

February 2, 2020

I Corinthians 1: 10-18

Prayer: Dear Lord, We welcome you into our worship service and pray that it be pleasing to you. We offer our music, our gifts, our words of praise, our confessions, our petitions, our humility. In Jesus's name we pray, Amen.

Already Gifted

During our child-raising years, Vince and I tried to present a united front.

After all, we were outnumbered. We might disagree and negotiate in private but when we faced the children, we tried to support each other.

Nonetheless, it was no secret that I was the disciplinarian.

Vince was the fun guy, the one who took you to The Clock or to the shaved ice hut. The one who was sweet and even-tempered. The one who quietly persuaded mean old Mom to back off lifetime restrictions.

So when Vince finally got mad at the children, I loved it. They'd look to me for help, and I'd be like, "Hey. You made your father mad. Deal with it."

Call me shallow, but I remember those moments with great fondness.

In today's Scripture passage, we see Paul getting mad. I like that, too.

He's usually going on about sanctification and righteousness and justification. He's usually setting up arguments as if he's in a court room.

But sometimes, he just gets mad and lets people have it.

Let's pause for a minute to remember who Paul was and how he operated.

As far as we know, Paul never met the earthly Jesus though they lived during the same time period. Paul was a Jew, a Pharisee and a Roman citizen. His name was originally Saul.

As a Roman citizen, he had some power, some standing. As a Pharisee, he had the respect of his religious community.

After Jesus's death and resurrection, his disciples went out preaching among their fellow Jews. From Saul's perspective, these disciples and their new converts to Jesus Christ threatened Judaism. As a good Pharisee, he didn't appreciate any threat to traditional Judaism, and went so far as to urge that these new Christians be killed.

He was actually on the road to Damascus to pursue this persecution when he was confronted by the risen Lord: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Saul converted to Christianity, and was re-named Paul. But he brought that same passion, that same energy, that same temper to his new vocation – as evangelist.

While Jesus's disciples stuck mostly to the Jewish communities, Paul struck out to spread the gospel to the Gentiles. He would found a

church, stay there for a few months or a few years teaching and preaching, then move on to another area.

Then he would hear about problems or issues or questions arising in the churches he founded, and he would write letters back to them. Those instructive letters became the earliest parts of our New Testament – earlier even than the four gospels.

In today's Scripture, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth – one of his problem children. He has heard that they are arguing about which church leader to follow. Listen for the sarcasm as we read **I Corinthians 1: 10-18.**

10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.'

¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

¹⁸ 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.

I love passages like this because they remind us that while the Bible may have been divinely inspired, it was written by very real human beings. Human beings who could be angry and sarcastic and even a little snippy.

Chloe was a Christian in either Ephesus or Corinth. Her household reported a divisive problem in Corinth. The congregation was divided over which church leader to follow.

Some claimed to be followers of church founder Paul himself. Some preferred church leader Apollos. Some preferred the popular Cephas, or Peter. And some professed – correctly, I assume -- to following Christ.

Paul found this division ridiculous. “Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

We have visitors today from JustFaith at Christ Church. That is a study group who goes in-depth on issues of social justice. I love them because most of the groups visit Triune at some point to worship, have lunch and get acquainted with us.

Well, the national founder of JustFaith is Jack Jezreel, who graduated from Furman. Once when he was speaking in Greenville, he talked about our tendency to worship the *pointer* rather than what is being *pointed to*.

He talked about pointing a finger at the kingdom of God, and people getting caught up in the finger – *Look at that finger! Let's build a statue of the finger!*

The finger is not what's important. The thing it points to – the kingdom of God – is what's important.

For some of us, the finger can be the Bible itself. If we start worshiping the Bible, rather than what it points to, we can go seriously astray. When you hear arguments about the inerrancy of the Bible, that's often what is going on.

Or for some of us, like this crowd at Corinth, the finger can be a church leader. The people in Corinth were dividing along personality lines.

But Paul knew quite well that he and Apollos and Peter were only the fingers. Christ was that being pointed to. And so he let his sarcasm fly: **“Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?”**

Our Holy Scriptures can be very down-to-earth.

