

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button

Occasion: 2 Epiphany

Date: January 19, 2014

Theme: “Ho w I Learned to Love the Apostle Paul”

Text: 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9

^{NRS} First Corinthians 1

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.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

May the Blessing of the Lord rest and remain upon you always, for the sake of Jesus. Amen.

Question:

- Have you ever been watching a football game in which one of the referees gets tangled up in a play and ends up face down in the turf after have been run over by young men the size of trucks?



- Do you remember how in those old-timey Western movies there would be a cattle stampede and invariably some poor soul would unwittingly step out onto Main Street only to be trampled underfoot?



- Maybe you've seen video of a department store opening on Black Friday and as the crowd surges forward somebody slips and the mob rolls over them?

That was me in my first call! After having received a great theological education and enjoyed a truly remarkable internship, I accepted a call to be an associate pastor in what turned out to be a highly conflicted church. The signs were there for me to see, but I had stars in my eyes.





All I saw was a bunch of really nice people who were very excited to call me to their church. (And, they were going to pay me \$20,000 a year!) Little did I know that a year later I would be calling on the Name of the Lord and asking both God and myself, “How did I get myself in this dog fight?”

As the old folks would say, the blush was off the rose.

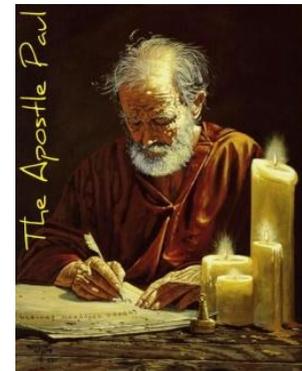
Where I once had stars in my eyes, I now had only bags under my eyes and I was starting to doubt whether I was tough enough to be a pastor. I’d been a 155 lb. guard and linebacker on my high school football team), so I thought I knew something about going up against big opponents.

But, man, did I feel puny. Now you may be thinking, “Oh, pastor! Everybody’s first call/first job/first venture into the real world is always an eye opener,” and you’re absolutely right. But trust me, without getting into specifics, this particular situation was pretty “special.”



Yet God was at work! Given the very messy situation in which I found myself, and having also dragged Carolyn along with me into this slough of despond, I began to realize there was a lot more to being a pastor than having a firm handshake, a friendly smile, or a quick wit.

As I found myself floundering in water way, way over my head, I also found myself casting about for help wherever I could find it. Thank God, I was blessed to have pastor friends who had themselves been around the block a time or two and who could assure me, “This too will pass.” I found further help in the counsel of wise scholars and students of contemporary ministry who helped me make sense of the congregational dynamics booming and buzzing around me. But the greatest blessing of all was that I discovered the Apostle Paul.



Not that Paul was lost or in need of my discovery, and certainly not that I hadn’t been immersed in Paul in seminary! I had studied the letters of Paul, the world of Paul, the theology of Paul, but until I suddenly discovered myself sinking in a pit of parish frustration, I couldn’t say I really knew Paul the man, much less Paul the pastor. But thanks to my own dysfunctional parish, I began to appreciate all the crazy situations in which Paul found himself.

As I began to re-read Paul from the perspective of a (partially) disillusioned parish pastor, I began thinking to myself, “Wow! This guy really took some big hits!” Consider the basis for today’s Second Lesson and for the next five Sundays of Epiphany, the Letters to the Corinthians. You can read these epistles as a virtual textbook of parish pathology. Throughout both these letters, Paul is continually responding to all sorts of craziness. Factions; divisions; competing claims to leadership; lawsuits; sexual immorality; abuses at the Lord’s Supper: you name it, Paul had it thrown at him. At one point the Corinthians all but fired him, or at least, showed him the door to the very congregation he had helped to found. There was a lot of ugliness, so much so that as I read further I began to feel better about my own parish setting. No matter the latest staff debacle or angry meeting, I could always say, “At least I’m not in Corinth!”



But besides congratulating myself on not being in the worst church in the world, I also began to ask myself, “So how did Paul survive? How is it that he didn’t throw in the towel and give up on the conflicted communities he served? Or more importantly, how did Paul help resolve those conflicts and keep Christianity itself from skidding into oblivion?”



