

“We Are Called”
Based on 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9
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So here’s the situation, Paul built the Corinthian church. For eighteen months he was in Corinth, evangelizing and forming the community of faith, teaching and living among them. Then, after he left, he gets word that the Corinthian church is a mess. There is in-fighting, there are different factions and many are even calling Paul’s authority into question. “The Corinthian insistence on individual freedom has undermined Paul’s attempt to build a cohesive moral community with clear boundaries separating it from Corinthian society.”¹

Here’s how one religion professor explains the Corinthian church and the situation Paul faces: “The church is split by factions (1:10-17), charges of sexual immorality (chapter 5), questions about lawsuits (chapter 6), conduct at the Lord's Supper (chapter 11), and the interpretation of speaking in tongues (chapter 14). And yet note that Paul does not hesitate to express gratitude for this community (1:4). He also reminds them (and us!) that they are holy (“sanctified”), which seems preposterous given the behaviors listed above. But this holiness is not something they have merited or produced. Rather it is a result of their relationship to Christ (1:2). He has made them holy and holy they remain, even if to outward appearances they appear to be something like sailors on shore leave.”² These tensions and divisions dividing the Corinthian church continue to polarize us today when we continue to struggle with different leaders claiming to be the only ones with the right answers, matters of morality, particularly sexual morality, what constitutes “right worship” or “right belief;” all these matters continue to plague the church and threaten the unity two thousand years after Paul wrote this epistle. Undoubtedly, some of the Corinthians wanted to have a vote to withdraw from the presbytery.

In this opening to his letter, Paul prepares his argument. Even though the church is divided into factions of different house churches, he addresses his letter to “the church of God in Corinth” as though they are one because that is how he wants them to behave. Paul’s letter begins with the typical formality of epistles of the day, by naming the sender of the letter. He starts, “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” Paul doesn’t open all his epistles referring to his call as an apostle of Christ. He seems to do so in this instance specifically to remind the Corinthians of his authority. He’s not just anyone, he is “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” He then continues in the customary mode to name the receivers of the letter: “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.” Two things about this salutation: first, as mentioned above, there wasn’t really **a** church in Corinth. There were at least two, if not more, churches meeting

¹ James W. Thompson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 255.

² Mark Tranvik, “Commentary on Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9,” Lectionary for January 16, 2011, Second Sunday after Epiphany, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx>

separately and considering themselves separate from one another. But Paul addresses them as one because he wants to emphasize the unity to which he feels they are called. And then, he refers to them as saints and calls them “sanctified.” If it sounds like Paul is “buttering them up” it’s because he is, in a way. Again, it was customary to begin an epistle, particularly an epistle with the purpose to persuade, with compliments. Also, not so different from today. Think of political rallies and even rock concerts. It’s always “great to be in _____.” And in political rallies, the people in attendance are always “good, hard-working, xyz, Americans.”

So Paul seems to be buttering them up, calling the Corinthians sanctified so that they will listen and do what he wants them to do. But it’s more than mere pandering. In calling them saints, here and throughout the epistle, “Paul never uses the singular form of ‘saint’ to refer to the individual Christian.”³ As one commentator notes, [The Corinthians and we] are saints in our common vocation, a shared gift. A ‘holy people,’ in this sense, is one marked by God, determined for ‘the fellowship of his Son’ both now and in the coming glory. Sanctity, therefore, does not refer, in the first place, to righteous behavior.⁴ Furthermore, to be sanctified is not a free pass—it is a responsibility. To be a saint doesn’t mean that you can do no wrong, it means you have even more responsibility to act accordingly. (Yikes, no one wants to hear that they are supposed to act like a saint!)

After the obligatory, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” Paul continues, “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—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Sounds like Paul is really laying it on thick. Does he really adore the Corinthians as much as he says? Maybe. Maybe not. One thing’s for sure, they not making life easy for him. And yet, I think he does genuinely give thanks for them, just as parents genuinely give thanks for their children despite the trouble they may give them.