The other thing I like about this passage is it shows how Paul’s personality persisted from the over-the-top Pharisee Saul to the over-the-top evangelist Paul. He simply transferred that same personality, that same drive, that same focus to another target – the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I remember taking a career counseling test in my 40s. Not surprisingly, journalist was near the top. That was a good thing because that’s what I was at the time. But at the *very top* of the list of potential career choices was ... Protestant minister.

At the time, I thought that was the funniest thing I'd ever seen. Ministers were boring. They couldn't drink or dance or cuss. Who'd want to do that?

When I found myself in seminary a few years later – just to learn more about the religion beat for the newspaper – I looked at the professors who read the Bible in Greek. I looked at my fellow students who read Thomas Merton in their spare time, while I was sneaking in Agatha Christie. And I found myself seriously wanting.

I brought that feeling into ministry – that I never quite measured up. I always had this sneaking feeling that if anyone knew what I really thought or what I read or what I did in my spare time, they'd scream “You imposter!”

Then one day, I was showing a new church partner around Triune. Several of their pastors and staff members came over to tour.

At the time, a man named Rich Butler was the senior pastor. When we got to the third floor next door, he quietly pulled me aside and

said, “Have you ever thought of writing a book?” I had just had *The Weight of Mercy* accepted by a publisher, so I told him that.

And he said, “OK, that explains it.” And that’s all he said.

Now this church was known for sharing prophetic words and visions with one another. They weren’t pushy about it, but they deeply believed that the Holy Spirit speaks clearly in the present day.

A few days later, I got curious about what Rich had said, and I e-mailed him. And he sent me back the most gracious note.

He said that right in the middle of our tour, he had a vision of me signing books at a bookstore. He said he’s never sure whether to share things like that or not, but he felt a strong prompting to share his vision as a means of encouragement.

He went on to tell me several more things that the Lord shared with him.

And one of the things was this: “The Lord gave you your personality before He gave you any of your gifts.... I believe that He

wants to use your story through your personality to be a fresh perspective on ministry ... especially women in ministry.”

I cannot tell you how freeing that was. Until that moment, I thought my personality was a detriment to our ministry. That I needed to compensate for not being spiritual enough or well-read enough or prayerful enough or serious enough to be a proper pastor.

That note from Rich turned everything upside down. God knew who I was *before* he called me. He wasn't asking me *to be* anyone else. He was just asking me *to do* something else.

On another plane entirely, it was the same with Paul. God knew who he was. He took that same personality, that religious education, that fierce drive, that temper, that sarcasm, and turned it toward another target. The gospel of Jesus Christ.

The question I'd like to pose today is, *What is your target?*

God has already given you your personality. He planted it “in the womb,” according to the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah.

What can you do with your personality, your gifts, the ones you have right now? Not *if I could just sing, or if I could just build houses, or if I could just perform social work, or if I could just cook*. But what you already have, who you already are.

What target is God pointing you toward?

A year or so after Rich Butler was here, a Baptist pastor from North Carolina visited. He was retiring after a long, long ministry. And he was looking at mid-career people in his congregation whom he sensed were feeling the tug of the Holy Spirit, the pull of the Holy Spirit, the nagging of the Holy Spirit. He wanted to leave them with some guidance because they were not sure what to do with it.

We never are. For us, it's rarely as clear as it was for Saul/Paul. The only sure thing is: You already have your gifts. You already have your personality. God will work with that.

In fact, that's the second part of this Scripture passage.

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

Paul, the former Pharisee, the religious scholar, says he didn't possess the wisdom to proclaim the gospel. The cross of Christ, or as he says elsewhere, the foolishness of Christ crucified, can hold its own.

Eloquent religious theology can't hold a candle to the power of the cross.

¹⁸ 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.

Paul considers his gifts – prodigious as they seem to us – useless in light of the gospel. The saving grace of Jesus Christ is not logical by

human standards, by educated standards. But to those who believe it, it is quite simply the power of God.

If that is what we believe – and I think it is – proclaiming it, living it, is where our gifts should lead us. That can take thousands of forms – loving our neighbor, taking in children, serving the poor, conversing with the lonely, singing in worship, sponsoring someone in recovery, pointing in every way we know how to the kingdom of God.

We already have the gifts. Maybe it's time to unwrap them.

Amen.