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Sermon 13 February 2022

Title: Mind the Gaps

- Good morning church family—we are so pleased that you have taken the time and made the effort to be with us today and we hope that your time with us has been a blessing to you. Wherever you are, we're glad you're here.
- Now for the last 4 weeks—in our “Unwrapped” sermon series and then in Pastor Tasha’s sermon last week, we have been looking at the words of the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth—and as you probably know, the Apostle Paul is arguably the person who is most responsible for the spread of the message of the gospel into the world beyond Jerusalem—and as Pastor Tasha shared with us last week, the Apostle Paul would also be the first to tell us not to single him out or give him too much credit because anything he accomplished was the work of the Holy Spirit and his contribution was to allow God to use him—to guide and direct and speak through his personality and his gifts and his ministry—and I’m sure the Apostle Paul would be quick to remind us that we are all important and indispensable parts of the body of Christ—and each of us is called to live out the gospel and to build the Kingdom in a way that no one else can.
- And even though the Apostle Paul would no doubt not want us to brag or boast about the fact that there is a lot that we can learn from him, his is an

example worth studying—we can learn not only from the words he wrote in his letters but also from the way he lived his life—and if you’re at all interested in learning more about the Apostle Paul—who he was and what he did and the things he taught—you really can’t do much better than looking at the work of Tom Wright—he’s also known as NT Wright, and he’s probably the pre-eminent Pauline scholar in the world right now—you could say about his knowledge of Paul that he wrote the book—and he did—he wrote this book right here called Paul: A Biography—which is a fascinating and really accessible story of Paul’s life that I can’t recommend highly enough—

Professor Wright has written a lot of other books and articles as well—some of them are very dense and scholarly and not so easy to understand, but Tom Wright is certainly the expert whose opinion I would give the most weight to when it comes to any question you might have about the Apostle Paul.

- And so, back two or three years ago when we were doing a Bible Study series called “Big Faith” at the church—when the Apostle Paul was the subject of our study we watched some video of an interview with Dr Wright—and in that interview, Dr Wright was asked what I think is a very interesting question—and that question was about what Paul’s most significant strength was—what characteristic of the Apostle Paul was most important—was it his zeal--his tenacity? His charisma? His knowledge of Hebrew tradition? His ability to bridge cultures? And Dr Wright gave a very interesting answer. This is what he said:

- VIDEO (2 mins)

- All the other strengths that we can attribute to the Apostle Paul notwithstanding—his tenacity, his intellect, his ability to communicate, his knowledge of His tradition—the singular strength that Dr Wright says is most important, most fundamental—is his prayer life. The time he spends in prayer.
- You know Pastor Tasha and I spent quite a bit of time in prayer on Monday and Tuesday of this week during the District Ministers’ prayer conference—it was an uplifting and refreshing time with dozens of other ministers from all across the British Isles North District—and because of the COVID situation it was held on ZOOM—that online meeting technology that many of us have become so familiar with over the past couple of years—and video-conferencing technology was surely a blessing back during the lockdown—we were able to have our prayer meetings and our board meetings and our Bible studies even when we couldn’t meet together in our building—and I am certainly thankful for that—
- Back in December I was able to FaceTime on my phone—to have a video call - with my Mom the day before she died—she could see and hear me and I could see and hear her and I’ll tell you that opportunity was just priceless and what a precious blessing that was
- You know I’m old enough to remember back when I was a kid—when I was a teenager, I used to sit at the kitchen table and talk to my friends—like Tasha—on the phone—on those old rotary-dial phones with the handset attached with a cord—we call them landlines now—and I’d stretch that cord

from the phone on the wall all the way across the room to the chair I was sitting in—as far as the cord would reach

