

Building Christian Fellowship
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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1 Corinthians 1:1-9 (NRSV)

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,
[2] To 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:

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

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

SUPER SACRIFICE

In just a few weeks we will celebrate the most “holy” day of the year. Yes, I’m talking about Super Bowl Sunday, that time when we determine that New England is the best football team in the country ... especially since they know the plays ahead of time! Even those who are sports agnostics are sometimes willing to celebrate on this High Holy Day.

Like everything else in life there is more to this championship than just the game itself. In the heat of summer all the teams must begin practice. All year long scouts travel around the country searching for the best college talent and making suggestions as to who should be signed to a contract. People in the front office must make strategic decisions that can make or break any team.

All the teams start the season with high hopes. But only one will win the Super Bowl. Only one team will have the talent and the teamwork and the commitment to really do what it takes to achieve that goal. It won’t necessarily be the most gifted team that will win the big game this year. It will be the team that makes the most of its talent and works together toward a common goal. It’s truly amazing how much work and effort goes into winning that coveted Lombardi Trophy.

That’s true of any worthwhile goal. In order to achieve what we want to achieve ... we have to make sure our priorities are in line with the goal that we’re trying to achieve and that we work together as a team to achieve the goal.

Like an athlete training for the big event, we must say “no” to certain things. And we must often make the decision to do the hard thing instead of the easy thing.

If I want to run a marathon I have to make the decision to get up very early and run ten miles a day before breakfast. I have to make that hard decision. I have to make that sacrifice in order to obtain my goal of being able to run a marathon. (This, of course, is a very theoretical illustration! I will not be running any marathons!)

In fact you sports agnostics out there might rightly say that winning a Super Bowl or running a marathon is not that important, that we have gone sports crazy in this country. I would be hard pressed to disagree with you.

But, what does deserve our ultimate allegiance? What should take priority over everything else? What as disciples of Christ are we called to do above all else?

Are our vocational goals more important than anything all else? Is that corner office really worth it? Are our financial goals more important than anything else? Do we win the race if we retire rich?

Perhaps you might say that our relationships with our family are the most important thing? Well, family relationships are more important than those other things we've mentioned. But, all of us have experienced disappointments and failures when it comes to family life. I think that one of the biggest strains on the family today is those who make family into a kind of "god." Family is important, but it's not the most important thing in life.

In this election season there are some who believe that politics are more important than anything else. I'm quite amazed at how much the candidates for president are willing to give up as they try to become the next commander in chief. They spend their money. They sacrifice family time. They work day and night. They take considerable (and often unfair) abuse from their opponents.

But, they all say that it's worth it in order to accomplish this goal. Some of us wonder quite frankly why anyone would even want that job. But, at least they're willing to sacrifice for something. And we certainly hope and pray that they do it because they love our country and want the best for all of us.

And I would say that their commitment challenges us to think about the priorities in our own life. Do we have something for which we are willing to sacrifice everything else? Do we care about something so much that it takes priority over everything else?

A GRACIOUS PRIORITY

For those of us who are disciples of Christ, what should be number one in our life when all is said and done? Is there an overarching goal, a reoccurring theme that should take priority? What are we called to say and do in each and every situation?

I would suggest that none of the things that often take priority in the world should really be number one in the life of the Christian. Politics, sports, job, finances and even family should not take priority when it comes to the Christian life.

Now that doesn't mean that we withdraw from life. But, how we live ... how we play our games, do our job, vote and relate to our family should be guided by a higher principle ... a Christian principle. And that principle is the principle of grace.

I would suggest that we are a community that proclaims and demonstrates the grace of God. We are a fellowship of grace, and it is grace that should take priority over everything else in our life.

Many of you have heard Beethoven's fifth symphony and know the reoccurring theme, "ta ta ta dom." Well, if we described the Christian life as a symphony, the reoccurring theme, the "ta ta ta dom" would be the song of grace.

The Apostle Paul begins and ends all of his letters to the churches with a similar phrase "grace to you." According to the Apostle, Grace is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end of the Christian life. God's grace is the goal, and most importantly, God's grace is the means to achieve the goal.

God's grace is the whole story, and it is the grace of God that calls us into fellowship with Christ and with each other. One commentator described grace as a "divine influence upon the heart, and its reflection in life." To put it another way, grace is being grateful for God's forgiveness and showing that gratitude in the way we treat others.

Grace creates communion and community. Grace creates communion with God through Christ, and grace creates a gracious community.

SAINTS AND SANCTIFICATION

The Bible tells us that we are saints. That's how Paul describes the Christians at Corinth. They are called to be saints in Christ Jesus.

Now what does that mean? Well, let me say first of all what it doesn't mean. That doesn't mean we are morally perfect. Usually, when I ask a fellow Christian, if they are a saint, they'll blush and say something like, "Well, I try as hard as I can, but I'm no saint."

That shows a misunderstanding of the word saint as it is used in the Bible. Sainthood does not mean that we are morally superior to everyone else. It does mean that we are called by God. God graciously intervenes in our life and leads us in a new direction. Saints are people who are set aside for a holy purpose.

Saints are not perfect people. Saints are called people. We are saints called by the grace of God, and we are sanctified (that is enabled to do God's will) by grace as well.

According to our lesson for today, God gives us the spiritual gifts that we need to do God's will. These gifts are (according to our passage for today) a confirmation of God's grace. The church at Corinth had many gifts, many signs that God had blessed and graciously equipped them for ministry. (1 Corinthians 1:4-7)

A TROUBLED CHURCH

Many of you know that the Church at Corinth was a church in deep conflict. Whenever I preach from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, I always say that I surely wouldn't want to be the pastor of that church. Jonah would have nothing on me if God called me to go to Corinth. I would have to be swallowed by a big fish before I would accept such a call and even then I would pout about it.

Let me summarize what was going on in that ancient church. The church at Corinth was divided into many factions. The church at Corinth did not take their responsibility to the poor seriously. Sometimes the rich would begin the fellowship meal early in order to leave the poorer members out of the party.

Some of their church members were so immoral that they were an embarrassment even to the pagan community in which they lived. And there were some church leaders who thought that immorality was just fine. They blended emotional pagan practices with Christian worship. Let's just say that this church was severely dysfunctional.

In fact, our lesson for today is just about the only part of the letter that seems to portray the Corinthians in a positive light as it talks about their many spiritual gifts. One commentator said that this mention of spiritual gifts was a way to give them a little pat on the back before he gave them another pat somewhat lower and harder!

That's a delightful way of putting it, but it's really not an accurate way of describing this passage. Paul isn't patting the Corinthians on the back because they are so gifted. Paul is saying that the gifts they have are visible signs of God's grace.

A FELLOWSHIP OF GRACE

But, being gifted is not enough. It's what we do with those gifts, those signs of grace that is all important.

Paul calls the Corinthians saints. From what we know of the Corinthians we know that a saint can't be a morally perfect person. No, saints are people who have been given an important task to do for the kingdom of God and the spiritual gifts to carry out that task.

It is like a trust. We have been entrusted with the wealth of the gospel of grace. We are stewards of God's grace, and that stewardship carries with it a responsibility. Jesus once said "to whom much has been given, much will be required." (Luke 12:48) That was true for the Corinthians, and that is true for us as well.

Grace comes with a responsibility to be gracious. Grace does not isolate us into warring camps, divided by the minutia of politics and religion. Grace brings us into communion with God and into a community that is ruled by grace.

In verse nine of today's lesson we read that "God is faithful" and that this faithful God has called us into "fellowship" with Jesus and with each other.

The two are related. The Bible tells us that we cannot enjoy fellowship with Jesus while at the same time being at odds with other members of the church. (Matthew 5:23-24) Our relationship with God is affected by the quality of our relationship with others."

In the first letter of John we read that Christian fellowship is essential to knowing and loving God. John wrote, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." 1 John 4:20 (NRSV)

The word translated "fellowship" in verse nine is the Greek word, "koinonia." It refers to a community where people are partners and everyone's participation in the community is needed and valued.

Later Paul will use this belief as the foundation for one of his more memorable analogies. According to Paul we are the body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it. In other words, when it comes to the community of faith, all of us are important, but none of us are self-sufficient. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

That sounds so simple, but it is really a revolutionary idea. And when people in a church begin to take that idea seriously, spiritual power is multiplied and grace becomes a reality in that community.

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

I spent a few hours this past Friday morning talking with our two new elders about what it means to be a leader in the church. And in particular I shared with them my conviction that how we solve a problem is often more important than the solution we come up with. The "problem" often becomes a means for us to grow spiritually and to learn to trust God more.

Presbyterians have a representative form of government. That means each year you elect leaders to make decisions for the whole church on your behalf. On a small scale it is sort of like how we elect people to represent us in the state and national government.

But, there is one important difference in how our system works.

Members of Congress are elected to represent the interests of their particular geographic district. Quite often members of Congress will cast a vote based upon what the "folks back home" want

them to do. On rare occasions they will go against what the folks back home believe in order to do what they think is right or better for the country as a whole.

In contrast to this process, the people you elect as elders do not necessarily make decisions based upon what the congregation wants or what they personally feel is the right thing to do. Elders are called to discern the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

In other words, in making even the most mundane decision we ask ourselves, “How will this decision promote the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ? How will this decision promote a spirit of forgiveness and love in our community of faith? And is this decision in line with the life and teachings of Christ?”

