

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Testing... Testing... 1... 2... 3...”**

**Psalm 126
1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 24**

Third Sunday of Advent

December 14, 2014

Very early, every Sunday morning... after I’ve showered and shaved and had a cup of coffee; I trudge over here from the manse and get the church ready for worship. I unlock the doors, I bump up the heat, I turn on the lights, and after everything else is ready to go... I walk up to the balcony and activate the sound system. And after I turn on the sound system, I always do a sound check; right here on the pulpit mike. I climb up here, and I say: “*Testing... testing... 1... 2... 3! Check one... check two! How now, brown cow! Good mornin’ Southampttttttoooooonnnnnn!*”

And the reason why I do a sound check is because, if there’s a problem with the sound system, I want to find out about it *then... before* I step into the pulpit to begin the worship service. Sometimes a wire comes loose; sometimes a plug gets jiggled; sometimes a switch gets bumped; sometimes some other problem crops up; and when something like that happens... the microphone won’t work! And that’s a bad thing! So, I *test* it. And if there’s a problem with it... I *fix* it.

And that makes sense, right? I mean, we do that sort of thing all the time, don’t we? We’re not sure if one thing or another is going to work the way it’s supposed to... so we test it out to see if anything’s wrong with it. And if something’s broken, or malfunctioning, or otherwise out of whack... we take action to correct the problem.

For example, before we took our most recent trip up to Maine, I had Otis Ford check all the belts and hoses on our car... just in case one of them was getting ready to break. I like Maine as much as the next guy... but I’d just as soon not get stranded there, on the side of the road. So, I had the car tested. Before you called me to be your pastor, I had to do a neutral pulpit sermon, a “test” sermon, as it were... at the Amagansett Presbyterian Church; so that the PNC could hear how great a preacher I am, before they presented me to you, for your approval. Whenever I leave the house, I test the door (I give it a little tug), to make sure that it’s shut all the way... so that our cat, Vic, doesn’t get out and run all the way to Sag Harbor. And before you can get a driver’s license, you have to pass a test at the Motor Vehicle Department; because they don’t want a bunch of people out on the road who don’t know how to drive. Okay, that’s not a very good example...

Anyway, you get the point: testing things is a regular and important part of our daily life. And as Paul the Apostle makes clear in our lesson today from First Thessalonians, “testing” is an important part of our life with the Lord Jesus, too. And when I say that “testing” is an important part of our life with Jesus, I don’t mean testing, as in God testing our faith, or our spiritual endurance, or our level of commitment to Him; although *that* kind of testing is also part of the life of Christian faith.

No, what I'm talking about this morning is the testing that *we* do... in order to make sure that our decisions, and our lifestyles, and our priorities are in tune with the will, and the wisdom, and the guidance of Almighty God.

In our text, Paul is wrapping up his letter to his friends in Thessalonica with one of his typical laundry lists of instructions for godly living. In this section of the letter, Paul encourages his readers to be joyful; to pray constantly; to give thanks; to be patient, helpful, and industrious; to refrain from taking vengeance; and so on. And then he goes on to tell them *“Do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”*

Now, the Greek word that your New International Version pew Bible translates as “test,” is δοκιμαζετε (dokimazete); and δοκιμαζετε means “put to the test,” or “examine,” or “try to learn.” According to Paul, as we live the Christian life, we're to be constantly testing, constantly subjecting things to critical examination, constantly trying to learn and understand what difference our actions are going to make to our relationship with the Lord.

In other words, Paul wants his friends and fellow believers to regularly be asking themselves the question: *“Is this action going to bring me closer to God, or drive me farther away? Is this opportunity before me a good thing, or is it an open door for evil? Is what I am being told the truth, or am I being deceived and lied to?”*

And then, having gone through that exercise of reflection and discernment, Paul encourages us to “hold on to the good;” and, “avoid every kind of evil.” And, as I noted, he also tells us to “not treat prophecies with contempt.”

Now, it's helpful to keep in mind that, in biblical usage, the word “prophecy” doesn't just refer to “predicting the future...” which is how we, today, often think of prophecy. Instead, what Scripture means by “prophecy” is “to speak the Word of God...” and this “speaking of the Word of God” may have nothing to do with predicting the future; it may be 100% concerned with present events. In fact, the most common form of biblical prophecy is *preaching*... what I am doing right now!

So, in essence, what Paul is saying is, *“When you hear someone preach or teach or otherwise proclaim the Word of God, don't just dismiss it out of hand. Check it out; examine it; think it over. If it's on the right track, and good... hang on to it. If it sounds out of whack, and wrong... stay away from it.”*

Okay, so Paul wants to make sure that his friends in Thessalonica, and his friends in Southampton, are testing... and examining... and discerning... and making an honest effort to learn to tell the difference between good and evil. And what does all of this tell us, about our quest to live as faithful Christian disciples?

Well, for one thing, it reminds us that not everything in life is equally good, equally wise, and equally appropriate for followers of Jesus Christ. By challenging us to “test everything” and to “hold on to the good” and “avoid every kind of evil,” Paul makes it crystal clear that some acts, some priorities, some decisions are better than others... for those of us who follow Jesus. And an important part of our following involves recognizing the difference and acting accordingly.

