

“Paul – A Third Journey”

1 Corinthians 1:1-9; 12:12-26; John 17:20-26

Paul, the Senior Pastor

Last week, we met two key players in Paul’s ministry: Priscilla and Aquila, whom Paul met in Corinth, Greece. They committed themselves fully to Paul’s work and the building of God’s kingdom. After 18 months, when Paul decided that it was time for him to leave Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila left with him. All three made their way to Ephesus, another very important city. Priscilla and Aquila stayed there while Paul went on to Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, they quickly became leaders in the Christian community in Ephesus. Once, a well-meaning Jew named Apollos came to Ephesus teaching about Jesus and God’s kingdom as best he could. But his teachings about Jesus were a little confused and inaccurate. Priscilla and her husband took him aside and taught him the full truth about Jesus and the new way.

As for Paul, after spending some in Caesarea and Antioch, he set out on a third missionary journey (see the map below), returning to shepherd church communities he had founded. He returned to Ephesus where he ended up spending three years, including time in and out of prison.



In Ephesus and a return to Rome

Naturally, Paul connected with Priscilla and her husband. Paul would mention them when he wrote a letter back to Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 16:9). But they never lost their desire to return to Rome. After all, it was their home, where they had been raised, where they had met and married. In 54AD, Claudius died and his edict expelling the Jews from Rome died with him. So, Priscilla and her husband returned to Rome where they would carry on their kingdom building work. Later, when Paul was in Corinth a second time, he wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome urging them to find unity as the Jewish-Christians returned. In this letter, Paul sent a poignant hello to Priscilla and Aquila, noting that they had “risked their necks” for Paul and his work (Romans

16:34). But even though they were back in Rome, their work was not done. There were many house churches in Rome that needed help and encouragement. Later, it seems that they again headed for Asia Minor to work for the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ (see 2 Timothy 4:19).

A letter to Corinth During Paul's lengthy stay in Ephesus, he wrote letters to church communities he had founded on earlier trips. One of the most important is the letter he wrote to the house churches in Corinth; we know this letter as 1 Corinthians.

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 the first time, 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 put it, the Corinthian Christians are "flowers in the rubble."

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 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 set 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

¹ Rome 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.

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

fellowship with Christ and with one another. In short, Paul portrays the Corinthians as important players in a grand story scripted by God.”³

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.

The work in Corinth and in every church

Start reading through Paul's letters in the New Testament and one quickly finds out that he has a lot to say on a wide range of topics. Even when we rightly remember that we are listening in on only one end of these conversations, there is still a lot to understand. So, let me help.

A good way to understand Paul's advice and instruction is to read it through a lens that has four parts:

1. Do what builds up the body of Christ.
2. Do what is a good witness to Jesus.
3. Avoid what tears down the body of Christ.
4. Avoid what is a bad witness to Jesus.

I came across this simple interpretation aid years ago (though I can't remember where!). It has stood the test of time. Why does Paul want all public speaking in tongues to be interpreted (see 1 Corinthians 14)? Here's why. How can the practice build up the body (the church) if no one besides the tongues speaker knows what is being said? Similarly, why does Paul want the believers to be orderly and controlled when they gather to worship (also 1 Corinthians 14)? Because the chaos will make the believers look crazy to outsiders. How could that be a good witness to our Lord?

So, the obvious and appropriate questions are: (1) how can we do all we could to build up the body of Christ, in our case, the local church called First UMC? and (2) how can we better witnesses to Christ?

Making ourselves ready

If we are going to do all we can to build up the body of Christ and be a good witness to Jesus, then we need to make ourselves ready. At a minimum, that means we have to grow in our Christian maturity. That is Paul's point in today's passage from 1 Corinthians 3. These new believers in Corinth are infants in the faith, and in Paul's metaphor, able to drink only milk – the barest minimum of the Gospel. Should we then be surprised that the Corinthians are having all sorts of problems living out the Good News? 1 Corinthians is a very long letter that addresses a long list of problems.

Paul wants the Corinthians to grow up in their faith and in their understanding, so that they can eat the solid food of the Gospel. Without that, they will be like the believers in Ephesus, “blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to mislead others” (Ephesians 4:14).

In Corinth this immaturity is being demonstrated by, among other problems, divisions among the believers. Some follow Paul and others follow another leader called Apollos. Paul rightly sees that such divisions will tear apart these fragile communities. So he pushes them toward unity. They are to use their many and diverse gifts to build up the body of Christ, but without surrendering their oneness in Christ.

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

One body, many members

Steve Martin and Lily Tomlin's 1984 movie, "All of Me," is a funny movie. Lily Tomlin plays Edwina Cutwater, a very rich woman who doesn't want to die. She finds another woman willing to accept her soul, but a mistake during the "operation" sends Edwina's soul directly into the body of Roger Cobb, a passing lawyer. To make matters worse, she takes over only half of Roger's body. Thus, Edwina controls one arm and one leg while Roger controls the other arm and leg. Needless to say, with Edwina and Roger in charge, the poor fellow's arms and legs are not all pulling in the same direction. Steve Martin's gift for physical comedy is on full display as he portrays a man whose limbs have minds of their own.

