

So to appreciate the story I am going to tell, what you need to know is that of the three of us, Jennifer is by far the most stereotypically “girly.” She didn’t play sports in school, her makeup is always exceptionally done, and she looks adorable all dressed up. What’s ironic is that now she is also by far the most toned and fit of the three of us too, being extremely diligent about her workout schedule through Covid, so her muscles are way more defined than any of the rest of our crew. However, 15 years ago, core arm strength wasn’t necessarily Jenn’s bag and that’s where we find ourselves for this particular story.

When all of us went to Hawaii for my mom’s fiftieth birthday, it was the first time any of us had gone, which meant that while we did plenty of off the beaten path things, we also had to do all of the stereotypical touristy Waikiki things. One such activity was doing an Outrigger excursion through the Pacific. We had a guide who placed all of us in a particular order, based on our weight and ability to make sure that we would properly be able to help row this outrigger through the ocean waves. Now, Jennifer being the shortest of all of us, and thus the tiniest was put in the front of our row of rowers. We start paddling and we’re doing pretty good, keeping things steady and balanced, but eventually we were having to fight pretty hard against the waves. Our guide kept giving encouragement but also pushing to

get us to row and maneuver so we kept the boat going. At some point, I don't know why, but he decided to start pick on Jennifer for her ability to help us properly row. Since she was in the front of our row, she was labeled as "Number 1," and anytime we needed to work harder, he would be like, "Come on, number 1!" "More number 1!" Eventually, he picked up on the fact that we all had started teasing Jennifer for her lack of number one strength. Finally, as we're paddling and paddling, our guide looks at the rest of us and just completely deadpans, "Number 1, kinda useless."

Now, because we all love each other so much that we thus tease each other mercilessly, fifteen years later, we *still* say this to Jennifer when she does something a little behind the game or just slips up somehow. It's also even more amusing since she's the oldest and thus is in fact our number one, who is the most responsible, the most detail-oriented, the most caring, the most in control of all of us, to joke that she is kinda useless is just absolutely priceless, and she knows it's all in good fun, so it works out. Our second lesson seems to hit a bit on the same vein of thought but with much less teasing and a much more serious tone. If the writer of this letter had to sum up his thoughts to the Thessalonians around their work ethic and mentality, I think he could appreciate the succinctness of our outrigger captain, "Number 1, some of y'all Thessalonians...kinda useless."

So, let's set some context here to figure out just what's going on. Paul and his other disciples' relationship with the Thessalonians is one that ran deep. They had known each other for a significant amount of time, and Paul had helped walk them through some of their deepest faith crises, as well as helped them form into the church as they currently existed during this letter. These are people Paul has walked through concerns about the resurrection, what would happen to their loved ones who had died prior to Christ's return, how to live together in community, how to keep striving forward in faith when they were persecuted and worried about the life they were attempting to form together. Because of that Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus all know that they can be very upfront and honest with these people because they have that kind of relationship.

As a general FYI, I specify those other two gents beyond just Paul, because 2 Thessalonians is one of those letters that scholars hotly debate as to whether or not it was written by Paul or one of his disciples who traveled with him, particularly Timothy and Silvanus. So, I include them in the conversation, because the words of this text might just as easily be theirs instead of Paul's. Regardless though, whomever wrote this letter to the folks in Thessalonica knew these people deeply and could be blatantly and kind of

brutally honest with them, no matter what the situation was and that is where we find ourselves in our lesson this morning.

The issue at hand in Thessalonica appears to be...complacency. They have been living in the post-Jesus years for awhile now, and frankly it is longer than they anticipated it being. They truly thought that Jesus' return was right around the corner and so they weren't anticipating this kind of wait. With that in mind, it seems that a certain number within their community have decided that if they've been waiting this long, then Jesus' return has to be *super close*, therefore, they've just kind of given up on the work thing. From what Paul and his crew have heard, they are living their days in idleness and causing disruption within their intentional Christian community, and people are getting frustrated.

What is vital for us to remember here is that these early Christian communities operated in such a way that all of the members supported one another. They tried their best to hold all things in common and when they gathered for meals, it wasn't just for communion, but for full meals. These were communities filled with folks who didn't always have a lot and so they pooled their money in order to take care of one another as best they could. Therefore, to have some people who have kind of thrown in the towel but are still reaping the benefits of the community is starting to wear thin on the

nerves and the coffers of their neighbors and siblings in Christ. They're starting to feel like they're being taken advantage of and they don't know what to do, so they have turned to their leaders, those who know them best, those who are a bit like parents to them for advice.

Paul and his compatriots do not mince words. They point to the time that they spent amongst this community and say that even though they had the full right to ask for such a thing, they didn't eat for free when they lived there. Paul and his companions would have had what was called apostolic privilege. As missionaries to a community, they were within their rights to ask for and expect the community to care for their needs without having to work for it. Their mission was their work, but Paul and his crew didn't do that. They worked for their food and fully contributed to the community. Thus they say, it doesn't matter if Christ were to show up the very next second, everyone who is a part of this community needs to pull their own weight and contribute what they can as they are capable. They aren't meant to burden one another, but to share their burdens and love and support one another as best as they can. They even go so far as to say if you don't work, you don't get to eat, which sounds harsh, but when we remember that this community is trying to care for *all* of their members, it's a good reminder. They all have a responsibility to one another; they can't be complacent.

This is one of those lessons that when we're willing to look it square in the eye, hits a little too close to home than we would maybe like it too. It's true, life in the church has changed. We are no longer literally feeding one another. We are no longer all combining our incomes to make sure that everyone is taken care of. However, we are all still involved in a ministry that involves commitment and dedication to our mission as a whole. To be a member of an intentional Christian community, which is what we are, which is what we remind the youth group kids they are at the beginning of every youth year, means to be committed to that community, it means showing up and giving of yourself as you are able. It means offering of your time, your talents, and as much as we don't like to talk about it, your finances to the extent you are able to give.

It can be so easy when we fall out of routine or when we distance ourselves from community to just think it runs of its own volition. Far too often we just trust that the church is always going to be there whenever we need it, even if we have had a tendency to forget about it. We allow ourselves to get complacent about what it means to be in community and then we're frustrated when we hop back in and others aren't doing what we expect them to do or things have changed. But if we're asked to help out a

little bit more or do something different well then, the laundry list of reasons why we can't is extensive.

It can be easy to hear texts like this and the way that they tie to our own lives as a guilt trip, as something to just make us feel bad, and that's not the intention. The intention is to remind us of why we are here, why we committed to each other in the first place. To ask ourselves why we're here and how we can continue to work together so that we can grow together for the good of one another and the good of our wider community. Life in this place takes all of us. Every week, the communion table gets set, bulletins get set out, servers guide worship, songs get sung, pews get organized, paraments are changed, lights are turned on, candles are oiled, and that's just to make Sunday morning happen. That doesn't count the numerous ways we're working together for the good of the gospel every day of the week, striving to be God's hands and feet in the world. That type of effort, that type of community takes every single one of us, because we aren't a community without every single one of us. This community, our life together, well, it's an awful lot like an outrigger boat being rowed against the waves, and it takes all of us. It takes all of us rowing at the same time, in sync together, striving towards the same goal, so that none of us ever have to be teased because well, number 1 is kind of useless. **AMEN!!!**