

Both mother and child (1 Thessalonians 2:1-8)

Paul, speaking for Silas and Timothy, offers a layered metaphor.

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Our reading from 1 Thessalonians concludes with a layered metaphor. Paul, speaking for Silas and Timothy, describes their relationship with the church in Thessalonica: “We were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you.” In their ministry to Thessalonica, according to Paul, they have been both the children and the mothers nursing the children.

The metaphor of the nursing mother gets significant attention from Paul. He uses it to describe the delight and the work, the generosity and the struggle of preaching the gospel. It is a consuming joy and a consuming labor, just as nursing a child can be for an exhausted mother. I am drawn to this feminine and maternal image, for in it I see myself throughout the six years I spent nursing my own children. I am grateful for the image.

The metaphor of the children is, by comparison, less developed. Paul uses it to suggest their innocence and humility despite being given authority by God. The image clearly echoes Jesus’s own words documented in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” But beyond that allusion, Paul does not tell us

precisely what it means that they have been “like young children” to the Thessalonica church.

When read together, however, these back-to-back metaphors—Paul, Silas, and Timothy as young children and as nursing mothers—depict an integration and wholeness that is compelling and healing for me. They have been mother and child, caretaker and cared for, needed and needy, strong and weak, weary and fresh.

This assertion of wholeness is, for me, a necessary reminder of my own position in and experience of the world. I am, in fact, a mother and a child, but I am also an independent woman and a committed wife, a neighbor and a business owner, a college professor and an eager student, a lifelong Christian and a still-new Mennonite, a leader in the church and a layperson. I am needed, and I need. I pray often for the wisdom to know when to step up and when to step back, when to lead in the care of others and when to ask others to care for me.

With Paul’s words in my head, I pray also for the space to be whole as mother and as child.