- And back then I remember that every now and then I'd see some science-fiction show, like I would watch a TV show like Star Trek, or the Jetsons, or a movie like Back to the Future, or if I went to Disney World we'd see the World of Tomorrow—and in those visions of the future they always had these phones that could be carried in your pocket—and these video phones, where you could see the person you were talking to—in real time—and I'd think –can you imagine what that's going to be like, someday, decades in the future—after the year 2000 maybe—when there might be such miracles of technology?
- Well, now I've had a MOBILE phone for at least 20 years, maybe more—and a “smartphone” for much of that time-- and we now live in a world where Zoom and video conferences or Facetime calls are commonplace—just something we do
- and carrying phones in our pockets is just the way things are now; we participate in video calls and videoconferences, we watch livestreams—and you're watching an online service right now--
- And even though this kind of technology is amazing, even miraculous—every now and then something happens with it that NEVER happened with the corded phones—the landlines-- we used to use all those years ago

- I'm talking about when you're in a conversation on FaceTime, or watching a church service, or on a Zoom call—and something like this happens (--glitch in video--)—garbled/frozen
- And it's so annoying—things just freeze or go silent—and sometimes you don't know it's happening, so you just keep talking—or praying or whatever's going on—and the person—or people-- who are watching just see this frozen screen and they can't hear what you're saying and they just have to wait and when the connection clears up they say—"could you repeat that? We didn't hear any of it."
- My favorite is when you're not sure about the connection and so you ask "Can you hear me now?" And the person you're talking to says "No" ---and you think, "wait what?? How do you know what I asked?"
- Gaps in connectivity can really dramatically hinder the ability to communicate, to have a conversation, to relate to and understand each other
- Our main scripture today is from Chapter 5 of Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians. And today's ENTIRE main scripture consists of only one sentence, and really just two words in that sentence.
- But before we get to that sentence, here's a little background. Paul is writing to the newly established Christian church at Thessalonica, in Greece, probably to an audience that included both Jews and Greeks—kind of like the folks at Corinth. In fact it's thought that Paul probably wrote this letter while he was in Corinth, around 52 AD, and some scholars think that 1 Thessalonians is the first letter Paul wrote to any church—others think that

may have been Galatians. But for the most part, 1 Thessalonians is a letter of encouragement and reassurance—there aren't really any major issues that need to be addressed, like there were in Corinth—at least not yet—and so in this letter Paul gives thanks for the love and faith of the church, he recollects the time he spent with them, gives them a little theology about the second coming, and then wraps the letter up at the end of Chapter 5—but just before he closes the letter, he gives the church some specific instructions about how they should live as Christians, from verse 12 through 22. He says things like, “be at peace among yourselves, respect those who labor among you, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted”—there's some great advice for the church today contained in those verses. But right in the middle of those instructions is a single sentence containing three commands, and this is the sentence I want to look at this morning. Let's read it together, beginning with verse 16:

- Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
- At first glance, you might think these three commands are hyperbole—exaggeration. Of course Paul doesn't mean rejoice always, like ALL the time, or to give thanks in every circumstance—I mean Paul was beaten, imprisoned, and finally beheaded—are we to believe that he was joyous and thankful –and praying--even then?
- Yes, I think so, even then. We'll come back to that.

- But because I want to think about prayer this morning, I want us to look at that command in the middle. Pray without ceasing.
- Now Paul uses similar wording to refer to rejoicing and giving thanks—he uses the words “pantote”—literally at ALL TIMES and “panti”—in ALL things—but his wording when he talks about prayer is different—Paul says “Pray without ceasing” and the word that is translated “without ceasing” is
  - *adialeiptós*—there are 3 parts to this word
  - *a*: not, without
  - *dia*: across
  - *leiptos*: to leave
  - so together these 3 parts give us something like “**nothing left between, without gaps**”
- We might be tempted to read Paul’s command to “pray without ceasing” and think—OK—I am going to pray all the time—as often as I can—so we might get out our daily calendar and say, OK, I’m going to wake up and pray before breakfast, at 8:00, and then, maybe this is a Wednesday—I’m going to go to the prayer meeting at church and pray there with the group, and then I’ll pray before I eat my lunch, and then in the evening I’ll set aside an hour of personal prayer, and then before bedtime, I’ll pray again—surely that must be what Paul meant, right?—I mean that’s a lot of praying.
- But if we look at our schedule, it’s pretty easy to see that there are “gaps”—from 9 to 10, and from 11 to 12, and then from 1:00 until 6 pm and then from 7 to 9—and Paul is saying that we should pray “without gaps.”

