

Faith on idle: Sunday, November 18. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13.

by [Michael Battle](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

*“For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right” (2 Thess. 3:11-13).*

In 1971, British child psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott was approached by Anglican priests and asked to solve the following dilemma: How does one distinguish between a person’s need for spiritual counsel and the need for psychoanalysis? Winnicott was caught off guard. He paused, and then responded, “If a person comes and talks to you and, listening to him, you feel that he sustains your interest, no matter how grave his distress or conflict, then you can help him. . . . But if he is boring you, then he is sick and needs psychiatric treatment.”

Many Christians are caught in a quagmire—idle in living out our faith and thus boring when we speak about our lives in the faith. If we also fail to understand why we bore others, we are missing the lesson that Winnicott and the apostle Paul seek to teach us. Imagine watching an athletic event and seeing an athlete fall to the ground in what is apparently a severe injury. If one sees the athlete writhing in pain and moving all of her limbs, one should sigh with relief, for she will most likely recover. But if the athlete is not moving, then one assumes the worst.

Paul was teaching the church at Thessalonica. Winnicott was trying to teach Anglican clergy in England. Both explained that in their spiritual lives many people are like the athlete who lies motionless on the field—paralyzed, depressed, unconscious or dead. These people no longer lead a dynamic life because they have lost all concept of living. In spiritual terms they have lost hope for life and become idle in their work and faith. They “perform” their Christianity only as a monotonous routine. Prayer becomes a monologue.

If we bore others, we may be revealing our own psychological distress. To be bored, however, is something else. According to Winnicott, being bored is an ordinary, necessary and oddly desirable part of everyday life. A young child’s capacity to be

bored, for example, is closely linked to his or her capacity to play contentedly alone while in the presence of a parent. This capacity to be alone reflects a welcome developmental achievement and is a sign of psychological health. As Robert Dykstra states, “The capacity to be bored may serve as something of an antidote to the emotional terror hidden in the act of being boring.”

Child psychoanalyst Adam Phillips explains that boredom is a process of tension in which a person is both waiting for an event and looking for an event. The tension of waiting and looking can lead either to a secretly negotiated hope or a recurrent sense of emptiness. If it is the latter, true desire dies on the vine and turns into hopelessness.

The lesson for church leaders is that we are to address the bored and idle among us by gently fostering hope. This demands that we not rush to alleviate boredom, but that we negotiate true desire over hopelessness. As Paul teaches us, true desire is found in Christ. In the garden of Gethsemane, Christ resisted a premature flight from uncertainty that would have circumvented the negotiation of hope for us all. In him, we are rescued from an idleness that would otherwise be our ultimate end.

We must neither sabotage a person’s boredom nor avoid cultivating hope where we see boredom. Dykstra suggests that the process of sermonizing is indicative of the creative work that we must do to take others from an idle, passive faith to an engaged, vital faith:

Unless the preacher and text alike first become vulnerable to the other while holding at bay outside authorities that include ecclesiastical doctrines and traditions, there can be little hope that preacher or text will inspire anyone else. If the minister refuses to be changed by and, more provocatively, to “change” the biblical text in this early encounter, the resulting sermon will almost invariably paralyze and bore rather than touch and transform.

Christ invites us into the true desire of hope for all the world. Be warned, says Paul. There will be places in the Christian journey where we will need to negotiate hope in our weariness, and action out of our idleness. “Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.” Like the athlete who falls to the ground, struggle with all your soul and body to rise up and finish the race. This means that you will sometimes pray without words, and do good in the absence of reward.