I wonder if the apostle Paul would find the movie all that funny, or if it would hit a little too close to home. Today's second passage from 1 Corinthians reveals that the believers in Corinth were too much like Edwina/Roger, with the various parts/limbs/members⁴ pulling in different directions. Paul doesn't see unity in Corinth, much less unity of purpose. Instead, he sees a community divided.

Most of us quickly grasp several of Paul's points in this passage.

1. First, we humans are a diverse bunch. Though there is much in our humanness that we share, we all know quite well that there is a wide range of personalities, experiences, and values that threaten to divide even the smallest groups.
2. Second, we know that God has given us a variety of gifts. Whether we call them gifts or talents, we know that some are good at one thing, others at another. I'm pretty good at teaching and talking in front of groups. Other leaders are better at caring for you during a difficult time.
3. Third, I think we understand that these various gifts make our community stronger. To use Paul's body metaphor, the eye needs the hand that needs the foot. The body needs them all. Our diversity is a benefit – so long as it is lived out in love and in unity of purpose.

We know all these things, but sadly churches too often allow their inherent diversity to pull them down into discord, instead of striving for harmonious unity that truly honors and glorifies God.

"That they may all be one"

In emphasizing unity, Paul is merely following Jesus' lead. On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus met with his disciples for one last meal. He began it by washing their feet and concluded it with his lengthy prayer to the Father (John 17). Of course, Jesus praying is not quite like you and me praying. Jesus is the Divine Revealer in what he does, what he says, and who he is. To put it another way, Jesus is the complete and definitive revelation of God. Thus, Jesus is not only praying to the Father, he is also addressing us with a prophetic word that we need to hear.

There are several themes in Jesus' prayer: the glorification of the Father through Jesus' death and exaltation, Jesus' obedience of the Father, the revelation of God in Jesus, setting the disciples apart from the world, the disciples' protection, and their mission.⁵ First and foremost, though, Jesus' prayer is for unity among the believers. Unity in Christ. Unity in truth. Unity in purpose.

We live in the United States. We give to the United Way. Our coins bear the Latin phrase, *E Pluribus Unum*, "out of many, one." As Americans, however, we are not united in our values or ethnicity. We are not united in our religion or beliefs. But what does Jesus mean when he prays that the disciples, then and now, will be one? Here is how Jesus describes this unity in his prayer. The Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father. Jesus prays that we will also be in Jesus and the Father (v. 21). We are to be one, as Jesus and the Father are one (v. 22). Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus so that we, the disciples then and now, may be completely one (v. 23).

⁴ "Member" is used in some translations. Our modern use of the word "member" as in "one who belongs to," is based on this older meaning of a body limb or organ.

⁵ From D.A. Carson's commentary on John in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series, Eerdmans, 1991.

Whew! That is enough to set any head spinning, so let's unpack it a bit. Jesus and the Father are one but they are still distinguishable. The Son prays to the Father; Jesus isn't praying to himself. The Son is obedient to the Father, who sends the Son into the world. Yet when people saw the Son, they saw the Father (John 12:45). What Jesus does, the Father does (14:10). One . . . but distinguishable.

Perhaps the best way to understand Jesus' meaning is to look ahead to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit, aka the "Spirit of Christ" and the "Spirit of God," arrives to dwell not only in the fellowship of believers but in each believer. There is even a Pentecost moment in John's gospel when, after Jesus' resurrection, he breathes on the disciples, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (20:22). The Spirit, who is also one with Father and the Son yet distinguishable from both and from us, forms us into one body. We often affirm this in the benediction taken from one of Paul's letters: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor. 13:13).

"That the world may believe"

Why are we to be united? Or to put it more carefully, why has God set us apart as a single body, grounded in God's truth? Why does Paul believe that unity is absolutely necessary if we are going to build for God's kingdom?

First, Jesus has given us the glory that was given him by the Father (v. 22). "Glory" is often a misunderstood word. It refers to the manifestation of God's being or character through an act that reveals it. Glory is about showing that God is God. Jesus revealed the love and faithfulness of God in his suffering and death. We too are to reveal God's love and faithfulness in what we do. The world is to see who God is through us.

Second, we are one so that the world can know that the Father sent Jesus and loves the world just as the Father loves Jesus. There could hardly be a more striking evangelistic appeal. We are not formed into God's people for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world. God's purpose is that every person might come to know God and know God's love. Our mission, as believers, is to carry forward that purpose.

There can be no sitting on our hands, no comfort with the status quo. Are there people who do not know that God loves them and that Jesus is their Lord? Are there believers who have only begun to taste the riches of God's faithfulness?

Whether it is reaching out to children or to youth, to white or to black, to the rich or to the poor . . . we can never forget why God has blessed us by calling us to him and setting us apart for his work.

This is why we at First UMC strive to be evermore outwardly focused. There are always more children to introduce to Jesus. More youth to help understand what it really means to be a believer. More adults to teach and to help grow in their own discipleship. More people to care for. More who need to be invited to the Lord. More poor to feed and to clothe. Always more. Always more.

None of this is a burden or an obligation. Rather, revealing the love and faithfulness of God is a privilege, a profound and energizing privilege. This is not only who we are to be, but also who we are. God has formed us into a fellowship, empowered by his Spirit, to do and to be more than we would ever imagine. By the grace of God we are united. Who says so? Jesus -- and Paul!

So then, let's work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10)