Today we will be reading from Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica. Thessalonica was in ancient Macedonia which would be considered modern day Greece. Paul writes this letter about 20 years after the death of Christ and this letter is considered to be the oldest document in the New Testament of the Bible. It is older than the gospels because it is assumed that the gospels were told orally for about 40 years or so before they were recorded.

In other words, if we were to organize the New Testament according to which document came first, this first letter to the Thessalonians would come before the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But even though this letter is the oldest Christian document that we have it receives very little attention today.

The church in Thessalonica was founded by Paul. It is made up of Gentiles who came to faith in Yahweh God from other faith traditions that believed in many gods. We see in what we will be reading that this church is being affirmed by Paul for their devotion in faith.

Paul’s younger friend Timothy has reported to Paul that this congregation is showing a strong faith as they are choosing to make some faithful choices that are different than the culture around them. They are, according to Paul, being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. So Paul is writing this letter to encourage them to keep up the good work of ministry that they are doing.

**Read I Thessalonians 3: 6-13**

For more than 20 years, the Rev. Eric Williams has educated people about AIDS and helped those who suffer from the disease. I think it is very appropriate to share his story today because this weekend marks World AIDS day and many of us are shielded from the ravaging destruction that AIDS has on a body and a family. But the focus of Rev. Williams' ministry on AIDS isn't something he could have predicted back in 1991.

In those days, Williams was a young pastor who had only recently been called as pastor of Calvary Temple Baptist Church in Kansas City, Missouri. He had been ordained in 1988. He says that in 1991 he "got a call from a local funeral home. The woman on the other end of the line told him, ‘I've got a really big favor that I want to ask." The favor had to do with a young man who had just died.

"He'd been a member of his church all his life," Williams recalls. "His parents were very active in church. Mom sang in the choir. At any rate, he's 25 years old, and he died of AIDS. And he just happened to be gay." The woman from the funeral home told Williams that when the man's "pastor found out how he died, he said, 'Well you know, I am not going to do the funeral. And it can't happen in our church.' "

Williams was asked to perform the service but he did not want to do it. “It's not appropriate for one pastor to go against what another pastor has said" he recalled thinking at the time. And he was perfectly all right with that — until he went home and started thinking about this family.

As Williams says, "You know, everything good that I've been able to accomplish has started with some kind of a burden." And AIDS burdened me.” So reluctantly, Williams did the funeral. He met the parents of this kid and as he recalls, "I was used to black dads disowning their gay sons. That was the thing to do: 'My son can't be gay.'

"But not this family,” Williams recalled. This father and this mother, they celebrated his life. They embraced all of his friends." In the years that followed, Williams became an advocate for those with HIV/AIDS, organizing prayer and information sessions. He's also urged other pastors to take up the cause and spread awareness. And it all started with that "favor," and the funeral that followed.

Williams reflects on his ministry with these words, "You know, that family taught me more about unconditional love in that little experience than any of the Sunday school books and any of the courses in seminary, or any of it. That was the event that rearranged my life."

Rev. Williams reminds us through his ministry that following Christ may challenge what we believe. Following Christ may lead us to engage in ministry that may initially make us uncomfortable. Following Christ may challenge us to reexamine what we do in our lives.

In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, he tells them that they are connected to the apostles by the work that they do. He affirms the good that they are doing and how they are faithful in the midst of the polytheistic religion all around them. Paul encourages them to support one another as he seeks to support them. Paul tells them that their faith makes them different now.

Much like Angus Jones is discovering. Angus Jones is the teenage actor on the wildly popular show “Two and a Half Men” who joined a Christian church this summer and is now struggling with the content of the show where he is paid a large amount of money to be an actor. He is showing his struggles as witnessed in a recent interview when he called the content of the show “filth” and encouraged others not to watch. An active faith in Christ challenges us to live by different standards. An active faith may challenge us to reexamine what we do in our lives.

A little later in the service we are going to offer a blessing to two families in this church as they leave this church and community and venture off to new lands. The Loxtermans are moving to Idaho and the Samios family is moving to Pennsylvania. We are excited for both families as they move to be closer to grandchildren. But we are also sad because both families will be sorely missed in this church and community. All four of them have given so much.

But we offer a blessing and we do this publicly not as a way to set them above anyone else in this congregation. We offer this blessing as a symbol which is similar to what Paul does when he writes to the Thessalonians. Paul encourages them to keep up the good work where they find themselves located.

By offering a blessing this morning we send the Loxterman and Samios families off to encourage them to be a blessing to a new community of people yearning to experience what they have to offer. A blessing which says that you are called to live values which reflect faithfulness to God’s ideals. Our blessing doesn’t stop here but is sent forward to places where they will now settle.

Our faith compels us forward. Forward for Rev. Williams meant overcoming his fear and offering a funeral for a young gay man who died from AIDS. Forward for the Thessalonians meant living a life faithful to God in a community that told them to worship anything and everything.

How does faith in God make you different? Is your faith causing you to reexamine some things you do in life? Is there some fear that you are being challenged to overcome in order to share the good news of God's love?

Your faith in Christ may be challenging you in new and fresh ways. AMEN.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

-“A Life’s Ministry Springs from a Dilemma Over AIDS,” and found on NPR at <http://www.npr.org/2012/11/30/166162027/a-lifes-ministry-springs-from-a-dilemma-over-aids>

-Given: Dec. 2, 2012 in Allison Creek Pres. Church (York, SC)