

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans
“A quick visit to Corinth”
1 Corinthians 1: 1 - 9
Pastor Jonathan

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Epiphany III

As I dug out again today from the snow, I thought it would be good a quick trip together to Southern Greece. Anyone want to go? There are many places to see and a beautiful coastline. But I particularly wanted to go to ancient Corinth, so I suppose we will need a time machine as well as other modern transportation. It's a good thing God has given us imaginations, and the creativity to take these trips together. Please be aware of the positive side of imagination, your holy imagination, if you will. All of us have struggled with the negative side of our imaginations, but God gave us imagination and the ability to go there and enjoy the positive journeys available to us.

Today we go back to about 55 AD, during Paul's third missionary journey. We find Corinth was a major cosmopolitan city, a seaport and major trade center, the most important city in the Roman province of Achaia. It was also filled with idolatry and immorality. The church was largely made up of Gentiles, non-Jews. Paul had established this Church on his second missionary journey. Much that was said to Corinth needs to be heard today.

But like most of the letters to the churches in the New Testament, we find them beginning with the same thing our letters and emails begin with: From whom the letter is sent and to whom it is sent. 1 Corinthians is no different. It starts: “Paul...To the church of God in Corinth...” So we know it was from Paul and that it was going to Corinth and if we read the phrase after that, it was meant to go to all the Christians, all the followers of Jesus Christ in the Roman province of Achaia, the southern half of modern Greece, more or less.

And as I was reflecting on everything I wanted to tell you about the Corinthian Church and Corinth in general, I kept marveling at Paul's calling and how Jesus met him. I couldn't get passed Paul, the first word in this letter. So let's spend a few moments together remembering his story and hear what God has to say to us about our own and others'.

Paul's life was a miracle. Each of ours is as well. We need to be able to hear what God has done to make sure we have been given the gift of life, and then God speaks to us about how we have stewarded that gift.

Paul grew up Jewish. He was able to trace his Jewish ancestry and you can read about that in Philippians 3:1ff, and Acts 26. He was trained as a Pharisee and lived strictly by that rule. He was zealous for his faith, and persecuted Christians based on that position. He is noted in Acts 7 as being the one who held the coats for those who stoned Stephen, one of the first deacons and martyrs for the faith. (Acts 7:57)

He is then the centre of attention, as the early church was now being persecuted. He was a key persecutor. Dr. Luke, who is writing Acts, notes that Saul of Tarsus, Paul's earlier name, "breathed murderous threats against the Lord's disciples," (Acts 9:1) That's pretty strong language. How much more anti-Christian could Paul have been? He had done his job of persecuting Christians so well in Jerusalem, the religious leaders were willing to export him to Damascus to do the same to "bring prisoners back to Jerusalem." (Acts 9:2) So they did export him. But the unexpected happened. No one saw it coming. Certainly not Saul. Stay with me if you think you know this story and all of its details.

Acts 9: 3ff

A light flashed from heaven. Saul fell to the ground. And he heard a voice say to him, "Why are you persecuting Me?" The light and voice self-identify as Jesus. Then Jesus tells him where he must go and what he must do. The men travelling with Saul can't believe what they have seen and heard. They heard everything Saul heard. They lead the blind man Saul into Damascus, a shell of what he was, originally with the purpose of jailing Christians. Now he is forcefully encountering Jesus and Jesus' representative Ananias. (9:10ff)

At the same time somewhere else, God clearly speaks to Ananias to go visit Saul, lay hands on him and heal him from his blindness. (9:11) Even though it is clear by Dr. Luke's account that Ananias knows this is the Lord speaking to him, he still questions God. And here's his prayer: "Lord, I have heard many bad reports about this fellow and all the harm he has done to your saints...he wants to do the same thing here!" (9:13)

God doesn't argue or try to persuade Ananias about Saul. He just tells him to go and heal him, and that He has chosen Paul as His representative to the Gentiles and their kings. (9:15) God even drops the hint that Saul will suffer much in his new ministry. (9:16) Was this to address Ananias' concerns, or simply a statement of fact? We don't know. We do know that Ananias does

what the Lord asked him, even with his doubts. It is a beautiful moment where a follower of Jesus trusts Jesus with a man who could wreck the church. (9: 17 – 19) How and where are you trusting God these days? How do you know you are trusting Him? He lays his hands on Saul, tells him the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road, sent me to heal you and be filled with the Holy Spirit. And it happened. Saul experienced something like scales falling from his eyes and he could see again (remember it is Dr. Luke giving us this account). He got up, was baptized, ate some food and spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

Saul began to evangelize his own people in the synagogues in Damascus. He preached Jesus from the Old Testament Scriptures. And some became Christians, but others wanted to kill him. So the new convert Saul had to be lowered down a city wall in a basket to escape being murdered. (9: 22 -24)

After all this wonderful contribution to the church in Damascus, you'd think Saul would be welcomed with open arms into the church in Jerusalem. They had heard the fact he had been converted and made a difference in Damascus. But what Saul found was that the church would not accept him in Jerusalem. All they remembered was that he had jailed their friends, and so they were afraid of him. (9: 26-27) Maybe this was just a new way of infiltrating the church to get more people into jail, they thought. They doubted his sincerity as a new believer, even though they had heard his story.

And you know how this story ends. It ends with one person welcoming him into the church in Jerusalem. That person was...Barnabus (meaning "son of encouragement.") Barnabus risked his own reputation and brought Saul to the apostles who heard his story and welcomed him into the church. He spoke boldly in the name. So boldly that he had to be sent to another region, back to where he grew up in Tarsus.

And so this is maybe somewhat interesting to you or not, but the question is: what would we do with a Saul in our midst? Would we accept someone who was known in Ottawa to be anti-Christian? Who would be the Barnabus, the sponsor, if you will, to risk their reputation to welcome him?

How welcoming are we? Do we think we welcome everyone here? Who would you less likely welcome here?

We don't know all the details of Paul's life, still called Saul until Acts 13:9, but would we welcome him here? He like to debate. He may have been short, unattractive, talkative, possibly had bad eyes and often portrayed as a bald man. We could look at artists' impressions of him. But would that matter? No, would we accept a person like him? And what about others who may be more difficult to love or accept?

We do our best to welcome everyone who comes through the door. I believe that. In these days, that notion will be challenged. It is not simply the sexuality issue that is before us, although it is, and that community touches our own. It is a number of ways where we need to reach out to each other, get to know each other beyond our different cultures and languages. We need to help each other be at home here and know we are on the same team. Because we are.

Paul, chosen of God...to the church that calls itself Grace... None of us are here because we are so wonderful, or gifted or talented, even if many of us are those things. We are here by grace, as a gift, because Jesus has met us, or is in the process of meeting us. How we can affirm that gift of grace to each one of us in these days?

⁴I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— ⁶God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's what Paul said to the Corinthians and I am saying it to you.

As we listen to the Lord through Scripture, let us not be afraid of what we believe we can and cannot do. Let us ask our God anew to help us where we are fearful and anxious. Let us cast our cares on the One who cares for us.

Let us pray.