

## Sermon 10/31/10

### First Church, West Bridgewater

The Good Resolve and Work of Faith: God will fulfill by God's power every good resolve and work of faith

The sermon this morning is taken from the object of a prayer being made by the Apostle Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy for the church at Thessalonica. The essence is that the three leaders making this prayer believed that God would fulfill the work of faith for which they were praying. The report concerning the Church at Thessalonica was that their faith was growing abundantly while the love of everyone of them for one another was also increasing. That provided the basis for believing that God would continue that work and bless their efforts.

Faith requires that we see beyond ourselves to others and ultimately to God – the big picture. Today, in our country, it is about the individual, not about the community of faith and love. Last week Rev. Ashton quoted from an article that I have also read indicating that nearly ninety percent of Americans believe in God, but in widely divergent modes that reflect our individualism. God can be viewed as authoritative, benevolent, critical and/or distant. Because every human is different, I am sure there is some truth in every one of these views. Yet is the church's mission to model and proclaim that God in the world through fellowship and mission to everyone.

Two weeks ago Rev. Ashton spoke of her desire to become a living part of the community by participating in

the social outreach programs of the church and the community to reach the less fortunate and practice Christ's preferential option for the poor citing some of West Bridgewater's history and upcoming discussions.

The news report on the Church at Thessalonica stated that community faith and love was increasing. Can we see the unity of love for all increasing in our individualistic society? I believe we can if our God is large enough and we are willing to look to others and beyond ourselves in love.

Malcolm Gladwell has written a book entitled; Outliers: The Story of Success. An outlier is one or ones who are outside the main body – different from the pack. In the introduction to his book he tells of a village in southern Italy by the name of Roseto. In 1882, the village sat on a mountain and was very poor. The resident workers would walk down the mountain four or five miles a day to work in marble quarries or terraced fields and then make the arduous journey back up the mountain in the evening. At the end of the nineteenth century, life was so arduous that a group of eleven decided to seek their better fortunes in America. They bought land and settled in Pennsylvania where a village sprung up that they named Roseto. As time went on, more and more of the residents of Roseto in Italy moved to Roseto in America until nearly the entire town was relocated.

The story tells of a doctor who made the observation that there was rarely anyone from Roseto under age sixty-five coming to him with heart disease, whereas neighboring communities had heart disease in epidemic proportions. While studying to find the reason for the positive

discrepancy, it was discovered that there were almost no heart attacks or evidence of heart disease in men under age fifty-five and that for those over sixty-five, the death rate from heart disease was approximately half what it was for the rest of the United States. The death rate from all causes in Roseto was thirty to forty percent lower than expected.

Thinking it might be diet, it was found that the Rosetans cooked with lard with forty-one percent of their calories coming from fat. Many were obese and smoked heavily. Maybe it was location, but the other surrounding towns had death rates from heart disease three times that of Roseto.

Finally, it had to be the residents of the town of Roseto itself that accounted for the difference. They visited one another, stopped to chat on the street, cooked for one another. Sometimes three generations lived under one roof with grandparents commanding great respect. The Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, modeled on the town church in Italy, was found to be unifying and calming. There were twenty-two civic organizations in a town numbering under two-thousand people. The emphasis of the town was egalitarian where the rich, rather than being rewarded for flaunting their success, participated in the community which helped the unsuccessful to obscure their failures.

A sociologist investigating Roseto found: “There was no suicide, no alcoholism, no drug addiction, and very little crime. They didn’t have anyone on welfare. Then we looked at peptic ulcers. They didn’t have any of those either. These people were dying of old age. That’s it.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gladwell, Malcolm, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 2008

Gladwell states: “The Rosetans had created a powerful, protective, social structure capable of insulating them from the pressures of the modern world.”<sup>2</sup>

Is there anything like this today? Is such a faith community possible? I am the latest arrival of three preachers who currently serve the small Union Mission Chapel in Norwell that meets Sunday evenings. The chapel is interdenominational and most members attend their own church in the morning: Catholic, UCC, UMC, or Independent.

We were greatly saddened by the death of a younger member who exemplified this Rosetan church practice. Stanley was an orphan who was taking shop class in high school. He took well to the subject and a bond was made between the teacher and the student. One day Stanley was invited to the teacher’s home and seeing a room down the hall, he asked: “Is that my room?” The teacher responded in love: “Do you want it to be?” There were no adoption papers, Stanley was of age and came to live with his teacher and family for a period of over twenty years. The family considered him their second son, for there was another orphan who had come earlier. My wife says that Stanley adopted the family, rather than the other way around.

Stanley was a tall and robust man, but one who had continuing heart problems. His heart of love, however, was quite healthy. I called him the “Gentle Giant”. He loved to cook for suppers at the chapel, for family occasions, and even for specific people.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

My wife has a ton of food allergies, couldn't come to the chapel dinners, and Stanley wanted to cook a desert. He found out what she could eat, prepared the dish, and Ellen, Stanley's adopted mother, came over to the house with it.

I can see Stanley fitting right in at the Roseto community and I can see a model for the church in expressing love to all. Stanley was an outsider or outlier who found his way to the center of a family and a faith community. There are many outliers out there with all sorts of needs and potentials waiting to be contacted through our outreach and our love.

It is not about others coming into our church community, but about our expanding our view of God to include everyone in the community – especially those who are the outsiders – those isolated from family and community by circumstances beyond their control.

Our Scripture this morning is a prayer for faith and love to abound that will unite hearts and minds and will fulfill by God's power what we have resolved to do in the work of faith. When the stories of Stanley were shared in his memorial service, the comment arose from the community – how can one not believe in God?

So let us increase our love of one another. Let us celebrate and mobilize our diversity into the community at large. Let us expect the prayer to be answered that faith may abound and that the outcome of that resulting community may resemble what occurred in Roseto over fifty years ago: a community with a significant reduction of suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, and welfare. – a community where the Stanley's find a place in our

community and in our hearts, stimulating our own outreach and sense of community.

Let us put feet to our prayers and remember that with God all things are possible. Amen.