- Is he suggesting the impossible?
- Is he asking the Thessalonian church to do something he can't do? That no one can do?
- I don't think so. I don't think Paul would ask the church to do something that couldn't be done, nor would he ask them to do something he himself wasn't doing.
- But how? How is it possible to pray without ceasing—to pray without gaps—to mind these gaps?
- I want to suggest two ways that we can mind these gaps—two ways that we can “pray without ceasing.”
- First way that we can mind the gaps: Fill them with words. With words—but what words?
- Well first of all, fill them with your words—and you probably already know what this means. These are all the ways that we pray as individuals. This is that “active prayer” that we pray when we wake up in the morning, at mealtimes, when we go to bed at night, in those special times that we set aside for ourselves to bring our thanksgiving and our petitions to God
- But we can also develop the habit of using our words in prayer more often—whether we speak out loud or in that inner monologue that we all carry with us, we can cultivate directing our thought and words toward God—when we're in the queue at the grocery, we can pray for the people around us, when we think of our church we can pray for our people and our programs and our future, when we're driving or walking through our community, we

can pray for God's guidance and direction--we all have the ability to use our words in such a way—and if you need to, you can give yourself some reminders—put a note on your mirror or set a reminder on your phone—whatever it takes to cultivate that habit of prayer.

- But you can use not only YOUR words, but
- Our words: when we pray together in groups or as a church, we lift our voices together in agreement. We do this on Sunday mornings at pre-brunch worship, we do this at Second Helping Bible Studies, we do this at the prayer meeting on Wednesdays, we do this in small groups of friends who meet at the park or at a restaurant or at each others' homes—we do this pretty much anytime we come together because prayer has a way of binding us together as followers of Jesus and making straight the way for the coming Kingdom.
- Now some may say, “but I don't feel that I have the gift of being articulate, of being able to pray out loud in a group of believers—that makes me uncomfortable”—and I want you to know that that is just fine—the silent prayer of every person in a group that's praying together in agreement is just as important as the prayer of the one who's speaking—and I'll tell you what else,
- I have heard some folks who could inspire others when they prayed out loud, whose prayers were beautiful and uplifting and seemed to open up heaven itself and lift an audience into the very throneroom of the Almighty—and that's a wonderful thing, but it's not necessary; it's not the important thing

- A prayer can be eloquent, and inspiring, and beautiful, but an eloquent prayer is no more efficacious or pleasing to God than a stumbling, awkward, elementary, inarticulate, but **sincere** prayer—and an **insincere eloquent** prayer is neither efficacious nor pleasing to God
- When we pray, we pray toward God, to God—not TO people—we may pray on behalf of people, and people may hear our prayer and be moved by it, but the only audience that REALLY matters is almighty God—that’s why in Matthew 6, as we heard Pastor Tasha share with us, Jesus says, don’t be like the hypocrites who “love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others,” because they have received their reward---and don’t be like those Gentiles who heap up empty phrases and think that they will be heard because of their many words, because your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”
- Prayer is not a PERFORMANCE--That is, when you pray—PARTICIPATE, don’t PONTIFICATE.
  - You can fill those gaps with YOUR words, and with OUR words, and finally we can fill those gaps with
- Their words: with their words—but who are they? They are the host of saints and God-fearing believers who left us with their words of encouragement, of dedication, of wisdom, of thanksgiving over thousands of years
- Tom Wright reminded us in that video that Paul practiced the recitation of the Hebrew prayers, like the Shema and the V’ahavta—Shema O Israel the Lord is God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all

your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength—Dr Wright suggests that Paul was likely to have been reciting this prayer not only on the road to Damascus, but also at the end of his life as his executioner raised his blade.