And Paul's words further reminds us that the life of faith isn't some mindless exercise in which we just follow our hearts wherever they happen to lead us. It's not like Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, where all we have to do is to get in tune with “The Force” and “go with our feelings.”

No, according to Paul to be a Christian is to use our *head!* It's to think; it's to exercise good judgment; it's to be guided, as a former seminary professor of mine always liked to say, by "Sanctified common sense."

Paul told the Thessalonians back then, and he tells us right now, that we live our lives in a kind of moral and ethical buffet line... in which we're surrounded by an endless smorgasbord of opportunities and possibilities; some of which are good, some of which are bad, and many of which are somewhere in between. And if we choose wisely; if we make smart decisions; if we orient our lives around the things of God which will lead us to God... then we're going to do okay. But if we choose unwisely; if we make careless decisions that wind up leading us away from God; or if we become so distracted that we don't even *realize* that we're making important decisions... then we're flirting with spiritual disaster.

Which really isn't surprising news, right? I mean, the scenario I just described sounds pretty obvious, doesn't it? You know, do good... avoid evil? Live by the truth... turn your back on falsehood? What could be more Christian? More godly? More biblical? More common sensibly clear as crystal? Yet, just as it was important for the Christians of Thessalonica to hear this lesson nearly twenty centuries ago... it's important for you and me to hear it again today, all these years later.

Because I think that one of the serious problems that we face today, is the fact that, in many ways, we as a culture are losing the ability to "test everything" and "avoid evil" and "hold on to the good." Or, if we're not losing the *ability* to do... at least we're losing the *willingness* to do it; we're losing the sense that it *matters* whether or not we do it. In our world today it's very easy to stand at that moral and ethical buffet line and think, "*Well, it all looks good to me! And as long as I'm happy and not hurting anybody else, anything I put on my plate is going to be just fine!*"

More and more in Western culture, the litmus test of "what is good" and "what is true," is not "what Jesus has taught us," but "my personal opinion..." or "the way I feel about it." Biblical teaching is routinely disregarded in favor of "what I want" or "what I believe" or "the way I think things should be."

And this problem is made much worse, I think, by the fact that most of us in America today have such a weak understanding of biblical teaching in the first place. We are utterly bombarded, every waking moment, by the self-indulgent mantra of twenty-first century Western culture, that, "I deserve to have what I want!" While we may go weeks or months at a time without so much as cracking the cover of our Bible... to get God's perspective on what we may want, or what we may want to do.

For crying out loud, even the televangelists appeal to this bogus way of thinking, when they assure us that "*the Lord just wants you to do your thing and be happy; your self-fulfillment is all that matters!*" Or even worse, when they so often proclaim, "*If you give something to God, God will give you your heart's desire! So, make sure to send that love gift to my ministry!*"

Every time one of those wackadoodie TV guys preaches such nonsense, they're trying to put you and me in the center of the universe... and turn Almighty God into our valet or our butler. It's nothing but pious used-car-salesmanship... but it plays right into the mindset of the world in which we're living.

Which is why it's so important to be reminded from time to time, of Paul's crucial message to the Thessalonians... to test; to examine; to reflect; and to live our lives and make our decisions

with spiritually informed care and caution. That's not just some kind of elective course in the life of Christian faith... fit only for monks, pastors, and theologians. It's true for all of us; we *all* need to be doing our best to learn God's will... to follow God's way... and to live our lives on God's terms, and not the terms of our increasingly benighted culture.

Now, please understand: this doesn't mean that what we think or feel or believe is always wrong; nor does it mean that our hopes, and dreams, and desires are always misguided. Of course not! But it should alert us to the fact that using our own desires and perceptions and opinions as the standard of righteousness to which we are trying to attain as Christian disciples, is a very dangerous thing indeed.

It should be a super-sized red flag waving before our eyes to remind us that we should be listening to our Heavenly Father *at least as much* as we're listening to the world around us... and probably, most of the time, we should be listening to our Father quite a bit more! It should tell us what we already know so well from our own personal experience: that some things are good for us, and some things are bad for us. Some things bring God closer to us; some things drive Him farther away. Some things are true; and some things are false. And if we would be faithful Christian disciples, we must make it our priority to do some testing; to learn the difference; and to do our best to embrace the good... and renounce the evil.

One of the major themes of Advent is to do precisely what Paul has challenged us to do in our lesson for this morning. Advent is a time for us to do a little personal spiritual inventory; to examine our lifestyles and our priorities; and to consider in which ways we might grow a little closer to our Lord in the year ahead.

So, as we continue on our journey to Christmas, I invite you to do a little "sound check" on your life with the Lord; I encourage you to make these next eleven days your opportunity to say, "Testing... testing... 1... 2... 3!" And see what you discover; see where the Lord wants to go to work in your life.

And the celebration of Jesus' birth will be more joyous and meaningful than it's ever been before!

Check it out! You can count on it! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!