

“Saints: Those Who Endure”

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This will be a little sermon-ette, I knew we had kind of a busy Sunday, so don't worry - I'm not going to keep you here until noon.

This passage expresses a commitment to those of the early church that Paul talked about and it's also a warning because the actions that we have in this world - just like the Thessalonians - have an impact on others and to the ministry of God.

Now, there was a movie I really loved that came out a number of years ago called “The Butterfly Effect.” Ashton Kutcher - Iowa's own Ashton Kutcher - starred in it:

The Butterfly Effect. I looked up the definition of what that is, and I have to read it to you because, frankly, it's too many big words for me: *The Butterfly Effect is the sensitive dependency on initial conditions in which a small change at one place in a deterministic nonlinear system can result in large differences in a later state.*

Did you get that?

In other words, what that means is, that in one spot you can have some small action take place, but that little action can make a huge difference at another place, time and state in time.

That is what Paul is saying to the people of the Thessalonians. He is saying to them, when you act out well, you can make a huge difference on others; but if you act wrongly - like in verses 5-10 - it can have a terrible effect. So, don't think that what you are doing in this world makes no difference.

There is something frustrating sometimes with teenagers. Although I was a perfect teenager, I know there are others that were not. My mother is gone now, so I can get away with saying that. A teenager will say, “Will you please leave me alone? It's my life. Let me live it.”

No, it is not. You may think it's your life, but it's not. Because whatever you do in your life - every action that you take has an impact on so many others. If you are a teenager what you do certainly does impact your parents - usually negatively. Reflect on it. But on so many others you just think it's yours. No, it is not. And, as we get older and we grow up, we have an impact on our families, our children and our church. The ripple effects are amazing.

In fact, the Iroquois Indians talk about their great belief that every decision they contemplate making could impact up to seven generations. Seven generations is 140 years. So, whenever they make a decision they think about what the impact of this could be, not just tomorrow, next week or next year, but for 140 years. They do that not only with the heads of the tribes - are we going to go ahead and fight this tribe, or are we going out and go after that tribe - but also on the little things, like deciding where they are going to move. What types of issues are they going to have within their family? On every

aspect of their lives - individually and corporately, as a tribe - they ask themselves first, "how will this impact 140 years later?" Boy, if only we could all do that.

The "Butterfly Affect" was defined by a man named Lorenz. To try and emphasize the Butterfly Affect and how it got its name, Lorenz said, theoretically, that a hurricane could take effect in this half of the world, but that it was actually started several weeks earlier in the other half of this world, by a butterfly's flapping of its wings; everything is interconnected.

So, to the point that physicists who studied string theory, those who are arguing about whether or not chaos theory is appropriate, reflect back to Dr. Lorenz and his understanding of The Butterfly Affect, believing that things are not chaotic or, on their own dissimilar; everything has an implication and leads to something else - like a snowball rolling down a hill - it picks up more snow and could turn into a landslide of snow, an avalanche of snow. In the same way, he argues, our actions can have the same implications - and I have seen it.

If you have lived in a church for any amount of time, you know what that means. In our first church Jill and I were in northern Wisconsin. There was this little lady. She was 180 years old if she was a day. Her name was Luella Crowe. She and her husband had a little dog. Her husband was a professor at the University of Wisconsin of Stevens Point - long retired.

Luella had every illness known to humanity, but God would not take her. I don't know why, because I had a whole bunch of people in that congregation I wanted God to take and he never would. But, I loved Luella so I think God blessed me by not letting Luella go while I was the minister there.

Everything physically for Luella was deteriorating. Yet, she still found ways to do the little things - to flap her angel wings, her saintly wings - when everything else was taken away. Her hands were so arthritic that she put a pen between two fingers and, with her other hand, hold them to write. That lady wrote as many as 25 cards a day, 5-6 days a week.

There were groups of people all over the country, the state, and literally around the world, that saw themselves as part of Luella's family because, over a period of time, 20 cards a day is not that big an issue; but when you are 180 years old, that is a lot of cards, for over 25 years. She cranked out over 100 cards a week in those last years, writing with both hands to make it work.

People were awed. They would call me. When people came to the church from other places, they would push me aside to find her. Everyone loved and cared for her. They prayed for her and were so grateful because, whatever their issue was, she was not afraid to name it, to write about it and to give some advice. At her age you are allowed. They knew even, in her words, that she loved them. What was hard and sacrificial about writing those cards was what made it so meaningful.

Look at each lit candle here today. There is a story behind each one of them. Some have wonderful stories of a life that was lived so easily and so well, but most of these candles

have stories behind them of challenges as well as joys, struggles as well as ease, pain as well as blessings. If you talk to family members of most of these lit candles they would tell you that, in retrospect, what brought meaning and gave them hope, what set an example, was their wings whispering and moving throughout their lives. What made the greatest impact were not the easy times, but how they lived through the struggle, how they endured faithfully amidst persecution or loss or struggle.

So I want you to reflect. Go through the list again that was read pretty fast. You were watching how I was lighting the candles, wondering why some candles were harder to light than others. Go back through the list and look at the names of the people you know - that you remember - and think about something you remember about them. Really reflect on each name. Of those you know, give thanks for their example. If you are a family member, thank God for them. Remember the difficult times as well as the joyous times. In the flapping of their wings they started something small, just their own reaction to some issue. It changed the way you thought about faith. It changed the way you responded to trials. It changed the way you placed an emphasis upon this world, and it just might carry through to the seventh generation.

My family has stories about my great-great-grandfather who was a congressman in North Dakota. He was a well-read man in an age before people had much. He had his own library. A very interesting man. My grandfather never went to college, but my family had a huge commitment to education and to faith. When they tell a story of my great-great-grandfather, who died far before I was born, he continues to change my family's commitment to education, how we view ourselves as responsible and dedicated to our faith - based on somebody who was born in 1840-something. His wings are still flapping, making a larger and larger impact as the generations go by, and the stories continue.

You, in your stewardship of your life, in the stewardship of the giving of your time, talent and your money are laying a foundation for good or ill. I hope it's for good. I pray that when you make a decision you realize it isn't just impacting you and your life - but your family, your church family, your community and - seven generations down the road - the world. Amazing. I hope you are awed by that thought and that it impacts your decision-making as well as what you do in a single moment.

Invite the Holy Spirit in. See what God can do.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen