

“Called Into Fellowship” – 1 Cor 1:1-9

Paul had a tough job. The apostles had a tough job. The preachers in the First Century had a tough job. In fact, all Christians had a tough job. It couldn't have been easy, trying to 'sell' the Christian message in those early days. Can't you just imagine the problems they would run into while evangelizing?

“You really should come and celebrate the Lord's Supper with us next Sunday.”

“Whaddya mean, Lord's Supper?”

“There's a group of us who gather to remember what our Lord Jesus said at his last supper with his disciples, and to worship God in Jesus' name. We break bread and share a cup of wine, the symbols of his body and blood.”

“So it's like a funeral, or a wake?”

“No, it's a celebration of Jesus being Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ.”

“But ... wasn't he executed as a common criminal, on a cross? How could he be the Messiah? How could he be so connected with God? No thanks, I'll pass!”

See what I mean? Paul, and the other apostles, and every Christian must have had a tough time selling the idea of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. Paul even says so in his first letter to the Corinthians: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” He goes on to elaborate, pointing out that “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Of course the Jews would find the crucifixion a stumbling block ... they were expecting the Messiah to be a king of kings, a leader of leaders who would help the Jews to rise up, to throw out the Roman occupiers, to rebuild the golden age of Kings David and Solomon ... and they were not about to accept that a virtual nobody from Galilee, a man executed as a common criminal, could in any way be that king of kings, the true Messiah. Likewise, the Gentiles – Greeks and Greek-speaking Romans, mainly, considered the whole thing utterly foolish. Those Gentiles, who included in their pantheon a goddess of Wisdom, Sophia, and even worshiped Wisdom itself, considered totally irrational the idea that someone who was claimed to be the Son of God could have died at all, never mind dying at the hands of humans.

This was a problem, but just one of the problems Paul addressed in his letters to a congregation he was instrumental in founding. His letters to the people in the church at Corinth reveal a great deal about issues that were arising in the early church, and perhaps more importantly provide us with some of the deepest understandings of the impact of God's activity in Christ Jesus. If we listen to the opening of Paul's letter – no, I mean really listen to it, not just the cursory listening we just did a few minutes ago – if we really listen to his beautifully crafted opening, we can hear both the allusions to the problems he was addressing and also the arguments he would be using to confront those problems.

I'm sure you recognized that the epistle scripture reading this morning is part of a letter, in fact the opening part of a letter. Those of you who have been to our bible studies will likely remember that the opening of a letter in Paul's day was as routinely structured then as our letters are today. We usually begin letters the way we were taught in school, with a return address, a date, a salutation to the recipient (“Dear John”), and perhaps an opening sentence that tells why we are writing. Of course, email has abbreviated that process, and texting even more so, but you get the idea. Letters in Paul's day had their own fairly rigid opening structure, identifying the author, then the recipient, then an affirmation of peace, and finally a thanksgiving that introduces the subject of the letter.

Paul's letters, and the 'First' letter to the Corinthians in particular, follow that pattern “to the letter” if you'll pardon the pun. He begins by identifying himself, and with that introduction affirms his God-given authority to speak on behalf of Christ Jesus, and in case that isn't enough to motivate

the recipients to listen to what he says, he invokes the name of Sosthenes, often assumed to be the leader of the synagogue mentioned in Acts 18:17.

Even with the peace or grace section Paul is already moving the recipients to hear his main message, a message of togetherness rather than division. “To the church of God which is at Corinth” signals a group that is already identified as a coherent unit, different for example than if he had addressed “the faithful in Corinth.” Moreover, he pulls the people there together even more firmly as he continues, “called to be saints *together* (emphasis mine) with all those who in every place call on the name of *our* (note the difference from ‘the’) Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” Do you suspect already he might be talking about unity, or community, or coming together in this letter?

The next formal section, “Grace to you and peace ...” is often heard and copied as a prime example of goodwill towards others, and indeed it most likely was, but I can’t help in the context of this letter as being more of a “settle down and listen” kind of encouragement.

