

January 20, 2008 ~ Isaiah 49: 1-7; Psalm 40: 1-11; **1 Corinthians 1: 1-9**; John 1: 29-42

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

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:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

THE CHURCH – CALLED AND SANCTIFIED

Church is not cool and many of us who name ourselves as Christian are not the people we wish we were. Many in the world today have lost whatever faith they may once have had in the church as an institution. In my first year of seminary, Glen Davis, then moderator of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada met with candidates for ministry and asked why we were pursuing a call to ministry. He pointed out that everywhere you turn; you see and are told that the church is dying. Serving as a minister means serving a congregation – it means that at some level you believe in the church. But being the church is not cool.

It is not difficult to find reasons to dismiss the church, to be disappointed in the church, to get up and leave. Tops on most people's list are gross hypocrisy and intolerance. We know that in the name of God's love Christians slaughtered Muslims during the Crusades, Jews during the Holocaust and First Nations people throughout the world in the name of colonization and progress. We have humiliated and exploited slaves, women, gays – anyone who is different and threatening.

Church history is filled with barbaric episodes of the way Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians have treated each other. It is a difficult and troubling thing to recall and reflect upon during this *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. We cannot deny or escape the fervent and sadistic cruelty Christians have, and in many cases, continue to unleash on each other. In the Presbyterian tradition, consider John Calvin and his reforms in Geneva. Despite his many gifts and wonderful contributions to the church, Calvin condemned those with doctrinal differences to horrible deaths. Most notable is Michael Servetus who questioned the doctrine of the Trinity. Under Calvin's direction he was burned at the stake in October 1553.

People less aware of our violent past often reject the church because they find it irrelevant, mediocre, boring or perfunctory. For some, Christians are people who have hounded heretics, burned books, defended the dubious, and supported pseudo-science. Christians and church are definitely not cool!

And people say – *yes, not any more, but I remember when...* – or *yes, let's try to emulate the purity and holiness of the first Christians...* But the epistle for this week from 1 Corinthians 1: 1–9 disabuses us of that romantic fallacy in a flash.

Paul originally comes to Corinth after a debacle in Athens where he has been literally laughed out of town by the Board of Philosophers – the ones who grant licenses to teach. Discouraged, he travels about 60 miles away to the city of Corinth. Although he expects to remain only a few days, he proves such a success that his visit lasts 18 months. It comes to a dramatic conclusion when several members of the local Synagogue drag Paul before a judge. Gallio, the magistrate, refuses to listen to the case so the people beat up a leader of the Synagogue, Sosthenes. We don't know much about Sosthenes except for the mention of him in Acts, chapter 18 and here in Paul's greeting today. Paul accords him the title of brother – his assistant and perhaps the scribe to whom Paul dictates the letter that we begin this morning.

Paul knew these people only too well. In the two letters to the believers at Corinth that have survived in our Bible, Paul addresses a series of ugly issues – sectarian divisions (where each group claimed to be more spiritual than everyone else), boasting about incest, lawsuits between fellow Christians, eating food that had been sacrificed to pagan idols, disarray in worship services, and predatory pseudo-preachers.

The church of today may have its problems and certainly we have a checkered past but from what we read in scripture the churches of the first believers were uncomfortably similar to our own in their dysfunction.

The letter is addressed to *the church of God that is in Corinth* – the people of God. It expresses how Paul sees the company of believers – set apart by God for a divinely appointed vocation. Remember what we learned last week about vocation? *It is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but are 'called forth' to a divine purpose.*

Paul describes this group as *sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints* even though his letter is to confront them problems that plague them. Paul sees his apostolic ministry as a calling, as a binding request from God. Divine will covers the initial calling and his entire ministry.

Their being sanctified and called saints does not imply moral perfection. It means that they have responded to the gospel in such a way that their lives can never be the same. To *call on the name of the Lord* as Paul uses the phrase here has the sense of confessing Jesus as Lord, not simply praying to him.

Paul writes his letter to the church – called and sanctified. He writes to people who confess Jesus as Lord. He writes to an assembly of people in conflict with one another, behaving at odds with the teaching of Jesus, claiming the resurrection while living as they choose. This is the church. So why bother?

That is what Glen Davis was asking too, I think – why bother with the church? Why not just believe and follow Jesus without the church? Have you ever asked that question? The thing is that despite our hypocrisy, mediocrity, and the futility of finding a church that fulfills our romantic notions of purity and contentment every many people are in church each Sunday. Despite the difficulties and disappointments many of us together continue to serve and to thrive as church because we continue to have faith in God and the Gospel.

That faith helps us remember that the reign and realm of God's kingdom is not identical with the institutional church. At its best, the church mediates and points to the divine, but at times God works beyond and in spite of the church. Jesus reminded us of this when he compared God's kingdom to a fish net that trawls through the ocean, catching both the good and the bad, or to wheat and tares currently entangled together. Even within the inner circle of Jesus' followers there were the traitor Judas and the betrayer Peter.

Whatever its shortcomings we experience much good within the church – couples working to hold their marriages together, children and young adults learning to be good citizens, generosity toward and concern for the poor, compassionate visitors to those unable to attend worship due to various infirmities, efforts at building community in an otherwise individualistic society, adoption of orphans and outreach to victims of HIV/AIDS through projects like Watoto, building schools, hospitals and a future in many places throughout the world by supporting the work of Presbyterian World Service and Development and Presbyterians Sharing.... This list is as long as the one of atrocities. Focusing only on our faults distorts the true image of the church.

The church is God's ordained human institution where God seeks to do divine work. As we place ourselves within the community of faith Paul tells us we are among *those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints*. Even though it may be thick with flaws, we are called to be here and to receive the grace God offers. In her memoirs, *Ordinary Time*, Nancy Mairs writes that she moved beyond her lapsed faith and returned to church, even though she still had many questions, so that she could *prepare a space into which belief could flood*. Perhaps healthy faith results from rather than precedes fidelity to the church.

Most of us likely come to church out of a deep sense of our own need. Being a Christian is one of the few things in life that you cannot do alone. The church, however imperfect, welcomes each one of us – each imperfect self with our deeply imperfect faith.

We should never turn a blind eye to church faults and failure. Rather, we should name them, own up to them, repent of them, and do what we can to correct them. Losing our illusions about church is a necessary and good thing. Church is not cool and maybe that's okay.

We are church. We gather to address God and to be addressed by God. The promise is that where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, he will be present with us.

We are called. We stand as God's peculiar people – loved by God because of God's mercy and grace.

We are sanctified. We are made holy – not pure and perfect by striving to obey commandments, being moral and doing good works – sanctified by God's gift.

We are not cool and we are not the people we may wish to be. **We are the church – called and sanctified.**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**