Paul gives thanks for them and rather than scold them for all their wrongs (don’t worry he’ll get to that later in the letter), Paul re-affirms their gifts from God. Reminding them not only that they have these gifts but that they are indeed, gifts from God, not of their own doing or merit. And again, just as they are sanctified as a community and not as individual, the spiritual gifts are for the plural you, for “y’all” not for individuals. The *community* has all the gifts but no *individual* has all the gifts and therefore they need to remain together to share them with each other.

Paul gives them assurance, “[Christ] will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Then concludes his salutation with, “God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ

³ Alan Gregory, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 256.

⁴ *Ibid.*

our Lord.” What does it mean to be called? For one, similarly to being sanctified, to be called is not a privilege but a responsibility. The members of the Corinthian church, and we, are individually called, but we are not called to a faith as individuals, we are called to a *community* of faith. One cannot be truly Christian without being in Christian community. You can be a good person, you can follow Christian morals and values but there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the responsibility of the call, “This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men. This oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept... has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man.”⁵

But “world-wide fellowship” doesn’t seem to come naturally for all of us, and fellowship with the person next door, or even sitting in the pew next to us can be even more challenging. Don’t get me wrong, like Paul, I thank God for this congregation and for the health of this congregation. I hear horror stories of congregations where there’s feuding and factions and all kinds of dysfunction that is not a problem at this church. However, we all know that we’re a little different. We’re different from most of the other congregations in this community and we’re different from most congregations in our presbytery. And it’s easy to fall into “us and them” mentality. And even in our relative health, we’re all human. It’s hard to love, truly love, everyone we share church with.

The Screwtape Letters is C.S. Lewis’ satirical letters from a senior devil, Screwtape, to his nephew Wormwood, a junior devil. Wormwood has a patient under his care and it is his duty to keep his patient firmly in his clutches. But when the patient becomes a Christian, Screwtape rebukes Wormwood but assures him that all is not lost. There is still an opportunity to remedy the situation. He writes,

“One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity.... Fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him on shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like ‘the body of Christ’ and the actual faces in the next pew.”⁶

It can be a challenge to see the body of Christ in the actual faces in the next pew, or in the actual faces of other churches in general. And yet, that is what we are called to as Christians. As Paul says, we are “called into the fellowship of [God’s] son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” When we look at it from the point of view of tensions and factions, as was the situation in the Corinthian church and too often is the situation in the modern

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Beyond Vietnam,” 1967

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1943), 15-16.

church, fellowship with the “other” seems like drudgery. A responsibility we are called to but don’t necessarily want to be called to. But fellowship is a good thing, isn’t it? We enjoy fellowship with one another and why can’t we enjoy the fellowship of the Church Universal? Because really, this fellowship is a party waiting to happen. The Trinity—Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit—is already in fellowship and we are called by God to join the fun. Being in fellowship with one another should be enjoyable. We all know it isn’t always so, but we should see ourselves as a team, working together. It’s not about winning or besting each other, it’s about moving forward together. It’s about sharing in the presence of Christ with Christ and one another.

In this opening of Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul asserts his perception of himself as a called apostle of God and the Corinthians as sanctified and called to be in fellowship to set the tone for the letter which calls them back into relationship with God and one another. He doesn’t simply scold them for their quarrelling, he calls them to be who *God* has called them to be: a sanctified body of Christ. Likewise, we are sanctified and called into fellowship. We are to give thanks for our brothers and sisters in faith, *all* our brothers and sisters in faith, whether or not we agree with them. God has called us all together to be followers of Christ together, to be brothers and sisters.

Paul’s final sentence about being called into fellowship begins with “God is faithful.” *Our* being called into fellowship is part of *God’s* faithfulness. Fellowship is what we call our social time together, but of course, fellowship is any time we spend together. Our worship, our meetings, our mission, too. We do these things and enjoy fellowship with Christ and one another because God is faithful.