- Now it's certainly true that some would suggest that such memorization and recitation can become an empty exercise, and I think that's a valid point, because anything can become an empty exercise if you do it with the wrong attitude, but with an attitude of worship and devotion and meditative focus upon God, written and recited prayers can provide opportunities for God to reveal ancient life-changing truths to us, they can provide a connection to our tradition that reassures us of the history of the faith and our position within the building of the Kingdom.
- So I would encourage you to search out and commit to memory the historical prayers of our tradition—The Lord's Prayer—our Father, who art in Heaven Hallowed be thy name, the Psalms—not just those Psalms of Thanksgiving, but also the psalms of Lament—those that give voice to desperation and confusion and cry out for rescue as well as the psalms of Praise—and also the prayers of the Saints like St Francis, who wrote:
  - Lord, make me an instrument of your peace  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love  
Where there is injury, pardon  
Where there is doubt, faith  
Where there is despair, hope

Where there is darkness, light

And where there is sadness, joy

- and of course another you probably know, Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer"—God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference

- And so we can fill the gaps in our time with words—your words, our words, their words—but we can also fill the gaps with
- Silence
- Sometimes when Tasha and I are apart, maybe one of us is at home and the other is at the church, we'll call each other on FaceTime, and just be connected—not having a conversation necessarily, but available to each other—in each other's virtual presence
- I think the first time we did this was when Tasha was on a fishing trip in Alaska with her Dad—and I couldn't go because I had work—but whenever she could, she'd call. And I'd sit at my desk, or I'd be washing dishes, or feeding the animals or watering the garden—and she'd be fishing, or sitting on the porch of her cabin, and we'd just "be together"—and we wouldn't always talk—much of the time we were just doing whatever we were doing while listening for the other to speak—and we could do that as long as there were no gaps in the connection—and so even though I was doing some mundane task, I was actively listening for her to speak. And she was doing the same.

- And this I think is a good illustration of the other side of a prayerful life—praying without gaps doesn't just mean talking all the time—offering words—it also means listening—so even though we might describe this as “passive prayer” because we're not talking, it is not simply passive—it is active listening—even when we are engaged in the mundane tasks of our day-to-day life, we can actively listen for God's voice, for the direction and guidance of the Spirit—
- but even in those times when we're able to carve out some space and time in our busy lives specifically for prayer and meditation, even in those times we may find that it's hard work to clear away the busy-ness from our minds
- And that's because the adversary loves to present us with all kinds of worries—all sorts of problems and tasks that need to be done—the devil has a way of making us think that we are ultimately in charge of whether or not everything gets done—and the devil will use those things, and our concern about them, to get in the way of our being able to listen to what God is saying to us.
- But a conversation is made up of both speaking and listening, and so is prayer
- And so, when we think of praying without ceasing, of praying without gaps, listening is just as important as speaking, silence is just as important as words
  - We certainly see this in the life of the Apostle Paul as it's described in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts—it's there in your listening guide—that's

when the apostle Paul and his companion travel one way and the Holy Spirit prevents their advance, then they go another way and the Spirit says no again, and then Paul has a vision that tells him to go to Macedonia.

- This kind of being led by the Spirit is only possible because Paul is actively listening to the Holy Spirit, because he is filling the gaps not only with words but with silence—he is taking the time to be quiet, to stop speaking, to allow space for the Spirit to speak—because he is “praying without ceasing”
- And so, when Paul says to “pray without ceasing,” he’s not talking about taking one activity in our lives—prayer-- and doing it a LOT—he’s talking about a way of living. He’s talking about a lifestyle that is at every moment connected to God and to the Holy Spirit, that at every moment shares in words our concerns and thanksgiving, our petitions and praises, and listens in silence to the leading of the Holy Spirit—so that every step, every decision, every action, is guided by the will of God.
- And so we see that these three commands in this sentence, **Rejoice (always), pray (without ceasing), and give thanks (in all circumstances)**—go together—it is BECAUSE we pray without ceasing that we can rejoice always and give thanks in all situations, because we know that as each step we take is guided by the Holy Spirit, where we are at any time is exactly where we are supposed to be—so when Paul is in prison, he’s not thinking “what mistake did I make that got me here?” or “I need to figure out a way to fix this

situation”—no, he can rejoice and give thanks because he knows he has been in constant conversation with God, and that God is directing his steps—every one of them—so Paul can say in Philippians 4:

- 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.
- And we also can do all this through him who gives us strength—if we learn to pray without ceasing—we can rejoice always and give thanks in every situation—if we mind the gaps.