

Against All Odds

8th Weekend of Kingdomtide – July 29/30, 2006

Sermon Background Study

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 (NRSV)

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

If the Apostle Paul were writing to us, how would he open his letter? In this letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul's opening is pretty surprising given what follows.

The first paragraphs of Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth do not prepare us for what follows. When I taught a class on 1 Corinthians a couple of years ago, I subtitled it, "You Think You've Got Problems!" That is pretty much how the letter unfolds. Paul tackles problem after problem among these new house churches. Sometimes he is angry. At other times he seems simply disappointed or even puzzled.

Regrettably, reading the letter is a bit like listening in on one end of a telephone call and trying to make sense of the entire conversation. Because we don't have any of the reports or letters that Paul has received, we can't always be sure of the problems to which Paul is responding as their pastor in absentia. Still, it is quite a laundry list: sex, legal disputes, marriage, eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols, chaos in worship, denial of the resurrection, and more.

Indeed, the letter is such a hodgepodge that it is easy to see it as little more than some advice given to a bunch of screwed-up Christians. Perhaps we're even tempted to say a quick thanks that we are not like them. But all this would be a profound mistake. Paul's opening paragraphs help us to see this. As Ellsworth Kalas puts it, the Corinthian Christians are "flowers in the rubble."

Corinth's Strategic Significance

I've circled Corinth on the map below. You can see that it is just southwest of Athens on the isthmus that connects the mainland and the Peloponnese to the south. The isthmus, this strip of land preventing an open passage from the Aegean Sea to the Adriatic Sea, is only about 4 miles wide.

Because the seas are rough south of Greece and because of the much shorter sailing distances involved, the Romans built a u-shaped ditch across the isthmus at Corinth and paved it. They would unload the ship on one side of the isthmus and then drag it through the paved ditch to the other side. Then they would reload the ship and sent it on its way.

There is also a very high hilltop overlooking Corinth that provided military protection of this important port city and control of passage from the mainland to the south.

In all, it is surprising that there was any period when the isthmus was not dominated by a city, but when the Romans burned Corinth about 150 years before Jesus, it was nearly a century before they founded a new city. However, it quickly grew to the important city visited by Paul.

Also, as long as we've got the map here, look at the eastern side of Macedonia. You'll see some places that are prominent in your New Testament: Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. These cities were all visited by Paul on his second missionary journey, during which he also visited Corinth for eighteen months. These northern cities were all on a major Roman highway called the *Via Ignatia* linking Asia Minor with the Adriatic ports leading to Rome.



The “rubble?”

I think that if I lived in Corinth in 50AD, I probably wouldn't like my city being referred to as “rubble.” But I'd have to admit that was some truth in it. Corinth was a tough town. It was a thriving port city founded by the Romans a century after they burned it. Corinth was established as a colony for retired veterans of the Roman legions.¹ Combine those retired soldiers with lots of transient sailors and you get a city that was more resistant to Paul's good news than most. Corinth teemed with pagan temples and

More Word Matters

Since we did some vocabulary work last week, here is more. There are three words in verse 2 that Paul uses to describe the immature and struggling Christians in Corinth. After reading the letter, it is a little surprising that he would use such words, but it illustrates Paul's deep understanding of the power and grace of God.

“church of God” – refers to the entire group of Christians in Corinth, not to any building or place. The early Christians in Corinth and elsewhere didn't meet in any single building but in people's homes. The only common denominator among these people was that they all called “on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 2). It was their faith in Jesus Christ that bound them to one another and to all other followers of Jesus and still binds them to us today. It is faith in Christ and faith alone that marks out the people of God

“sanctified” – Webster helps here: to sanctify is to set apart for a sacred purpose. As Kathryn noted in her sermon last week, John Wesley described sanctification as setting apart a person (or anything) for its intended purpose. What is our purpose? Why has God created us? In the words of the great Westminster Confession, the purpose of humankind is to know God and enjoy him forever. By his grace, God has *both* sanctified each of us (set us apart for his purposes) *and* is in the process of sanctifying us. Our possession of sanctification is God's gift. The process of sanctification is a cooperative effort between God and ourselves. This is another of the “both/ands” of the Christian faith.

“saints” – It is unfortunate that this word has come to mean a “super-Christian” or something similar. In the New Testament, “saint” is synonymous with “believer.” Saints are those who have been set apart, sanctified, by God. All those who have faith in Jesus Christ are saints, living and dead. As Paul would later write “to the saints in Ephesus . . . There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 1:1, 4:4-6)

temple prostitutes. Kalas writes, “In the first century a young man who had been to Corinth was described, with a snicker I'm sure, as being ‘corinthianized.’ He had been introduced to easy and flagrant evil. . . . How can a church bloom in such a setting?”²

Only a few flowers

The fact that Paul could plant any flowers among the Corinthian rubble is a testament to God's power and grace. And Paul knows it. He is thankful that God has planted these flowers whom he is to lead, even as he prepares to correct and, at times, scold them. He can love them and exercise pastoral leadership at the same time.

