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1 Thess. 3:6-13
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“Love Inc”

Grace and peace...

There are certain movies that are a must-watch this time of year. “How the Grinch Stole Christmas”, the Dr. Seuss animated classic, is on that list for me. I like the beginning where it shows the heart of the Grinch. We didn’t need the X-ray to know something was wrong with his heart. But his heart was two sizes too small. And yet in the end, when he pulls the sled back from its precipitous demise on the mountain peak, it was because the Grinch’s heart grew three sizes that day!

So that concept of a heart that is transformed—miraculously—that grows, that chooses to love—I want you to have that in mind today because the Word of 1 Thess 3 is aimed not at the head, not at the hands, but it’s really aimed at the heart. And if there was a heart monitor that we could slide over your body, and peer inside you, what would it say about your heart? Would it find that it was two sizes too small? I don’t think so. But I’m afraid of what else it might find.

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 3, God establishes our hearts to be “blameless in holiness” (v. 13). Does “blameless in holiness” describe your heart? God knows what’s in the heart—and it’s not pretty. I mean, if we were really honest

with each other, it'd be downright shameful the things that come from our heart. So no, blameless in holiness—whatever that means, that's not something we can relate to or bring about by our own efforts. It's a God-thing. And it's just as miraculous as the Grinch—to think that our dirty, filthy, selfish hearts could be cleansed, transformed, and even grow three sizes that very day when we received Jesus into our hearts. The sign of this transformation is a love that increases and abounds! So this sermon is titled "Love Inc" and "Inc" stands for Increasing. Each day, God is establishing our hearts so that we increase in love for one another and for all.

So let's get our bearing here. I can't show you where Whoville is, but we should probably know where Thessalonica is on the map. It's in the region of Macedonia. Paul is writing this letter to the Thessalonians while he is in Corinth. The year is end of 52 or early 53. So this puts us in his second missionary journey (AD 50-54). Paul will be in Corinth for about 18 months (Acts 18:11). And this is just one of those little tricks to know about Paul's letters to Thessalonians, but 2 Thessalonians is written first and 1 Thessalonians is written second. The numbering of them when the Bible came together simply had to do with length. But if you look at the content, it reads more logically because 1 Thess. is more optimistic than 2 Thess. Paul has a lot more to respond to and write about.

That's why it's longer and later. There's more to talk about, more to be thankful for. How does Paul know what's going on? Well, Acts 18:5 says Timothy and Silvanus arrived in Corinth having come from Macedonia. Our maps showed us the city of Thessalonica is in the region of Macedonia.

What's Timothy's good news about the good news? It's simply this: people are still believing and they have accepted what Paul had to say in his first letter. That might sound like a given, but let me just say, as a pastor, whether people will accept spiritual oversight is never a given. The issue Paul was dealing with was this false teaching going around that the day of the Lord had already come. This had resulted in social unrest. People were disturbed, upset. Some gave up their normal jobs and roles in society because they thought the end had already come and they missed it. There was mooching off of others, as people weren't working like normal—all because of the false teaching that the day of the Lord had already come. So Paul has a job in front of them—to calm the people down, to assure them that everything is OK, and to say, get back to work and do your job. Stand firm (2 Thess. 2:15); Don't be idle but earn your own living (2 Thess 3:12); Don't grow weary in doing good (2 Thess 3:13). But it's a test of his authority and standing? Will they listen? Will they trust him? Or will they get caught up in the frenzy?

1 Thess. 3:6-7, “But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—for this reason brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.” Paul’s relieved because they still believed. And he looks forward to the time and prays that he can see them again and supply what is lacking in their faith (v. 10). What does that tell us? It tells us faith formation is an ongoing process. It tells us that there are basics that need to be in place before we learn other aspects of the faith. It tells us that Paul as a disciple-maker takes spiritual formation to heart. All he wants is for people to grow in love as followers of Jesus. They did. And when you see someone grow because you have poured yourself into them—that’s what is so gratifying about discipleship. V. 11, “Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you...”. Paul sounds like a grandparent who upon seeing his grandkids says, “My how you’ve grown—and so quickly!” When people take the Gospel to heart, it changes them noticeably. It’s not usually three sizes in one day, but it can be!

I was talking to my dad recently about the pacemaker he recently had installed. He has low blood pressure and years ago when he was in the hospital for something unrelated, he sets off the alarms of the heart monitor because his

pulse rate and blood pressure are both so low. I thought we kids had done a better job of stressing him out, but I guess not. It must be all that lap swimming he does. Anyways, what is the job of a pacemaker but to regulate and establish the heart in good order? He's feeling better these days, able to do more now because his heart is in the right. His heart is established.

Well, friends, the Holy Spirit is something of a pacemaker because He sets the rhythm and output of the heart. Verse 12, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all." The Spirit prompts us to love. He initiates and regulates the way of love. It's actually the divine essence in us that's being expressed. There's just something compelling there, like we all are Thessalonians who have room to grow, more love to give. Therefore, love is always a choice we can make. It's not an emotion, it's not a feeling. Love is a choice.

It's not like the call to love is a new idea. But is it possible that you may be holding back love a bit, as if it needed to be conserved? The call here is to grow in love; be generous and messy with it, spilling it all over the place. There's always more love to give. It's not going to run out.

It's similar to a fear that older siblings sometimes have when they're told there's going to be another younger brother or younger sister. Does this mean

that mom and dad are going to love me less? Of course not. They'll just be dog tired, that's all. But love is not something that partitioned, divided and rationed off. Love is not in that category. Love grows, multiplying as it is shared. It abounds. It's just one of those things, the more you give it away, the more you get it back and then some. The Lord works this kind of love in the heart. It's His doing that we abound in this kind of love that is ever-increasing.

So with that in mind, there might just be someone that God is telling you today to love even more—to increase in love for that person and not hold back, but to really pour it on with a love that is extravagant! Go for it! Pour it on!

The front of your bulletin says, "Live so that people want to know Jesus." But it should just as much read, "Love so that people want to know Jesus." When we choose to walk in love, that brings a lot of joy to the people in Whoville, ya know? People see the change. They talk about it. They write songs about it. Paul even wrote Scripture about it. As we abound in love, may the Lord "establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father". There it is—blameless in holiness. That's a heart that has been forgiven and transformed by His love. That's the actual result of what God is working in us. As a result, we choose to love others with that kind of love. We can love this way when we know what Jesus has done for us and what Jesus will do for us. He's coming! When he

does come, then the words “blameless in holiness” will not be a process, but an established reality! Jesus is blameless in holiness and as He is—so will we be. We will be changed. We will become like Him! Until He comes back though, the call is to increase in love—to love one and love all!

In Jesus’ name, Amen.