

I Remember You Before God With Thanksgiving!

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the risen Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

(SLIDE) Paul's first letter to the Church in the city of Thessalonica is most likely the oldest writing of the New Testament. It is dated somewhere between 43 and 50 AD. That's only about ten years or so after the first Easter. Paul, Silas or Silvanus, and Timothy had founded the Church there. It's unclear how long Paul stayed in Thessalonica, but from what we read today it was at least 3 weeks, probably several months. This was his second missionary trip where he had just come from a successful meeting in Jerusalem. Paul had been recalled to Jerusalem from his first mission trip when the controversies over circumcision and food offered to idols became too much of a distraction from spreading the Gospel. At the first Church Council meeting, ever, in Jerusalem, Peter, James and the other Apostles all decided Paul was correct in his teaching that Gentiles did not have to become Jews before becoming Christian. Having settled those early disputes, Paul returned to the mission field. After founding the Church in Thessalonica, Paul constantly had to stay one step ahead of the mobs that seemed intent on doing him in and squashing the Gospel. From Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to the Thessalonians to ensure they were following the Gospel and to encourage them in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. When Timothy catches back up with Paul, he's already starting another congregation in the city of Corinth. It is from

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Corinth that Paul writes back to the Thessalonians with this glowing letter of praise. (SLIDE) Not only are they following the Gospel as laid out by Paul, Silas, and Timothy, news of their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ has spread to the entire region. So impressive is their work in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ they have become the model for other congregations to follow.

(SLIDE) The work they were doing was not easy. They were under oppression and persecution from the beginning. Paul, Silas, and Timothy barely escaped with their lives when the rioting mob dragged poor Jason and the other believers before the town council. That was a scary time to be a follower of Jesus! They actually had to pay bail back then... Paul had already been run out of Philippi and writes later in chapter 2 that he had to have courage from God just to bring the Gospel message to the people of Thessalonica. When you read through the Book of Acts, the rioters were constantly being stirred up against Paul and the Gospel message. It was a scary time to be a Christian, but it must have also been an exciting time as well. They were doing the work of spreading God's Word of love and inclusion to pagans who worshipped a different god on every street corner and high place.

What an exciting time to be a part of Trinity Lutheran Church too! (SLIDE)
We don't have anyone dragging us to the town court or beating us for sharing our

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faith in Jesus Christ, but we do know the thrill of victory... As well as the agony of defeat.... (SLIDE) Paul was a Church planter, but as I travel around Darke and Miami counties, I don't find a lack of churches. There's already Churches aplenty in Darke County, so we no longer need to travel around the county starting a new congregation in every village and town. On the other hand, we do live in a time when the Gospel message still needs to be proclaimed. Today, the message of God's forgiveness, acceptance, and love is needed as much or more than in ancient times. With mental illness on the rise and the hungry living on the streets, the job of Churches today is no easier than it was 2000 years ago.

Even in our own Congregation, we have gaps where we're not serving or reaching some segments of our own folks. (SLIDE) To address these gaps and to better serve those God has given to us, we've been meeting as the Children, Youth, and Family or "CYF" Ministry Team now for well over a year. (SLIDE) When we made the change from being the Sunday School Team to the CYF ministry we quickly realized this was much bigger and more inclusive than just planning for Sunday School and a few related events. CYF ministry includes nearly every ministry of Trinity for all the life stages within our congregation. I mean everyone has a family, so most of the things we do affect almost everyone in one way or another. So, we began by making a timeline from January through December of all the ministries of this Church. We printed that list out and made it available to

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everyone who came to the meetings. We spent a couple of months just combing through that list to make sure we didn't leave anything out and that the timing of when certain things needed to happen was clearly indicated. Our meetings now are much shorter as we typically go over the previous month and then make plans for the upcoming 3 months. For those of us who attend the CYF Ministry Team meetings, we are all amazed at the level of activity in this place. Because of these CYF meetings I have become much more focused on the events and ministries of Trinity. We discovered a few gaps in our ministry and some areas where our focus can improve the programing we offer. Since starting the CYF Ministry Team we've added numerous educational events and special speakers to our Adult Sunday School time. We've added a few completely new events to our Church calendar. Last January Marge planned a highly successful Euchre Tournament and a few weeks later we came together for our first ever Fat Tuesday pancake supper and celebration as a lead-in to our Lenten journey. Our Wednesday evenings during Advent and Lent are once again filled with delicious soups, the Word of God, and more of you attended than I ever hoped for. Next week we will fulfill what has been a longtime prayer of mine. We will turn over the reigns of our Worship service entirely to our youth—even the sermon! Maybe we haven't planted any new Church congregations, but we have a bit of experience planting new ministries for both our members and for those not yet members. Yes, it

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certainly is an exciting time to be active here at Trinity! Not just because we're the reigning dartball champions, but because of all the ways God's love is poured out among us.

I say all this, not just to toot our own horn, but rather so we can all remember and give thanks for the opportunities we've been given to serve the true and living God. (SLIDE) Two weeks ago we had a guest speaker during Adult Sunday School, Christian Conversations. Sandra Combs, from Graceworks also gave the Sermon that day. During the sermon, Sandra talked about how moved and inspired she was to see how we tie our prayers to the beautiful Prayer Quilts made by our Prayers and Squares Ministry. As the Congregational Liaison for Graceworks, Sandra travels around to many congregations in southern Ohio. My guess is she will be spreading the word of your love and how you serve the sick and those in need, not just with a pretty blanket, but with our very love and prayers tied right into the fabric of each quilt. As Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, so I tell you, your work of faith, your labor of love, and your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ are inspirational to so many. I'm not just talking about the ministry of Prayers and Squares either. The way you all come together when any need arises, is amazing. Most of the time the opportunities for doing something new come from you, not from me. That's the way it should be in the Church. Each and every one of you is equipped with gifts that God intends you to share.

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Here's a few more examples... The Sunday School fund helps folks who need a little extra help to get by. The money raised from the Christmas Auction helps Darke County children who would otherwise not have presents for Christmas. Just recently you all gave generously to two families hit hard by the recent tornados. You all paid the mortgage for several months for a family whose primary breadwinner was permanently disabled. The latest thing I've heard about is your desire to repurpose old shirts and blouses into clothing coverings for the residents of Graceworks so they don't soil their clothing when they eat. The list goes on and on... I haven't even touched on the myriad of ministries you all just do on your own without fanfare or accolades. For all these ministries I give thanks to God our Father. For your generosity, not just at Christmas time, but year round, I give thanks to God our Father. For the faith of each person and the way you all rise to any challenge, I give thanks to God our Father. For the love you freely share within our cozy little congregation and with people you don't even know, I give thanks to God our Father. For your works of love, for your faithfulness in serving, and for your willingness to take a leap of faith when the end is not certain, I give thanks to God our Father. Most of all for allowing me to be a small part of your huge ministry, I give thanks to God our Father. May his blessings upon this Congregation never cease. Amen!