And finally (in the introduction at least) we have the introduction of the subject of the letter, and even here Paul reveals that he might have had an MBA degree. Corporate managers are taught a way of disciplining subordinates that is sometimes labeled the “crud sandwich” – well, not exactly ‘crud’, but you get the picture. The “tough talk” is made up of three layers ... an “atta-boy” or “atta-girl” at the beginning relating the good things that the subordinate has done or emphasising their good qualities, and a similar kind message of encouragement at the end to send them off in a positive mood. In between is the ‘crud’ part – the heart of the message outlining exactly how they have messed up and why they shouldn’t do it again! Paul’s letter follows this outline to a ‘T’, and in this intro we have the initial ‘soft white bread’ opening outlining how he gives thanks for them always, how they have been empowered by Christ, and how they display exemplary gifts of wisdom, and eloquence, and spiritual gifts. And then comes ‘the hook’ as he completes his introduction with the reminder that they have been called – by God, no less – “into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Whew! If that were the only fragment of the letter that had been preserved, we would think the folks in the church at Corinth were the ultimate perfectly faithful, living in rapturous harmony. However, the remainder of the letter survived intact, and a different picture emerges, namely a picture of people as real as we are, of people who struggled in their faith as we often do, and of a people with whom we can not only identify but with whom we joyfully join in fellowship and communion.

When we read further we discover that the very qualities that Paul lauds in his opening – namely wisdom, eloquence, and spirituality – are the very problems that he goes on to address more fully in the letter. He claims he came “to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross be emptied of its power” and goes on with the argument of “the folly of the cross.” And set against the pride of being spiritual or displaying spiritual gifts Paul sets his beautiful treatise on love, the beloved Chapter 13, “if I have all these things but have not love I am nothing.” However, beyond these specific issues, the root problem in Corinth appears from Paul’s reminder that they were called into fellowship with Christ to be one of division, of individualism instead of community.

Sadly, how little things have changed over the years. Both within individual congregations, denominations, and the Christian faith as a whole divisions instead of bridges seem to be the highlights. We identify our differences more often and more clearly than our commonalities. Up to a point there may be some validity in doing so, as we all search for understanding and seek to find a closer relationship with God in Christ, and yet so easily that searching can take us down diverging paths where we quickly lose sight of how God has called us into fellowship with Christ Jesus.

These days the problems seem stronger. Having passed through the Age of Reason, that golden era in which rationality and human thought seemed to conquer the entire universe we have moved into what is called “post-Modernity,” a time when the individual is free to challenge any and all

established thought. More and more the individual person is believed to be the master of knowledge and of understanding, free to dismiss any expert advice and to adopt any advice as expert. Politics, economics, science and technology all seemed to prove that we are in charge, that we merely need to think it, and it can come true. That kind of thinking pervades today, as advances in genetic science appear to make us controllers, if not original creators, of life itself. Oh yes, in the world in which we live Christ crucified is still very much a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.

How then could Paul have been so confident, so sure, proclaiming that “to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.”? If indeed the story had ended there on the cross, then both the Jews and the Greeks would have been right – the message would have been as dead as Jesus was.

But it is impossible for us to leave the story there, for we cannot help but hear the story of Christ’s death on the cross through the filter of our faith in the resurrection. We, like Paul, know and proclaim that Jesus rose again from death, sealing the covenant established by God that whosoever believes in Christ shall receive life, life everlasting and life abundant.

And so we find ourselves in good company. In our faith, in the fellowship in Christ to which we have also been called by God, we find ourselves together with Paul, and with the good folks in Corinth. We are in company and communion with Stephanas, and Fortunatus and Achaicus for whom Paul encourages recognition in his closing. On this day as we celebrate Holy Communion we sit together at Christ’s table with Aquila and Prisca, along with the churches of Asia who sent their greetings in the Lord to the folks at Corinth. What a marvelous collection of people we sit down together with at the table of the Lord, people from the churches next door to churches across the ages. Isn’t that a wondrous, warm feeling of fellowship and communion?