

Piedmont Presbyterian Church



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October 14th, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Oregon Health Authority is asking that children not go trick-or-treating this year because of the risk of spreading the coronavirus infection. My children are disappointed, but it hasn't stopped them from talking in great detail about Halloweens past. Mostly about the treats, and which houses were the best houses- the ones that gave out FULL size candy bars. We adults are the same- I remember one of Pastor Maury's sermons a couple years ago, and he still remembered the name and the address of the gentleman in his childhood who gave out the FULL size candy bars, every year.

These houses have a *reputation*. The children talk about them on the school bus. They point at them as we walk by. They plot to include them on their trick-or-treating route. And decades later, they tell their children about them, and perhaps even give them a shout-out in a sermon. Such is the power of sugar and over the top generosity and good will.

Our New Testament lesson [1 Thessalonians 1:1-10](#) for this week doesn't mention trick-or-treating, or the long lasting memories of sweet, melting goodness. But it does talk about reputation, how people can know things about you without even knowing you. A reputation, for good or for bad, is an identity so strong it pushes your character into the public arena. Your actions, your thoughts, and your associations (or some version of them) are encountered by people who might never meet you. You might find yourself meeting somebody, and hear them saying to you, "Oh, I've heard about you."

Years ago, after I felt God's nudge to become a pastor, I spent a summer at home and asked the local church what I could do to help. The pastor there, Rev. Dennis, asked me to do home visitations to church members who were unable to attend worship because of being unable to leave their home- two were completely paralyzed, and two were recovering from broken hips. I was a little doubtful about whether they would welcome me- an unknown college kid who didn't know what she was doing. What I remember though was that when I called to arrange the

visits, all I had to do was *mention* “Pastor Dennis” and the voice on the other end of the phone would immediately become friendly. The doors would fly open, and I would be welcome with open arms. Any friend of Pastor Dennis was a friend to them. Thinking back on it now, my guess is that Pastor Dennis had let them know I was coming. He probably even asked them to let me in as a favor, and certainly in the end, they ministered to me as much as I ministered to them. But such was the strength of his reputation. They knew him as unfailingly kind, loving and gentle. His favorite phrase, spoken often, “if there is anything the church can do for you...” His signature benediction was from Henri Amiel, “Life is short and we have too little time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind” His reputation was such that just by being associated with him, people were willing to give me the benefit of the doubt.

In Thessalonians, Paul writes to a young church that he is separated from by distance. He tells them about the reputation they have, “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.” (1 Thess 1:8) Whether from Paul and Paul’s associates, or visitors from the region, people have talked about what happened in Thessalonica so much, Paul is now hearing stories about the church there from people who had never been there.

The Thessalonians church built their reputation through, as Paul describes it to them, “your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:3) They had received the message of Jesus Christ with joy, even when it made them a target for hatred and attack. They had given Paul a warm welcome, at cost to their own social standing and safety. And they had responded to the gospel whole-heartedly, “turning to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.” What they do and what they say, all of who they are is bound up completely in their identity as people who follow Jesus Christ.

I imagine none of us have a reputation as large and clear as the Thessalonians. But what is your reputation? What would a neighbor, friend, co-worker, or household member say were your most apparent characteristics? Would they talk about those fruits of the Holy Spirit they have seen in you, such as love, or joy, or patience or kindness? Have they seen you “turn from idols to serve the living and true God?” May we all be so intent in our “work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in Jesus Christ” that these become the first things people think of when they think of us.

The love, joy and peace of Jesus Christ be with you,

Pastor Sarah