

Consecration Sunday
II Corinthians 9:1-8, 11-15
October 23, 2011

The city of Corinth rose up on the isthmus that linked Peloponnese, the southern portion of Greece, to the country's mainland. Like the busy swinging door of a popular restaurant, Corinth was the gateway to two harbors, a constantly moving hub of travel, trading and tricks. The city was rich, with plenty of self-made merchants. The city was also poor, full of garbage collectors, dishwashers and others who sold their trade while the city slept. It had all the glitz and glamour but as critics often repeated, none of the substance. It was in this heady, teaming town that the apostle Paul came and with a few hungry souls, formed a church.

In the years after its birth, Paul and these newest Christians exchanged letters, written between a founder who loved a newborn community and a growing, at times testy church that wasn't entirely sure they wanted Paul's love. The only remaining trace of the first letter is the "when I first wrote to you" recorded in First Corinthians. But let's imagine it was written soon after Paul left, a euphoric letter filled with all the things you say when things are just starting out.

Isn't the world amazing? Isn't our God amazing?

I am counting the days until I see you again, holding you close in my heart.

Eventually, of course, you come back to earth. Living out your faith, day in, day out, rain or shine, is hard. Corinth's nickname was "Sin City." Little in their surrounding culture supported their new faith. In the biblical first letter to the Corinthians Paul tackles the questionable behavior that has reached him.

I hear that some of you are bringing a feast to the Eucharist, eating and drinking from a rich table, and then leaving just crumbs for your poorer sisters and brothers. Is that a sharing in the body of Christ?

I hear that some of you are boasting that you have the greatest spiritual expertise. Have you forgotten that you are all gifted in the Spirit and equally members of the same body?

The love is still there, but it is channeled through instructions, the necessary lessons that make one mature in faith.

Anxious about what he is hearing, Paul drops in on Corinth. The visit does not go well. Ever contentious, ever convinced of their own authority, the Corinthians rebel against his leadership and in an adolescent display start a shouting match in church. Paul is humiliated. And so he writes what is known as the 'lost letter,' a letter written in heat of hurt and anger. How could you...to me? Are you so easily seduced by other temptations? Is Christ among you... or not?

Days pass. Weeks turn into months and finally when the dust has settled and the heart is a little calmer, Paul takes up his pen again. "I've resolved not to make another painful visit. I wrote last time with much anguish and many tears." But I still love you. And the gospel is still only conveyed through our relationships with one another. So I want to commit the following things to paper. And so he writes the Biblical second letter of Corinthians, which is filled with the beautiful truths that we cling to in the life of faith.

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

We walk by faith, not by sight.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away. See, everything is becoming new.

We are perplexed in every way, crushed but not destroyed, defeated by not driven to despair,

remembering that we have a treasure in clay pots and God is always at work in us.

Now, in those days, letters were read aloud in churches. Maybe at the announcement time, someone would stand and say, “I come bearing a message from Paul.” Or maybe at the sermon time, someone will come to the front, unfold the paper, clear his throat and say, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father from your brother in Christ.” The community might lean forward to be sure they could hear. Or maybe, given the last letter from Paul, they might lean back, fold their arms, and hold their breath. But as the letter unfolds – new creation, treasure in clay pots – they breathe a bit more easily. Maybe it is all going to be okay.

But here, just as everyone is getting comfortable, Paul turns to his final reason for writing: the collection being taken for the needs in Jerusalem. The easy breathing stops. The bodies get rigid. There he goes again, making another demand. We knew it would be about money, in the end. Paul even pulls out his shame by comparison trick. Remember your sister church in Macedonia. They have given generously, far beyond their means. If your sisters can give out of their poverty, well surely you can do so as well.