Now don’t misunderstand. This doesn’t mean that we will always makes decisions that are popular and in line with the thinking of the majority to maintain “unity”. Sometimes quite the opposite is true.

AN EXAMPLE OF DISCERNMENT

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

Shortly after I came to this church as pastor, the feeding program for the homeless lost its home. The house they were using was going to be torn down in order to make a parking lot. When no one stepped forward to house that program our church decided to do it in our fellowship hall.

Now this put a great strain on our very small facility. Some people were complaining about the “cost” of this program to our church. And one night at our Session meeting several elders said that they wanted to give the program two months to find a new home.

Now those elders had a point. Our facilities were being strained. The people who complained were right. There was a tremendous cost associated with housing that program in our building. The Session voted unanimously to ask the program to find a new home.

But, I said that I disagreed with their decision, that it was not in line with how I understood what it meant to be a disciple of Christ. More than that, I would ask for a reconsideration of their decision if the feeding program did not find a new home. I was quite frankly worried that this might mean that there would be no more feeding program for the homeless in Osceola County.

Several months passed, the program did not find a new home and as promised I brought the subject back up at the Session meeting. I had the woman who was coordinating the program for our church come and speak very persuasively (using Matthew 25 as her text) about how when we cloth the naked and feed the hungry it is as if we have done it for Jesus.

And the Session voted unanimously to continue housing the feeding program in our church for as long as necessary.

Now what really made the difference in this process was how the leaders of this church related to each other. By the grace of God in that first meeting I kept my infamous temper in check, and I acknowledged that though I disagreed with the Session's action I could understand the reasons for that decision.

However, I did more than just go along to get along. I also asked that they be willing to reconsider their decision at a later date, and they graciously agreed to do just that.

As I look back on this decision it seems to me that the most important thing was not what we decided to do. A case could be made for either decision. The most important thing was how the decision was made. We went through a process of discernment, and we were eventually led (I think by God's Word and Spirit) to keep the feeding program in our church.

(By the way, to let you know the rest of the story, later the Baptist church was given a plot of land and the community in conjunction with the Baptist church was able to build a new building on that site to house services for the homeless. There was no way any of us could have predicted this would happen, but I think it goes to show how God continues to supply us with the gifts we need to do His will.)

GRATITUDE AND PATIENCE

I think this important way of making decisions is summarized in verse 7 of our lesson for today. Paul told the Corinthians, "You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

I think that there are two important lessons that this verse teaches us about leading in the church. First of all we need to be thankful for what we have.

I know of churches that have tremendous gifts ... financial and leadership resources that most churches could only dream about. And yet these churches are very anxious about the future; they are divided into factions and feel that they do not have what they need.

Why do they have this problem? Like the church at Corinth, they look upon their resources not as gifts from God but as a reason to be personally proud. They seem to be saying, "We have all these things because we are more faithful. We're a better church than those other churches."

And in this way their gifts become a curse instead of a blessing. Their gifts become a source of contention instead of source of hope. Instead of promoting a word and a lifestyle of grace, the church becomes a stumbling block to others.

We shouldn't be too smug when we see other churches having trouble. We can be in the same situation in a blink of the eye. But, there are some things that we can do to promote a more healthy life together.

As we start this New Year we too need to begin it by counting our blessings. We need to think about all the gifts that God has given this congregation.

These gifts come to us not because we're such good boys and girls. They come to us because God has graciously given us these things. And the first step to using the gifts properly is simply to be thankful for God's provision.

But, there is one more step that we need to take in order to create a gracious Christian fellowship, that "koinonia" where everyone has an important part to play. And that second step is to be willing to wait upon the Lord. We shouldn't make decisions too quickly out of anxiety. We wait upon (as Paul put it) the "revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Until we see Christ face to face, our understanding of the faith will be incomplete. And so every decision we make should be made with the understanding that it is subject to change.

One commentator said that the Corinthians were "overconverted." He meant that they were so sure of their understanding of the faith that there was no room for change.

That's why so many terrible things were happening in the Corinthian church, and that's why so many terrible things have been done in church history in the name of Christ. If Christians are unwilling to wait for the revealing of Christ, they can actually find themselves working against God's kingdom.

Waiting of course takes faith. And yet isn't that the very nature of faith? Faith is about having the courage to make the journey. Faith is about trusting in God's provision instead of our own abilities. Faith is discovering again and again the gracious hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Like Paul I give thanks for the gifts of this particular church. We are blessed, and we have a hope that is eternal. God has led us this far, and I believe that God will continue to lead us home.

Amen.

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