

Parade. When you hear that word you probably think of the 4th of July. Of lining the streets to watch floats and hear music and collect candy. But the word can also be used in a very different sense. The sense of a military parade. Now, I've never been in the military. But I was in Boy Scouts. And every year during summer camp, we would have a military-style parade.

The scouts would dress up in the most formal fashion possible. Hair would be combed. Dirty limbs and faces would scrubbed. Every boy would be dressed in uniform. His neckerchief perfectly folded and tied around his neck.

We would line up in straight, even rows by rank. Flag bearers out front, leading the way. And we would march to the parade field in perfect lockstep, shouting marching songs in unison. And there we would follow a precise formation until we took our place before the council leaders. Before our parents, gathered to watch.

And before our own scout masters. They weren't there to guide us. We were doing this on our own. There was no one there to reprimand us if we goofed off or messed up. We did it purely out of troop pride. The pride having the best looking, most disciplined troop in the camp.

We took it seriously. Which was kinda surprising considering that no one told us to take it seriously. You just knew. You could feel from the older boys. The intensity with which they approached preparing for parade. And they passed that on to the next generation.

Likewise, we were really never trained how to march. The youngest boys would start marching completely out of step and disorganized. And yet, by the time we arrived at the parade field two miles away, we were in lock step and moving as a single unit. No one sat us down in a classroom to teach us. We just learned from those leading us.

This memory came to mind because of something I read in our Epistle lesson for today. It's a phrase that St Paul uses several times in the passage: "walking in idleness." In English, it's a pretty straightforward concept. He's talking about someone who's lazy, right?

Well, yes. But there's more to it. You see, the phrase in Greek is actually a military term. And it is used to describe a soldier who has fallen out of step with his unit.

Picture it: a legion of soldiers marching onto a battlefield. 5,400 men. But not 5,400 men in a giant, disorganized mass. No, 5,400 men marching in perfect squares, called cohorts, of 480 men each. And those cohorts divided into smaller squares, called centuries, of 80 men each. And those centuries divided into smaller units of 8 men each.

Every single man marching in flawless precision. Perfect lines. Perfect rows. A perfect grid of men. And the commander is looking down from the hillside above with pride at his perfectly disciplined army.

And then he sees him. The one man who has fallen out of position. The one soldier who is walking in idleness. And it cascades out like a wave. As the men bump into him and move aside to make room for him. And soon the entire cohort, 480 men, almost a tenth of the commander's legion, is in complete disarray. Because that one soldier wasn't paying attention. What do you think happened to that one soldier?

Walking in idleness. It's a military term for being out of position on the battlefield. For being a disruption to everyone around you because you couldn't take the time and effort to pay attention to your own behavior. Walking in idleness in the midst of battle.

You weren't just lazy. You were undisciplined. And that lack of discipline meant that the cohort no longer functioned as efficiently and effectively as possible. That lack of discipline opened up holes all over the defense of the cohort. That lack of discipline threatened the lives of everyone around you.

And that is what St Paul charges members of the church of Thessalonica with doing. You see, the Thessalonians were a very young church. St Paul writes his first letter to the Thessalonians only a few months after he and Silas planted the church there. It's growing quickly, but they have questions. What about the resurrection? How does all that work?

Paul explains it to them in his letter. A few weeks go by. And a disturbing report comes back. The Thessalonians have misread his intent. Instead of viewing the resurrection as something to provide them with hope and encouragement in the midst of suffering and persecution, they're using it as an excuse to be lazy. To be idle. To sit on their hands and wait for the Lord to return.

And Paul is not happy. Because this isn't even close to what he taught them. Not in his first letter. Not when he was living among them.

He tried to teach them by example. The way that the older scouts would teach the younger scouts in our troop. If Paul did something one way, then the Thessalonians did it that way. If Paul thought something was important, then the Thessalonians thought it was important.

By the time he left, they were marching in unison. Not just with him and Silas, but with each other. He had the right to tell them what to do. But he didn't have to. They figured it out by watching him. And by the time he left they were brothers in Christ and disciples of Christ because they were disciplined in the traditions that Paul had taught them.

But already, just a few weeks later, some of them are falling out of step. And so Paul comes back to them, not as an older scout, but as a military commander. *"Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness."* We command you. They are out of position. They lack discipline. They are going to get you hurt. Stay away from them.

It's a harsh message. It's not something that the modern, 21st century church is used to hearing. Keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness? Keep away from any brother who is not in accord with God's Word? Seriously? We're supposed to shun them? Like Muslims or the Amish?

Well... kinda. I mean, I don't want to sound legalistic about this. I'm not giving you permission to go through the church directory and preach hellfire on anyone who hasn't been to church in the last six months. But we need to be aware of the soldiers marching around us. Are they out of position? Are they falling behind? Is their idleness moving me out of position? Is their lack of discipline, is their sinfulness, going to get me hurt?

But more importantly, we need to be aware of ourselves. You'll notice, Paul doesn't assume that the people reading his letter are without fault. He ends this passage by commanding and encouraging his own readers to do their work quietly and to earn their own living and to not grow weary in doing good.

You see, the end times are coming. We hear that vividly and at length in our Gospel lesson. Christ is returning to bring an end to suffering and persecution. We rejoice in knowing that our redemption is drawing near. And we can see him coming as clearly as we can see the leaves falling from the trees right now, marking the end of summer. Or the new buds that will appear in a few months to mark the beginning of spring.

Not all can claim faith like that. Paul himself says that. But given that faith, we have an opportunity and a challenge. Not to be idle with the time given to us. Not to be undisciplined and lazy. But to work with even greater fervor and passion. The end is coming soon. We don't have much time.

Jesus himself says it in the verses that follow our lesson. We don't have time to be weighed down with wastefulness and drunkenness and the cares of this life. We don't have time to be idle or lazy or to fall asleep in our task. Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength. Praying that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored. Praying that we will not grow weary in doing good.

And look to the older scouts around you. We have some great examples to imitate. Examples of faith in our congregation. But also the example of the Apostles. The example of Moses and the Prophets. Most of all, the example of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Who never spent a day of his earthly life walking in idleness. Who was never out of step with his Father's will. Who endured to the end and suffered all, even death on a cross. And won the battle over death by his resurrection. Who won for us eternal life.

By his example, he has shown us how to live. So that we can be an example to others. So that we can be the older scouts that teach those around us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Walking with discipline and the hope of eternal glory.

And so that we can pray for strength. So that we can pray for the word of the Lord to speed ahead. And so that we can pray for the Lord to direct our hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. Who is indeed coming with power and glory. And his redemption is drawing near. Amen.