

Firm in community

By [Kyle Childress](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Childress's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Second Thessalonians is concerned with encouraging a struggling congregation to stand firm, endure and persevere. Wendell Berry refers to the "[art of the commonplace](#)," a phrase that for pastors brings to mind the art, craft and skills by which we cultivate the common everyday life our people are called to live and share--and which will enable them to stand firm. It is about the mundane and about community.

Growing community, the body of Christ, is an everyday task that takes constant teaching, reinforcement, paying attention and making connections, and plain old persistence in helping our people learn to share a common life. Since we all live in a hyper-individualized society, with its constant barrage of messages that everything revolves around *me*, growing Christians takes a lot of time over the long haul.

Every Sunday for more than 20 years we have ended worship with a benediction I first learned from an African-American pastor. It begins, "Let's take each other's hands. . . . Now look who you're holding hands with, and hold on tight! Because we're going to need each other this week."

Several times over the years I've had church members in unexpected crisis tell me later, "When I first heard the news, I didn't know what to do or who to call. Then it hit me--who was I holding hands with Sunday? And that's who I called."

I want our people to think in terms of God and each other, each other and God--that we can't have one without the other--so much so that it is habitual, their automatic way of thinking. I tell them that if someone walks into our church on Sunday morning

and steps on someone's toe, I want the whole congregation to yell.

There are deep theological and biblical reasons for the church to learn to live a shared life, but it is also very practical. If we're going to stand firm then we'd better do it as a body, or else we'll never make it. Lone individuals trying to stand are easy pickings for the powers and the ways of the world. Monday through Saturday we are separated, isolated, dis-membered and picked off one at a time, then ground down into the dust.

Standing firm takes a community of friends in Christ, together worshiping, working and living in the same direction, seeking to cultivate the same habits. And every Sunday, like our Lord's Supper table says, when we do this--share this meal (as well as pray, hear the word, sing hymns, forgive and be forgiven, serve, etc.)--we are remembered into the body.