

“A Radical Word and a Word of Hope”

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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At first glance, the opening verses of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians read like a basic address. “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus... to the church of God that is in Corinth... Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...” Yes, yes, we’ve heard it all before; it’s Paul’s ways of saying, “Dear Corinthians,” with a little flowery preacher talk thrown in... or so it seems.

But upon closer examination, these verses contain one of the most radical statements Paul ever makes. He refers to the recipients of this letter not just as “the church of God that is in Corinth,” but as, “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,” that is, “those who are holy, those who have been set apart.” And then, he goes on to say that he gives thanks to God always for this church.

Now, if we didn’t know anything about this church, this wouldn’t seem unusual, but we do know a great deal. This is the church where some people think their gifts are more important than anyone else’s, and thus there is conflict and hostility. This is the church where there are all sorts of inappropriate relationships. This is the church where even at the love feast connected to communion, some people eat so much that others have nothing to eat and some drink so much of the wine that they get drunk! And Paul says *these people* are sanctified?

This letter contains some of Paul’s finest writing – about love in the 13th chapter and about resurrection in the 15th – as well as some of his most troublesome writing – about marriage in chapter 7 and the role of women in chapter 14. But what he says here about the church being sanctified is radical. He does say in his second letter to this church that the gospel is a treasure in a clay jars (2 Corinthians 4:7), but this is putting an exclamation mark on the claim. To call these people holy is a radical statement... and a word of hope for us. For if the Corinthians are worthy of such praise, perhaps God can see something good in us.

Now, I refer here not just to “us” as individuals and members of First Baptist Church, but the church as a whole in our culture. We all have our flaws as individuals, our dark side, whether we acknowledge it or not. And our church, with all its strengths, has struggles as well. But the church in our culture has a long history of being on the wrong side of issues, following the culture rather than leading, and being so consumed by self-interest as to not resemble the Lord we follow, the Christ who emptied himself of all self-interest and gave his life for us.

Rather than passionately engaging in evangelism, what most American churches do is swop sheep and then gloat over the sheep we have pulled into our fold and wring our hands over those who have wandered to another. Rather than deepening our bonds to Christ and each other as a way of building the beloved community, we constantly find things to disagree about and allow these disagreements to distance us from Christ and each other. Rather than being focused on the significant needs of the world around us – like poverty, violence and racial division – we spend most of our time fussing over how we do various aspects of church and who gets to decide what.

Consider just one example this weekend when our nation reflects on the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - how faithful has the church been to Christ in matters of race? Racism is the central sin of our nation, a repugnant stain on our rich heritage as a democracy. It began with the twin evils of slavery and mistreatment of native peoples, persevered through the years of Jim Crow and continues in more subtle forms even after civil rights legislation. Even the election and re-election of an African-American president did not resolve all the issues. In fact, there seems to be more tension and division, particularly between some minority communities and law enforcement.

Where has the church been in this longstanding struggle? While there have been notable exceptions, especially within predominately African-American churches, where we have been is mostly silent, absent, on the sidelines, or at best late the party.

For example, in 1995 the Southern Baptist Convention apologized for its complicity with slavery. In 1995! As many of you know, the SBC was formed in 1845 in response to the question of whether slave

owners could be missionaries. Baptists in the north, who did not own slaves, said “no” while Baptists in the south, who did, said “yes.” Race, culture and economic realities were involved, but slavery was slavery. We endorsed it in 1845 and did not repent until 1995, 150 years later!

There were southerners who rose above the thinking of the time and realized that loyalty to Christ demanded a different way of living wherein all of God’s children are treated with dignity and respect. But they were few in number and not just in the 19th century. And this is just one example of where the church has fallen short of the mark.

Yet, as the Apostle Paul addresses the church in Corinth, with all its flaws, as those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, and gives thanks for them, we are affirmed as worthy of God’s initiatives of love even with all our shortcomings. This is a word of hope for us, a radical statement and a word of hope.

But what is the basis of this hope? How can Paul affirm the Corinthians and how might we merit such consideration? Well, what does Paul say? “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus...” Because of the grace of God in Christ Jesus... It’s not really about the Corinthians, it’s about God. It’s not about anything the people have done, it’s about what God has done in Christ. Such is the case for us.

Consider the things that matter most in our lives – the people we know and love, the work we do, the relationship we have with God, the health we experience, the blessings we know in this church. How many of these things do we achieve or experience on our own? Even if our effort is required, we all experience a lot of grace along the way, blessings we neither generate nor deserve. Grace defines our individual lives and our shared life as a church, but in this nation of rugged individualism and independence, we are sorely tempted to forget this.

In good times, in times of growth and relative ease, we are tempted to forget about grace and think we are doing well as a church because we are so smart or noble. The reality is that good times are a function of many things, most of which are beyond our control - cultural shifts, renewed interests in matters of faith and population growth, not to

mention pure, dumb luck! The only constant in such times is grace, the grace of God we know in Christ. This is the very reason the church exists, the only reason we are in good standing with God, the best thing we have to share with the world, and we must not forget it!

