-10**.

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 always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.

⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Paul is warmly congratulating the Thessalonians for accepting the gospel and persevering. *We give thanks to God for you.*

We remember your steadfastness.

You became imitators of us and the Lord in spite of the persecution you faced.

He is wrapping the Thessalonians in encouragement, building them up, sentence by sentence. He tells them they inspire everyone who hears about them.

If everyone is not as intrigued as I am by the link between the ancient Thessalonians and the 20th century Thessalonians of the Holocaust, Clarence Jordan imagined another way to read this book. Jordan was a learned theologian and scholar of Greek who lived on Koininia Farm in Georgia during the 1960s.

Koininia was an intentionally integrated community outside Americus, Georgia, a very segregated part of the South. The farmers were regularly terrorized with cross burnings and Ku Klux Klan activity. Our own Nikki Day lived there for awhile.

Clarence Jordan sat in a little cabin on the farm and wrote *The Cotton Patch Version of Paul's Epistles*. He re-imagined Paul to be writing to the beleaguered Christians of Atlanta and Birmingham and Selma during the Civil Rights era. Here's part of the passage we just read:

“From you the word of the Lord has echoed not only in Mississippi and Alabama but all over the country. News of the way you live for God is so widespread that we don't need to bring it up any more.”

And here's the previous passage about relationship: “Now you don't need me to write you about brotherly love, because you yourselves are God-taught to love one another. And you are doing just this toward all the brothers even throughout Mississippi. But we are encouraging you to grow even more in this respect....”

Grow even more in loving each other.

The power of our Scripture is that it speaks to us in every time and every place. And it is our job to take its truths and interpret them in ways that are true to our time and our place.

So how might this truth look in 21st century Greenville, SC?

For one thing, it might look like acknowledgement that the effects of that Civil Rights era racism continues to this day. On Thursday night, Long Branch Baptist Church was filled with people who came to hear the story of a lynching that took place in Taylors in 1933.

George Green was a sharecropper. At harvest time, he and his landlord had a dispute about the value of the crop. The landlord told him to move out of his house. Green asked for more time. His landlord sent in the Ku Klux Klan who shot and killed him in front of his wife.

I think it's always important to know our history in order to be an educated people. In order to prevent us from making the same mistakes over and over.

But the Thursday night program introduced another reason to know our history. And that is to understand the continuity between former moments and this moment.

Several speakers called out gentrification as a more genteel and sophisticated way of accomplishing exactly what the Ku Klux Klan accomplished in 1933. That is, getting someone out of his home ... because someone else wants it.

You don't have to look very far from Triune to see one-time black neighborhoods becoming sites of homes way into six figures. We need to look honestly at ourselves. *Is this how we have been taught by God to love one another?*

The very day after the story about the reunion between the Mordechais and Melpomeni Dina appeared in *The Greenville News*, there was a local story that made *USA Today*.

Darlene Quinn was a 60-year-old employee of FedEx. And in a scenario that we see quite often among people living on the edge, her car broke down. She was able to find someone to take her to work. But for three months, she walked 12 miles home each day.

A co-worker named Josh Lewis and his boss saw her a couple of times, and they began asking around. Then they offered her rides home.

Lewis and his boss then started a GoFundMe page. They posted it on Oct. 22. Within a week, 100 people had pitched in enough to buy Darlene Quinn a car.

They worked with a local dealership and surprised Ms. Quinn with a silver SUV. Two local businesses reached out to offer free oil changes and free tires.

Now that's a 21st century, American interpretation of our very first Christian commandment: Love your neighbor. Care for your neighbor.

When Josh Lewis took to Facebook to thank the donors who purchased Ms. Quinn's car, he admitted that he had been in the same situation months before. Four good friends came forward to help him with a vehicle. Without the help he received, he wouldn't have been in a place to help Darlene Quinn.

"I hope that people are encouraged," he wrote. "Encouraged to take a chance and get to know your neighbor.

"Encouraged to take a chance and help someone who needs it.

"Encouraged to be the hands and feet of God that we are called to be."

Paul himself couldn't have said it any better.

Amen.