

Sunday, June 17, 2012
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Today we turn our attention to Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. The church in Corinth received more letters from Paul than any of the other communities. He had first visited Corinth some time between the year 50 and 51, baptizing believers and getting the group started. The letter we will look at today was written between the years 54 and 56 while Paul was in Ephesus. Paul is writing in response to ethical and practical concerns that have come to his attention from other sources.

The reading is from 1Corinthians 1:1-17.

Sermon – “Belong to God”

Corinth was a port city in Greece with an estimated population of 600,000.

It was a multicultural city where people came and went, making it an essentially safe place for Paul to preach.

He could get lost in the transient crowds.

Worship life in Corinth focused on many different Gods particularly Isis, Dionysis and Serapis.

Small religious communities would form around the worship of a particular God, so Paul had some precedent to work with in assembling his small gatherings.

As a tentmaker, Paul was able to support himself by meeting the needs of the multitude of travelers.

His first visit to Corinth in the year 50-51 had lasted eighteen months, the longest time he is known to have stayed anywhere.

Paul's evangelism in Corinth was among the workers, people like himself; people of a lower social class, including freed slaves and household help.

A few wealthier families supported him, but his message was primarily for the marginalized.

In the passage we heard this morning Paul uses his greeting to set the tone of his letter.

He starts out by asserting his authority as an apostle of Christ, called to this work by God.

He follows this by identifying the recipients of his message as those who are sanctified in Christ, called to be saints.

This is the term used for early Christians.

Paul makes his point about the importance of community by reminding his readers that they are “together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The familiar greeting of “Grace and Peace” is the one that we use to start our service each Sunday.

Grace and Peace are important to Paul.

He felt that there was no higher gift than grace.

He defined grace as the very nature of God, freely expressed in God's self-giving love for us."

God is grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

Peace, Paul says is born of "consciousness of power which is available to us for all the needs and demands of life."

In Paul's church, grace and peace work together to build an authentic Christian community.

The hallmarks of this church are unity and love, both spiritual in nature.

Pauline scholar John Short says, "For Paul the church is the living embodiment of the Spirit of the Master. It is Christ's continued incarnation in the world and its function is to propagate Christ's gospel and to perpetuate and spread his spirit among people until they leaven the life of the whole world."

Leaven means "to permeate with an altering or transforming element."

How's that for a mission statement?

Paul concludes his introduction by giving thanks for the very things that are causing conflict in the church.

He acknowledges the many gifts that individuals bring to the church: speech, knowledge, spiritual gifts, a sense of call.

His letter will go on to urge his followers to move into union with Christ through Christlike trust.

John Short's description of Paul as he writes this letter is touching:

"Paul is sitting in the house of friends in Ephesus, and with a heavy heart he is studying the various reports that lie before him.

His reply, like most letters written by sensitive, sanguine souls, is a revealing document;

it helps us understand the apostle who, perhaps more than any other, understood and so marvelously interpreted for all subsequent generations the mind of his Master, Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we hear the ring of denunciation, sometimes we almost feel the beat of a loving heart, sometimes we can almost see the tears that stream down his face as he pleads for better things from Christian believers.

Like many such letters written by such people, it can, without any sense of contradiction, rise to heights of stern invective, and yet pass immediately into a flood of tenderness.

Only deeply sensitive spirits can be so strongly and profoundly stirred."

1Corinthians is a letter written to a divided church.

The community has broken into cliques.

There were those who followed Apollo – an evangelist who had preceded Paul and those who had shifted their support to Cephus or Peter, who had visited Corinth after Paul.

The disagreements were based on several things:

1. social standing – the old, who is in and who is out;
2. adherence to Jewish law – how literal must one be in following the Torah;
3. the gift of ecstatic speaking or tongues which the Cephus party claimed as a mark of holiness and the Pauline party claimed as exclusionary to those in church who didn't understand what was being said.

Paul does not support any faction but argues against putting factions before Christ.

This is a reminder for us today living, as we do, in an often polarized world.

The point is that in church it doesn't matter whether we are democrats or republicans, whether we are young or old, or whether we are rich or poor.

When you come here, when you come through these doors, you are in Christ's church—you are on holy ground.

Ground made holy by our presence and our commitment to be the one body of Christ.

Paul does not argue for union – he assumes it.

When we are one with Christ we don't lose ourselves, we ground ourselves. We become centered. We become whole.

Paul teaches us that there are two ways to become part of the body of Christ. The first is baptism into Christ and the second is believing into Christ.

Either way, a believer becomes united with Christ and is transformed.

The gospel is embedded and embodied in the lives of the believers.

Another Pauline scholar, Jouette Bassler wrote, “the gospel is proclaimed through the lives of believers, insofar as their lives manifest not only the power of the resurrection but also – and especially—the suffering of the cross.”

This does not mean that we have to suffer or die, as Jesus did.

It means that we can handle adversity or suffering with a resurrection mindset.

We know that God is with us, always, and that we can and will get through any suffering we might encounter.

We are called to live our faith: embedded and embodied.

Unity, with Christ or with one another, does not mean sameness, it means wholeness.

We strive to be whole, to be genuine.

When we reach a point where we feel complete, where worries and judgments are left behind, we move toward holiness – oneness with God.

The commandment is to love God with your whole heart, soul and mind.

This is what Paul is calling the church at Corinth to do.

This is what we are called to do.

Let us commit ourselves to living holy lives – lives rooted in a love of Christ and one another.

Let us be the ones to perpetuate and spread his spirit among people until we leaven the life of the whole world.”