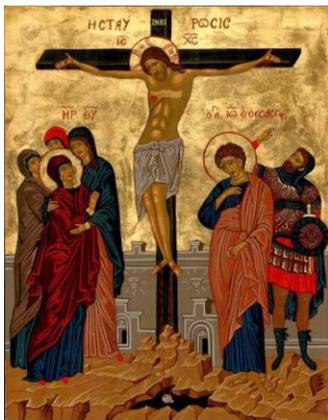
Paul didn’t have older pastors he could turn to for counsel and advice. Paul was first generation, the Pastor 1.0 model. He and his fellow apostles were just then defining what a pastor was and were often flailing in the same deep waters in which I was adrift. Likewise, there was no body of research to which he could turn for insight into family systems, conflict resolution, or leadership development. All Paul had was the gospel.



In deference to the Christians in Corinth, you have to remember that they were also just trying to find their way. They didn’t have 2000 years of tradition on which to rely.

They were, like Paul, first generation and trying to figure out what it meant to be church, so of course, they had questions and doubts and conflicts over some really basic things: To marry or not to marry; to divorce or not to divorce; to engage the culture or to withdraw from it. Their situation was further complicated by other teachers and preachers who were giving them opinions contrary to what Paul had originally taught them. It got very messy very

quickly, but no matter how outrageous the question or how ferociously these new Christians locked horns, Paul would continually, consistently bring them back to the gospel. The Corinthians were, at heart, struggling over how they should live, and for Paul that meant constantly returning to the core of the faith: Christ crucified for me and for you; Christ raised for me and for you.



I had a seminary professor who once advised us that before we ever step into any pulpit, we should ask ourselves: Did Jesus Christ suffer and die for me to say what I’m about to say? Is this sermon worthy of and consistent with the Lord who ascended the cross that we might ascend with him to the new life of resurrected glory?

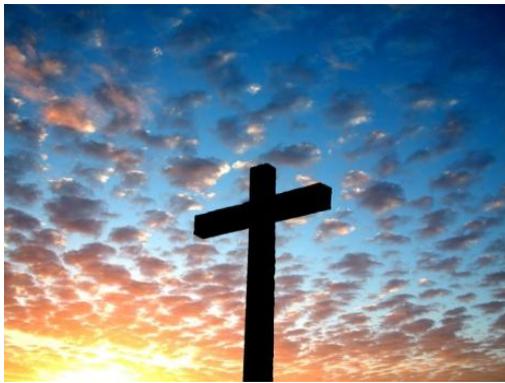
That was effectively Paul’s method for sorting out the Corinthian conflagration. As he approaches every question and each issue, he’s also asking, “How does this fit with the Christ we know as the crucified one?” For Paul, there’s nothing too big or too small that it cannot be examined and understood in the light of the cross.

Paul’s cross-shaped method for discerning true discipleship is as vital to us today as it was to those Corinthians so many centuries before us. We are also venturing into a new world, much as they did.

Like every church in America we are encountering a culture that is very different, some would say radically different, from the world in which we grew up. Consequently, we are, no less than the early church, asking questions about how to reach out, how to minister, how to live out our faith in a world that is no longer quite as friendly as it once was to church or faith or even God. Not surprisingly, given these changes, over the last 50 years churches have often encountered unprecedented levels of stress, conflict, and dysfunction. One expert says, “Do this,” another says, “Do that,” and before long somebody is saying, “Get rid of the pastor!”

Doing nothing is not an option. We can't just throw our hands up in the air and walk away from the church of Jesus Christ, or at least, not without compromising our faith and sacrificing our souls. But the way is not always clear. We know that there's no single silver bullet that will restore the church to the privileged position it once enjoyed, and even if we could find such a fix, I don't believe that that's where we really want to go. But on the other hand, we're not sure how to go forward, which leaves us, I think, with basically two options. We can expend all our energy in big fights over who's right and who's wrong and who got us into this mess in the first place. Or we can go to the gospel, we can renew and reroot ourselves in the message of Christ, and as we stand beneath the cross of Jesus, we can have a little faith.

We can try some new things. We can even take a chance or two. I don't mean throwing ourselves off the pinnacle of the temple, but we can apply Paul's own method of discernment, asking ourselves, "Is this worthy of the Christ who surrendered everything for us? Can we attempt this, that, or the other in the confidence that we are serving the Lord who became poor that we might become rich, who died that we may live eternally, who rose that we might take up our own crosses and follow him?"



In a matter of minutes we'll be meeting as a congregation to make plans for the coming years. There will be some decisions for us to make that may perhaps fall outside the category of "business as usual." But we'll make those decisions in the light of the cross. We'll weigh our options and consider contrasting viewpoints and we'll take St. Paul as our exemplar. We'll ask ourselves what's worthy of our crucified Lord, what is true to his path of suffering love, and what will keep us in the way of the cross. And we will be just fine.