The opening verses of Paul's letter sets the stage for all that follows. Richard Hays writes: “By the end of the first nine verses, Paul has sketched a sweeping picture of the Corinthian church's calling: They have been called by God to participate in a movement, along with others all around the known world, to extend the destiny of Israel by living as a covenant people set apart for the service of God. God has lavished upon them spiritual gifts that enable their mission of bearing witness to the grace of Jesus Christ, and God supports and strengthens the community during the present age, while they await God's final judgment of the world. During the time of waiting, God prepares and sanctifies the community and brings them together into close fellowship with Christ and with one another. In short, Paul portrays the Corinthians as important players in a grand story scripted by God.”³

Against all odds

It is easy to shortchange God, to have low expectations of a too-small-god. I bet that most people looking in on these new Christians in Corinth would have walked away betting that it would be just another fly-by-night movement. Indeed, Paul tells the Corinthians to tone down the chaos in their worship so that outsiders wouldn't draw the wrong conclusion (14:23).

Yet, against all odds, here we are two millennia later reading a letter written to these “flowers in the rubble,” hearing of their problems and sharing in their hopes. Even learning a few names along the way. The truth is that there are no “odds” so far as the purposes of God are concerned, only the certainty of God's victory, God's love, and the everlasting lordship of our savior Jesus Christ.

¹Rome established such colonies throughout its empire as a way of deepening its influence. The veterans wouldn't go there in hopes of getting back to Rome someday. They went with the intention of living out their rest of their lives in this foreign city. These colonies were built according to Roman city plans and had Roman-style government and law.

²from Kalas' *The Grand Sweep*, Abingdon Press, 1996.

³Hays, R. B. *First Corinthians*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching. Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press. 1997.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

July 30 - August 5

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Sunday A day for reflection and catching up	Monday A day for reflection and catching up
Tuesday 1 Corinthians 12-14; Psalm 100 Problems with the community worship. Notice how Paul's great chapter on love is sandwiched in the middle of all this about speaking in tongues. Why?	Wednesday 1 Corinthians 15-16; Psalm 101 Chapter 15 is the greatest chapter in the NT on the resurrection, Jesus' and our own. It was written little more than 20 years after the fact and long before the Gospel accounts.
Thursday 2 Chronicles 1-4; Psalm 102 Solomon prays for wisdom and builds the temple.	Friday 2 Chronicles 5-7; Psalm 103 The ark is brought to the temple and the temple is dedicated.
Saturday 2 Chronicles 8-11; Psalm 104:1-23 More on Solomon's reign and his death.	

Sermon Notes

Announcing the new St. Andrew Academy!!

We've completely revamped the Bible Academy. It is now the St. Andrew Academy. We've added lots of new classes and teachers: marriage, parenting, spiritual gifts, missions, and more have been added to our classes on the Bible and spiritual formation. An all-new brochure has been designed and is being mailed to thousands of homes in our area. This is outreach! You can see the class schedule now and even register online at our new website: www.standrewacademy.org. It will look familiar, yet new. You'll soon hear a lot more.

August Book Recommendation

***Take and Read – Spiritual Reading: an annotated list* by Eugene H. Peterson**

I always like learning more about the reading lists of Christians and biblical scholars whose work I rely on. This book is a journey through the reading lists of Eugene Peterson. I'm sure that my spiritual journey would take a giant leap forward if I managed to read everything on this list. Of course, it has taken him a lifetime and he started much younger than I! I think you'll enjoy reading his comments on all these books. There are categories here for everyone, including some that seem hardly "spiritual," at least as we tend to use the word. Who'd ever think to find *A Canticle for Liebowitz* and murder mysteries!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Richard Hays urges us to see that Paul places this problem-riddled community in the context of God's epic drama. These novice Christians may seem like small actors on an insignificant stage, but the truth is that they are God's actors. It is from God, the creator of the universe, that these persons get their true cosmic significance. Do you see yourself this way? Do you embrace the Christian claim that you have been created for a grand purpose? Does this thought lift you up or overwhelm you? We live and work on God's stage, empowered and enabled by God in ways we can scarcely imagine. Hays writes: "Thus, by reading the opening passage of the Corinthians' mail, we can learn to see ourselves within the story of God's grace in such a way that despair and pride and petty conflict should fall away." Have you experienced this in your own life? Have you seen it in others?

Are you a saint? How would it make you feel for someone to call you a saint? Would you feel undeserving? In the Greek, the words "saint" and "sanctification" share the same root word - "holy." Saints are set apart for God and God's purposes. The NT speaks of believers as being holy and as becoming holy. The first refers to our position before God. In Christ, we have been saved; we are a holy people. The second, the becoming, refers to the on-going process of becoming evermore holy, evermore Christlike. In this, God works *with* us. Are you consciously striving to become more Christlike, to become evermore suited to God's purposes? How? What is your plan? Who, besides God, is helping you in this? Anyone? How are you helping others to become more Christlike?