

I was able to attend a great football game Thursday night. I was able to go to the Clemson / Georgia Tech football game which was a great game from my perspective as a Clemson graduate since Clemson won the game. I was able to attend the game with my brother-in-law Gary and his son Mac and my friend Douglass.

As some of you may remember, my brother-in-law Gary was here at Allison Creek a few months ago thanking us for the prayers we offered up on his behalf. He had a diseased liver and was literally a few days or at most weeks from death when a woman named Peggy died in Charlotte. Peggy had signed up to be an organ donor prior to her death. Peggy's liver was transported from her body into the body of my brother-in-law Gary. Gary's body accepted the liver with lots of medication.

Gary has made a remarkable recovery over the past few months. Gary was able to drive his son and his brother-in-law on Thursday and attend a football game. It was great to see the progress that Gary has made. We even had an additional treat on the way to the game. We stopped by the Legend's Barber Shop in Spartanburg on the way to Clemson.

The Legend's Barber Shop is owned and operated by Harold, the son of the woman who donated her liver to my brother-in-law. It was special to meet Harold and realize that his barbershop is on the same road that I can travel when I go to Spartanburg to visit our oldest daughter Rebecca.

Because I know the story of the person who owns that barber shop, I now feel a yearning to stop in again. I feel a yearning to bring the rest of my family to meet Harold because I know some of his story now. I now know that his mother donated a liver that now rests in my brother-in-law. The Legend's Barbershop will now be a place that I notice and will stop in to visit on occasion.

I share this part of my Thursday evening because something else happened on Thursday night that continues to disturb me. And it has nothing to do with teenagers catching and throwing a football. It has something to do with what happened after the game.

The game on Thursday was a late game. We all know that college athletics is controlled by television so ESPN set this game to be played on a late Thursday night. That meant we were not going to get home until about 2 am. I left the stadium and we wanted to quickly get to the car to try to get ahead of some traffic so that we could get home as quickly as possible.

That makes sense. We were tired. It was very late. And we had a long drive ahead of us. So we were quickly walking along on the sidewalk next to the soccer stadium. As we were rushing along with the crowd that was leaving together I spotted a woman sitting on the sidewalk resting her back to a brick wall. I could notice what looked like her two small children who were also bundled up.

It was in the 30s that night when we left after 11 pm. My first thought was that this woman had been to the game and she was resting with her two little Tigers while she was waiting on someone. It was cold on Thursday night and she was bundling up.

I assumed she had been to the game and then my next fleeting thought was that she almost looked homeless. I said a joke to myself that she almost looked homeless but I knew she was not. This was, after all, Clemson and this was a football game. There are not homeless people in Clemson, SC after a football game.

But I was wrong. As I caught her eye as I sped past I heard her say to me, "can you help us out?" "Can you help us out?" In a flash I thought to my wallet. It had no cash in it. I don't usually carry cash so I knew that I could not help her out monetarily at that instant.

But is that what she really wanted? I don't know. Probably, but I don't know. I was too focused on getting to our warm car that was equipped with seat warmers and getting on the road to my warm house. So my day began by getting to know the story of someone in a barbershop that I would have passed by ordinarily and never thought anything of it and my night ended with passing someone by and not offering to stop to listen to her story and what she needed that night.

I have continued to see her face in my memory and her cold and bundled two children since I passed her by on Thursday night.

The text we read from 2 Thessalonians is a text of Scripture which is pulled out by folks a lot of times when there are discussions about whether or not I should have stopped to find out what this woman and her two children needed. This is a text of Scripture which is pulled out a lot whenever there are discussions about whether or not we should have safety nets in our society like welfare and food stamps.

This is a text which is pulled out whenever there are discussions about whether or not a homeless shelter should be built in a community. Whenever middle class and wealthy Americans debate whether or not we should provide safety nets for those who are struggling to get by inevitably someone who has never been food deprived will self-righteously say, "Well the Bible says if you don't work you should not eat."

The problem with someone quoting 2nd Thessalonians to make that point about safety nets is that to quote this text in that argument is a gross misuse of this text of Scripture. When Paul wrote this letter to the community in Thessalonica it had nothing to do with social safety nets.

Paul's words had everything to do with people in the church who were sitting on their duffs and complaining about others in the church but then not doing anything to help improve what was going on in the church. Paul's words had everything to do with people who were complaining about others and then stirring up problems in the church.

The NIV and the NRSV translations have classically translated verse 6 and verse 11 as "idle." These translations have translated these verses to mean that those who are idle should not be able to eat. Looking for proof from the Bible to address social safety nets like food stamps many have lifted this passage up to say, "see, we should cut food stamps because the Bible says if you are idle you should not eat."

But the word translated as "idle" is found only here in all of Scripture. And it comes from a word which means disorderly and disruptive. Therefore, this is not a text about social safety nets. It is a text about people in the church who are being disorderly and disruptive.

So what the text is really saying is that those in the church who are disruptive and disorderly should not be able to eat. This text is calling out those in the church in Thessalonica who are troublemakers and meddlers. People who stir up trouble in the church but refuse to do anything to help.

People who gossip about things in which they have no business but then provide no help to solve. In fact, the text goes on to say that those in the church who are disorderly and disruptive should be shunned by the rest of the community.

I feel a deep sense of personal sorrow that I did not stop on Thursday night. As a Christian I was called by Jesus to stop, and pay attention, and to hear her story. I did not do that. I will continue to mourn my selfishness that night. I don't know what she was asking for.

I don't know if she was a front for someone else who was seeking to take advantage of others generosity. I don't know because I never stopped to ask.

The text we read from 2 Thessalonians though is not the text of Scripture that I am to turn to answer what she needed that night. This text from 2 Thessalonians about work and food had nothing to say to her or me that night.

This text from Thessalonians does have something to say to all of us inside the church during this time when the Session is asking for commitments from the congregation during this time of stewardship. This text does say that we are called to work together to find solutions to the challenges and opportunities before the congregation.

This text does have harsh words to say to anyone that speaks harsh words against another without working to find appropriate and God breathed solutions.

Are you being idle, disruptive, or disorderly? Paul has some harsh words here against that type of behavior.

Are you being a problem solver, a person who seeks solutions, a person who brings people together? That seems to be the type of person that Paul is calling the Thessalonian Christians to be.

Problem solvers, solution seekers, and people who bring people together probably work well here in this church as well. AMEN.

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Prayer of Confession:

We confess to you, O God of all people, that we have seen others in need and walked by because we were too wrapped up in our own wants. We have become worried that you will not provide rather than trusting you to provide what we need. We have been quick to complain and do nothing rather than seek solutions to challenges before us. Forgive us, O God, and restore us into a right relationship with you.

Prayers of the People

Holy God, we come before you and lift up those in need. We lift up the needs of the woman and her two children in Clemson. We pray that she finds a place of comfort and security if that is what she needs. We lift up those who are working hard but falling through the cracks in our society. The fast food employees who work full time but still live below the poverty line. The single parents who need to care for their children but do not have any funds. The immigrant who has worked a full week only to be told that his employer would not pay him for his labor. We lift up all who work hard and for those who have never worked hard a day in their life. We know that they are all your children and loved by you.