

November 16, 2025

Rev. Mike Eller

“The Subtle Art of Not Growing Weary”

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

When was the last time you really checked in with yourself—Like truly checked-in? I find that sometimes I have to be intentional just to remember to take a deep breath. I can go through most of my day and forget to do this. I wonder if you, like me, forget as well. Neuroscience shows that meditation—even brief moments of it—softens the brain’s alarm systems and strengthens the regions that make us capable of compassion, calm, and clear thinking. It reshapes us from the inside out, helping us become people who respond with intention rather than being reactive. Let’s take a minute to do that together now, as an embodied prayer to open us up.

In this breathing exercise, I want you to close your eyes, and as you inhale, think... *I am known and loved.* Then exhale slowly, thinking... *I have nothing to prove.*

Now... Inhale: *I am free to not know.* Exhale: *I can rest in mystery.*

We often need to remind ourselves to just breathe. We need it . . . because life feels particularly daunting at the moment. I don’t know if you are also feeling this way? Just think how unprecedented is the number of times we’ve used the word “unprecedented” over the last handful of years. Someone recently said we may be feeling particularly overwhelmed because for the first time in history we are omniscient without being omnipotence. We can see nearly every crisis or disaster, much of it in real time—war, famine, injustice, poverty, ecological crises—yet we feel powerless to do anything to stop it. There’s a psychological and spiritual toll that that can take. It can be destabilizing.

To be transparent, preaching in times like these is particularly challenging. The preacher—if we are doing our job—is holding in tension a world that *is*, with all of its struggle and dissonance . . . and a world that *longs to be*, one that is hopeful and liberating. Yet these two can seem like two immovable forces moving counter to one another. We can grow weary sitting in the

tension of this paradox. You want to be honest and authentic about the current state of things; yet sometimes the Biblical lens through which we see the world can seem inauthentic, maybe even trite with pat answers that lack resonance to speak to our present reality. But, hold this tension, we must.

Theologian Karl Barth famously said of this work of preaching: to "take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." Of course he was preaching in the first part of the 20th-century. In today's language, that could read something like: "Preach with the Bible in one hand and your device in the other—filled with social media feeds, blog subscriptions, news articles, and societal studies. By the way, that advice doesn't just go for preachers, but for any Christian.

This pressing between two worlds very much defined the zeitgeist into which the writer of our Epistle lesson is writing. A majority of scholars don't believe it was Paul who wrote the second letter to the Thessalonians, though it is widely believed that he wrote the first. So, 2nd Thessalonians is often labeled a Deutero-Pauline letter, meaning it's a secondary or pseudo-Pauline text—written in the name and spirit of Paul but not actually his handwriting. The message of this sequel seeks to address some discouragements within the early Christian community in light of ramped-up persecutions and even deaths of some of the members.

In Paul's first letter, he was very much writing with an imminent Parousia in mind—he believed that Christ's return was going to happen in his lifetime. From chapter 4: "the dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air" (4:17). Paul expected to be one these who will still be alive on that day. Some time had passed, and the Christian community in 2nd Thessalonians believed "the end" was already taking place, that God has come to fix everything. To right the wrongs. To bring peace and install justice. And many became unwilling to continue doing the things that lead to flourishing community. Perhaps they grew apathetic. When it's the end of the world as we know it, things get sped up for us. Values shift a little. We lose our sense of stability. After all, why expend the energy if God's got this?

This passage of the letter is particularly challenging when read through our modern lens. Today, we would balk at the idea that if you don't work, you don't eat. That's just not the reality for many. We have to remember that this letter is for a particular congregation at a particular moment in history and to address some particular challenges they were facing. So we can't be

too quick to universalize the message here. But you get the sense that some have checked out. They were paralyzed by the present. They've become apathetic.

You know, there are two ways to destroy a garden. One is, you can take a hacksaw and in anger and frustration just chop everything down and lay waste to the whole thing. The other way is by apathy—neglecting the garden through a series of causal abuses: failing to water the plants, to take the time to weed and prune the harmful parts. This way is incremental—before you know it, given enough time, the garden will eventually disintegrate and stop producing flowers and vegetation. Even without any harmful intentions, something can fall apart just from the lack of attention and care. By the way, this doesn't just go for gardening. This is also how you destroy any relationship, a marriage, a church community.

The wisdom written to the first century church still carries a similar urgency for us today: "[D]o not be weary in doing what is right." (3:13) Other translations say, "never *grow tired* of doing good." For, often it isn't that we just wake up one day and check out of doing the good. Many times, it's a slow fade. It's an incremental descent into apathy. And before you know it, you've neglected the work. You've stopped pitching in and doing your part. You've given up the work.

Lately, have we become sped up in what seems to be the end of the world as we know it? Is there still time for the slow work of God? Does Christ's kingdom still come in small ways, like the patient growth of a mustard seed? Are we still being called to do the slow work, as the yeast imperceptibly works its way through the dough?

Mother Theresa, who became her own immovable force of justice and love on the streets of Calcutta, said: "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love." Can we hold onto the value of doing the small things, even when everything seems so daunting? Small does not mean weak. Grass pushes through concrete not by some great counter-force but by exerting small, consistent, daily pressures until it cracks open.

I think about the legacy of the underground railroad, which became a force for freedom, an emblem of liberation, and a pivotal moment in our country's history.

We have to remember that it didn't free hundreds of people all at once—it came about because of the slow work of doing good. It was one person, one

mile, one act at a time. How easy it could have been to grow weary in that work. Chattel slavery looked like an immovable institution. But it was slowly eroded by:

small acts of hospitality,
one meal at a time,
one lantern in a window,
one mile of guided travel,
one whispered warning,
one hint by a lyric sung in a spiritual,
one quilt on a clothesline,
one person tended to at a time.

Taken all together, that slow stream became a deep river of liberation.

Today is Stewardship Sunday... The essence of what that word means is to take care of something. Not a one-off moment of kindness, but a commitment to the slow work of bringing a community to health and flourishing. The opposite of stewardship is not destruction but apathy. We can be well-meaning but over time "check-out" and neglect the very things we love. It is my hope in this season of stewardship that we are reinvigorated to participate: Submit a pledge card, certainly... But also, find a place to serve the ministry, to pitch in and help out, no matter how seemingly small it may seem. Your pledge at the close of this year 2025 will likely not move mountains, but it will contribute to building a force of love and justice in our community. So give in confidence and faith.

I want to close with some wise words from American author, Presbyterian minister and theologian, Frederick Buechner: "Will we be brave today or a coward today? Not in some big way probably but in some little foolish way, yet brave still. Will we be honest today or a liar? Just some little pint-sized honesty, but honest still. Will we be a friend or cold as ice today? All the absurd little meetings, decisions, inner skirmishes that go to make up our days. It all adds up to very little, and yet it all adds up to very much. Our days are full of nonsense, and yet not, because it is precisely into the nonsense of our days that God speaks to us words of great significance—not words that are written in the stars but words that are written into the raw stuff of our days . . . And the words that [God is speaking] to each of us differently, are "Be brave . . . be merciful . . . feed my lambs . . . press on toward the goal.' "

Amen.