But we are also tempted to forget about grace in times of struggle and on these occasions the response is not a misplaced sense of pride but an unnecessary fear that all is lost. We worry about all the cultural shifts going on around us, we worry about the decline in the percentage of people going to any church, not just our church, on any given Sunday. We worry about whether we are doing all we can and should to respond, and wanting to do our best is a good thing. There are genuine concerns. It's just that the level of anxiety we feel reveals a lack of faith.

A very long time ago, a young ministerial student expressed grave concern for the future of the church, naming specific issues of the day and how the church was responding or failing to respond. His wise old professor calmly replied, "Son, if it were up to people, the church would have died a long time ago. But it's not up to people, it's up to God."

Indeed! In every generation, there are some who think the church is doomed for various reasons inside and outside the church. But whether our assessments and critiques are accurate or not, the church is not finished just because we face some new challenge. The church isn't finished so long as God hasn't given up on it. And the truth is God continues to work through flawed people and flawed churches because these are the only kind of people and churches there are.

The key is that we allow God's grace to make us better. Grace is not cause for complacency, but rather motivation to grow and the means as well. Paul says the grace of God in Christ Jesus has enriched the Corinthians in every way. It may not have made them perfect, but it has made them better and will continue to do so throughout their lives.

So it goes for us if we allow God's grace to work within us. We may not be all that we should be, much less perfect. At any point on our journey, we are still works in progress, but we are in progress, ever growing in response to grace. An old saying puts it this way. "I'm not what I ought to be, and I'm not what I'm going to be, but thank God I'm

not what I used to be!” This is true for all of us today and every day and this is true for the church, our church and the church universal.

So, what might this mean for the church in our culture today? In matters of race, we are not where we ought to be nor are we where we are going to be, but we are not, thank God, where we used to be! We have made progress in terms of legislation and human relationships. To deny this reality is not only inaccurate, it is self-defeating. The best way to move forward is to build on our successes.

But there is room to move forward and First Baptist Raleigh is in a unique position to offer leadership in this realm because of our beginning as a biracial church, our partnerships over the past 50 years and the diversity that exists within each half of First Baptist Church today. That we still meet at two locations remains a significant footnote on our shared identity, but we have much to build upon going forward.

For example, how might we create space for conversation about the relationship between certain parts of our community and law enforcement? How might we create space for conversation about the racial disparities that still exist in our criminal justice system? How might we begin a conversation about educational and economic opportunities and how these still vary as a function of race? How might we create space to get to know each other as human beings at a deeper level? We are trying to reschedule the play *Defamation* which Hurricane Matthew postponed, but what other initiatives might we take?

In regard to the church’s evangelical calling, how might we work with other downtown churches to develop strategies of connecting with the rapidly growing number of people with deep spiritual needs, but great skepticism about institutional religion? We have much to build on, we have great relationships among the downtown churches. Can we find a way to get past our parochial institutional allegiances and get caught up in the reign of God? Can we demonstrate with our actions that we really do care more about the spiritual welfare of others than whether they sit on our pew, worship our way and donate to our cause?

I have named just two areas in which the church is called to grow, two very different areas and we may feel like these are not our areas, we don’t have the abilities to make a difference in these realms. But before

we hide behind this seemingly plausible excuse, I would have us return to Paul's letter to the Corinthians. What does he say? "In every way you have been enriched in (Christ Jesus) in speech and knowledge of every kind..." but then, he goes on to add, "so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul is setting the stage for what he will say later. Every gift you have comes from God and is needed by the church; so, there is no place for arrogance. But he is also saying the church has been given the gifts it needs. "So that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift..." God has not called them to do something they are unequipped to do.

Nor has God called us to anything we are unequipped to do. If there is needful work for the church to do, in the realm of evangelism or racial reconciliation or any other realm, we have the gifts to do it. That too is a radical word and a word of hope for the church today.

Three decades ago a Baptist church in rural North Carolina held a Vacation Bible School. A teenage girl who had not been in church came and made a profession of faith at the end of the week. It was cause for excitement until the pastor presented her to the church on Sunday. About half of the members voted "no" when asked to welcome her into the church. Why would they do that? Because of the color of her skin. The church was white; she was of a mixed racial background.

The pastor and a few church leaders were so disgusted that they left and started a new church, baptizing this girl as their first new believer. The church welcomed people of all races, especially those of mixed racial background because all three racial groups – white, black and Native American – shunned people who married across racial lines. They named the church Trinity Baptist Church for the three racial groups which formed it. It became a place of welcome and inspiration.

Such is the nature of the church in our time and all times. It is flawed, terribly flawed. We get some things so badly wrong that we wonder when God is going to give up. But then, because of God's grace, we get something so right that it astonishes us. The gospel is a treasure in clay jars. "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus..." Amazing, radical and hopeful!