

Called To Be Saints

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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This morning's New Testament scripture comes from 1 Corinthians. But before I read it, let's take a minute to get our bearings. I Corinthians is a letter, of course...one of several which Paul wrote to the Christian church in Corinth. This letter was written some time around 55 AD. Which meant that some 20 plus years had passed since the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and small Christian communities were beginning to emerge in cities and towns.

Of course, one of the leading figures in the growth of the early Christian church was the apostle Paul, who traveled all over that part of the world sharing the good news of Jesus. He would go to a city, stay there for awhile, help to get the Christian community going, then move on.

One of the places he went on his missionary travels was the thriving city of Corinth. He spent 18 months there proclaiming the gospel and helping to establish that Christian community. But eventually it was time for him to move on, so he did. However, just because he was no longer living there didn't mean that he had forgotten about them or no longer cared about them.

Apparently, word had come to Paul that some problems were threatening the church in Corinth. So Paul wrote them this letter. Here's how he begins.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Back in New Testament times, if you were going to write a letter, there was a standard letter form that you would follow. Just like our letters today have a set form to follow, so it was back in the first century. In that day letters began with the name of the sender (which makes sense, since that's the part we read first anyway!).

Look at the opening of this letter to the church in Corinth that we have just read: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,..." So this letter is from Paul and Brother Sosthenes.

Next comes the party to whom the letter is addressed: "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."

Next the typical letter had a greeting. In fact, most of the letters of that day would say that very word. Usually the letter would say something like: "Paul, to the church in Corinth, greetings." Except notice that Paul does something slightly different here. He changes the word "greetings" to "grace." "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Now maybe it's just a little change and doesn't really mean much, but I think that Paul is making a point. "Greetings" is a human word—it describes human relationships; it is a word used between people: "Greetings, friend." "Grace," however, is a word that describes the relationship between people and God.

At the outset of this letter to the church at Corinth, Paul wants to remind the people that their relationship is not just among themselves, but that God is a party in their dealings with one another.

I think that point is especially important for Paul to make in this letter that he is writing to the church in Corinth, because what's getting ready to come in this letter is that Paul is going to let them have it. As we said, the reason for writing this letter was that Paul had learned that all sorts of fussing and fighting was going on in the church in Corinth. Paul loved that church; he had helped to get it going, and it grieved him to hear about the squabbles in the church.

Let me tell you a little of what we think we know about the Christian church in Corinth. Many Bible scholars seem to think that there were about 50 members—roughly the size of a large Sunday School Class. And you could say that they were somewhat conflicted. For example, they were divided into at least four bitterly opposing cliques—remember there were only about 50 people in the group. They had arguments going on about baptism and about the Lord's Supper. There was a tremendous rift over spiritual gifts, and there was a hostile fight over speaking in tongues. There was sexual immorality. And a good many of them did not believe in the resurrection. Other than that everything was fine at the church in Corinth. (This description of the Corinthian church is taken from a lecture delivered by Tom Long, professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology.)

When Paul heard about all these divisions in Corinth, he decided to write them a letter. Now before he's done with the letter, he will have addressed all these issues. He's going to respond to each of the conflicts that had been reported to him. And he's not going to mince words.

But first.... He's going to get to that, but first.... Here's how he begins the body of this letter. "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind...so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift." Here is a congregation riddled with conflict and disagreement, and Paul knows that he must address those differences. But before he gets to that, he wants to remind them of the fundamental unity they have in Jesus, through the grace of God.

I have often wondered, whenever I have read about all the fussing and fighting going on in Corinth, what it was that kept that church from just flying apart. If there was so much conflict, why didn't some of them just quit and go someplace else? I think it was that they knew that in spite of their differences, there was something bigger that kept them together. And Paul reminds them of it here: grace—God's grace, God's love that is greater than anything that might divide us from one another. He reminds them of God's blessings that have been given to them and that those blessings have helped to make the church what it is.

He reminds them that theirs is a congregation full of saints—"called to be saints," he says. Can't you just imagine the reception Paul's letter got when it was read aloud in church that Sunday? "Called to be saints"? Surely there were members who found themselves looking around at others with whom they were having a disagreement and thinking, "Well, I don't see anything saintly about old Joe over there." Paul wanted them to see that greater than any difference that might divide them was God's love that unites them. You are called to be saints.

OK, let's bring this forward in time. On one level you would have to say that it's a long way from Corinth to the Carolinas. And, thanks be to God, many of the church fights that were creating such problems in Corinth are nowhere to be seen around here. Nevertheless, I think that there is a lot we at Philadelphia can learn from those folks back in Corinth who were trying to figure out how to be the church.

If you read Russell Kerr's account of the 240-year history of our church, called *The Presbyterian Gathering at Clear Creek*, you see that we've had our shares of squabbles through the years.

For example, you may think that differences of opinion about church music and the hymns that we sing are a relatively new thing. But, according to our history, back around 1810, a number of families left Philadelphia because they didn't like the hymns we were singing (*Kerr*, p 114).

In the 1840s the Session felt that it was necessary to take a stand on the issue of public drunkenness and intoxication (p. 154). Something makes me think that there was probably a little bit of discussion and perhaps disagreement over taking this stand.

Several times through the years there have been conflicts that arose concerning various pastors. Charges were even brought against one pastor for conduct unbecoming a minister of the gospel. After a difference of opinion with one preacher, our Session minutes record that when the pastor left: "his departure was regretted by no one" (p. 174).

With fights over preachers, differences of opinion about the music, concern about moral behavior of church members, and various other issues of division in the church through the years, what is it that has kept this church from just flying apart? I think it was that through the years we have known that in spite of our differences, there is something bigger that keeps us together. As it was in Corinth, so it is here at Philadelphia: God's grace is the glue that holds us together.

As recently as 2003, when our church was recovering from a time of conflict and disagreement, the Session adopted a set of guidelines for our life together in this community of faith. And I think that from time to time we need to remind ourselves of those guidelines. I'm going to highlight a couple of them:

- 1) We will speak positively about our brothers and sisters in Christ and our church. We will support and encourage our leadership, teachers, spiritual guides, staff and fellow members to build up the Body of Christ at PPC.
- 2) We will observe the Golden Rule, forgiving others as Christ forgives us. We will reflect the love of Christ toward each other.
- 3) We will strive to "speak no ill" in bitterness or wrath to or about any member of the Body of Christ, mindful always of our duty to speak the truth in love.

At their core all these guidelines point to the unity that is ours in Jesus Christ, and that unity is greater than any differences that would divide us.

Maybe it's not as far from Corinth to the Carolinas as we first thought. Yes, even here at Philadelphia, there have been, and continue to be, differences of opinion. Yet, in spite of the differences, there is a deeper unity that draws us together. As Paul said, we—everyone of us—the whole congregation—we are called to be saints. We are the people of God. Thanks be to God. †