Then Paul, every skillful, ever truthful, as uncomfortable as the truth might be, says it plainly. It is not necessary for me to write to you about this again. I’ve appealed to you multiple times. You know the need. You are probably as sick of hearing about it as I am of asking of you for it. So I’m not going to ask again. I am going to remind you what you promised at your baptism, to follow Jesus, who said whenever you do it to the least of these, you do it to me. You have boasted far and wide, this is a church that keeps its promises. This is a church others can count on. You promised. I baptized. I bragged about you, too. You don’t want us all to be humiliated now, do you? So I am sending the brothers to arrange the day and time for the plate to be passed and for you to make your offerings. They will arrange your bountiful gift. But don’t be worried. We won’t extort the money from you. A gift is only a gift if it is given freely. You have to decide for yourself. What you place in the plate must come from you.

The thing about Paul is that he’s a tough, tough leader. There are no cutting corners with him, no evasive half-hearted efforts. You won’t get grace without cost in Paul’s proclamation, just as you can’t know resurrection without meeting Christ crucified. But there are two gospel truths here, rocks upon which we stand.

“The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” The harvest only comes when we’ve invested in the planting. To sow the seed is never to offer only our surplus, the extra pieces we find lying around, but to give from our substance, offering back to God the very essence of who we are. Your bountiful gift comes because you give not from your surplus but your substance.

But when you place your gift in the plate, writes, Paul, remember who God is. God is the one who first gives to us. God says, “I am able to make all grace abound in you, so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” Think about that: in **all** things, at **all** times, you will have **all** that you need.

What a counter cultural statement. In a world that says you will never have enough, that you deserve every little last thing you earn, it is a scary confession that God will give you all that you need. You and I hear those words against the backdrop of a prolonged – if not official – recession, in which the work has dried up, health care costs have soared, where our money doesn’t go as far as it used to and no solutions are in sight. You will in all things, at all times live bountifully says God, just as you abound in

God's good work. This is not foolish financial planning. It is solid, faithful discipleship, an investment in the economy of God.

It is a moment of faithful clarity when you know God to be the author of your life, the sustainer of your days and then give of yourself back to God. It is a joyful privilege to give back to God. While directed to God, our gifts do the work of the church. They make possible the hands and feet of Christ in our hurting world. So I share two stories with you about the work of the church.

The preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of his own father.[1] "My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, "I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of it? Another name, another pledge." That's what he always said.

"Once in a while the church would have a revival, and the traveling evangelist would come for dinner. And always my father said, "The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge." I guess I hear it a thousand times.

"One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and said, "It's too late." They put in a metal tube and X rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

"He was me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. ...He wrote: "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story." I said, "What is your story, Daddy?" And he wrote, "I was wrong."

And then a story from my home church. Raised in a Methodist Church in Florida, my family sat a few pews behind another family, parents and three kids. The second daughter, a few years older than me, was a bit of a wild child. She got in more trouble than most of us at church. I heard my parents exchanging their concerns when they thought their own kids weren't listening. By the time I was in middle school, Jenny had run away from home. Several months later, she returned, knocking on her parents' door late at night, with little left to her name and pregnant. The pregnancy prompted a reconciliation between Jenny and her parents. In due time, she gave birth to a son, and then a few months later, she brought her son to church to be baptized.

In that church, just like in ours, baptisms happened early in the service. The opening hymn, the opening prayer and then the family comes up. Jenny's parents and siblings had dropped her off and gone to park the car. They hadn't made it into church by the time the worship moved to the baptism. Jenny walked up to the font, and just stood there, alone with a baby in her arms. She looked around, glancing back over her shoulder towards the congregation and her face said plainly, "You can't really expect me to stand up here all alone."

And then as if someone had choreographed it, although the only choreographer was the Holy Spirit, a person from over there, and then from over there, one from way in the back, another and another stood up and made their way up front, to stand beside her. By the time her parents arrived, out of breath at the church's back door, there was such a crowd at the font that they couldn't see their daughter and

grandchild. For a second, their faces were clouded in confusion. And then they relaxed. “Oh, yes, of course. None of us can do this all alone.”

This is the work of the church. It is the work into which we have been baptized, the work that you are already doing. When we offer our pledges, which at their best are really our very selves, we affirm our belief that God’s abundance runs right through our lives, always calling us forward to even greater work. For the joy of giving, for the grace of the work, thanks be to God, for this indescribable gift.

[1] Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*. ed. by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 14.