

“Jesus and Paul and Community Unity”

20 June 2021

Salado UMC, Salado, Texas, 76571

Preaching Text: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

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“You’ve got to do your own growing, no matter how tall your grandfather was”
(Irish Proverb).

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Today is Father’s Day and we will briefly visit the theme of counting the cost of being a father. Did you know that the largest number of collect calls made on any single day of the year people make on Father’s Day (*Almanac for Farmers & City Folk*, Spokesman Review)? Real fathers know how to count the cost. As a child, my sister gave my father a Father’s Day poster that read “Anybody can be a father, but it takes a special man to be a daddy.” Real fathers know how to count the cost.

Let us pray: For our fathers, who have given us life and love, that we show them respect and love, we pray to the Lord For fathers who have lost a child through death, that their faith may give them hope, and their family and friends support and console them, we pray to the Lord For men, though without children of their own, who like fathers have nurtured and cared for us, we pray to the Lord For fathers, who have been unable to be a source of strength, who have not responded to their children and have not sustained their families, we pray to the Lord

God our Father, in your wisdom and love You made all things. Bless these, that you may strengthen them as Christian fathers. Let the example of their faith and love shine forth. Grant that we, their sons and daughters, may honor them always with a spirit of profound respect. Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen (*The United Methodist Book of Worship*, #441).

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Hear today’s lesson, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13:

[6:1] As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. [2] For he says,

"At an acceptable time I have listened to you,

and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! [3] We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, [4] but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, [5] beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; [6] by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, [7] truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; [8] in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; [9] as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; [10] as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. [11] We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. [12] There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. [13] In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also (2 Corinthians 6:1-13).

I once heard John Holbert say: "Church fights are so nasty because the stakes are so low." Minor issues, marginal to the church's mission, too often consume needless time and energy. There are many examples from the color of new carpeting to the menu for Wednesday night dinners. While the Christian community in Corinth probably did not scrap over these precise issues, they seemed to quarrel over nearly everything else. Then, as now, many church members were more interested in their personal pleasure than the larger good for the community. Paul tried to soothe the Corinthian church skirmishes by means of his letters. Yet, Corinth remained a divided community. When divisive issues distract us with respect to fellow church members, then it is challenging to focus on God's spirit.

Amid the Corinthian conflict, Paul writes that more is at stake than "their good feelings." The more is . . . a new way of life offered in Christ's gospel. The gospel demands total loyalty.

Paul outlines his loyalty when he writes of the suffering he has endured: “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments” . . . and so forth.

Paul here draws a lot of attention to his own miseries. Seminaries generally teach modern pastors to minimize references to our own lives. The thought here being few church members want to hear about the limitless exploits of us or our darling children. Most folks sense this kind of disclosure as “showing off.” Doing this kind of sharing puts preachers above their congregations. When Paul details his personal hardships, it may strike us as self-indulgent.

Can you distinguish between “passion” and “fanaticism?” Do you know Christians who will readily bear beatings and imprisonments for the sake of faith? Would you call them either extremists or fanatics? A passionate faith creates fear in us. True faith commands loyalty and obedience. We all know that there is a difference between “passion” and “fanaticism.” Yet, most of us have neither. A few weeks ago, someone told me about two local churches that have “it going on.” This person wanted to know what I was going to do about it. So, I asked, “how many people have you invited to church since we started meeting face to face in March?” This person said none. So, I said I guessed that the churches that “had it going on” had 50 or 100 or more people offering invitations to friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc. each and every week. We too often maintain the safe distance from invitation and instead hide behind a gospel of moderation.

In the name of a practical gospel, some members see my job as picking the right color carpet or “being helpful” or “making everybody happy.” We diminish spiritual leadership when we do this or allow it to happen. If and when this domestication of the gospel of salvation happens, then the gospel becomes irrelevant.

Paul’s pastoral message to the self-preoccupied, self-possessed Corinthian congregation was, in effect, “it is not about you!” In Christ we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul reminds the Corinthians that in Christ the prior things, including competitive social hierarchies, are dead. Pastoral leadership is not just offering salve to injuries—it announces the good news. God declares all people infinitely precious. Life’s value develops not from either wealth or status. Rather, true joy grows from seeing God’s grace even within difficulties.

In this lesson, Paul writes mainly to the question of how we make and preserve authentic Christian community. How do we express influence reliably in a congregation? The answer is that we form and maintain Christian community by mutual charity rather than by competition for spiritual “knowledge.” Some believed they had an inherent right to lead because they were special because of their superior spiritual knowledge. Paul instead offers a model of leadership based on a person’s willingness to surrender comfort, safety, and personal ego to the gospel. Paul, however unreliably, seeks to embody what we call “servant leadership.” Servant leadership does not claim personal power. Instead, it strives to give itself to others in Christian love. Servant leadership functions via the proper tools of charity: “patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.” How do spiritual leaders help build a genuine Christian community? By loving that community unconditionally. As Paul writes “There is no restriction in our affections.” He also suggests a risking love that speaks an unpopular truth that the community needs to hear. Do you recall Paul’s words? “We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians.”

Perhaps Aquinas was correct in writing “it is our destiny to be made friends with God.” Perhaps we can become friends with God and others in our community.

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