

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Love Letters

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True story. On New Years Day, I connected with a friend I've known for most of my adult life. She's curious. A lawyer by education and profession, she's tenacious. She listens. She faithfully attends church, sings in her choir, and gives generously. She parses the words in scripture and sermon to understand. She recognizes the profound impact of words to shape belief and actions.

When she joined a pilgrimage I led in the Holy Land to walk through Galilee, I recall how we both felt transformed by walking where Jesus walked.

That afternoon, she complained about THE CHURCH. Even though I am a friend, an occupational hazard of being a pastor is the occasional turn of duty in THE COMPLAINTS DEPARTMENT.

Those of us who wear a clergy collar seem to be accountable to answer for THE CHURCH about something that occurred decades or centuries ago or in another denomination.

Her opening salvo: "Why don't we stand for Paul in worship?"

(Many denominations will read a variety of scripture passages in worship and ask the congregation to stand when proclaiming the gospel.)

She's heard Paul's writings most of her life and wanted to know "why don't we give him the honor of standing." Furthermore, (her lawyer voice took over) why don't you call it 'The Gospel of Paul'?"

Oh, where to start with an answer? Remember, I'm in THE COMPLAINTS DEPARTMENT and she's ready to cross-examine me.

I started quietly: "Paul wrote *letters* to churches. Paul never wrote a *gospel*. They are different genres."

She paused.

I continued, "Paul doesn't write about what Jesus did, who he healed, nor repeats any of his parables. He makes no mention of Jesus' birth or family. Paul only quotes Jesus' words at the communion table when we break the bread and pour the cup."

She continued to listen.

"Paul's letters tackled the particular and universal challenges of being the church...in Galatia, Thessalonica, and Corinth. These letters teach us who we are as the church ***because of what God did for us through Christ.***"

She turned back to watching the Rose Parade and I thought of calling her pastor to be ready when she shows up at his office.

Our sermon series asks: what are we here for? What are we to believe about ourselves and one another? What does this belief call us to do?

Paul's letter to the church of Corinth provides answers.

Dear God, we come with nagging questions about how to live today.

Some people tell us to be quiet, to keep the peace, to stay out of the way.

*Silence those voices that distract us you and your holy word.
Startle us with the truth who we are because of the gifts you give
to us through Christ Jesus. Amen.*

1 Corinthians 1

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,² 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:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—⁷so that you are not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose.

Today, when we write a letter, we list a street address, city, and zip, author's title and organization's name. These details alert the recipient for whatever message it conveys.

Paul's letter begins in the typical style of one written in the first century.

He identifies himself by name along with a companion, Sosthenes. Period.

But, he neglects to mention his family lineage, pedigree as an educated Jew, nor city of origin, details to common at the time to assert credibility. He writes as "an apostle of Christ Jesus" who ministers as one "called by the will of God."

The *send to* part of this letter identifies the recipients as those "called to be saints" at the church in Corinth. Paul never uses the singular form of "saint." All saints share a common gift and share a common vocation.

In a few words, Paul deftly reminds the people in Corinth there is no such thing as a lone-ranger as a follower of Christ. Their faith binds them together.

He expands their church beyond a particular town with "together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Just as there are no lone rangers within a church, the church in Corinth is held within the universal church.

Before he gets to the meat of the letter, he establishes this truth, and no criticism undermines it: God calls them, each of them, to be united in Christ with believers in every time and place.

Then, he turns to the heart of the letter ... Now I appeal to you...that all of you be in agreement and that there be no

divisions and be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose.

Like all fledgling churches of the time, the church of Corinth pioneered the faith begun by Jesus, who knit together people despite their diversity. This inclusiveness both launched Jesus' ministry and got him in trouble. Previously religions relied upon homogeneity, limited to one tribe, one ethnicity, one economic group, included those from a common lineage and excluded those different.

The church in Corinth that Paul tended included liberals and conservatives and moderates and fundamentalists, Jewish and Gentile believers, and people from the East and people of color from the south. After he left, the little church began to fracture at the foundation. People argued about everything.

They bickered about the table, treating this sacred meal of unity as a common feast. They discriminated against one another by what they wore, what they did, and their God-given talents.

Even though he called out faults undeniably within the church in Corinth, this letter became widely circulated among all the cities...because of the common tendency of all humans towards self-interest.

The heart of Paul's argument— a basic tenet of Christian faith—is that diversity is God's idea. It is not a nuisance to be overcome or a problem to be solved.

Diversity is part and parcel of God's good creation. Diversity is good. It is rooted in the very character of God.

And so to deny it, to treat people differently, to do violence to people, to oppress, on the basis of their race, is not simply an affront; it is a denial of the reality of God.

Another disciple of the Christian faith, who wrote life-changing letters, is the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Like Paul, King also spent many hours in what he describes as the “sacrament of imprisonment” from the numerous times he was jailed.

In the early months of 1963, there were counties in Alabama in which the vast majority of citizens were Black, but not a single Black person was registered to vote. Throughout the state, “Colored” and “White Only” signs adorned restaurants, theaters, bus stations, public toilets, and drinking fountains.

Civil rights advocates asked the merchants of Birmingham to remove the signs and restrictions. They promised and then broke those promises. King applied for a parade permit to protest. It was denied.

Blacks of Alabama and whites from across the country gathered and marched in solidarity. Birmingham’s Director of Public Safety, Bull Connor, arrested King and others.

While languishing in prison, King received a letter from eight prominent ministers of white Birmingham churches, who presented themselves as “liberals.” While they *understood* his position and ultimately agreed that all Americans, ought to have equal rights and equal opportunity, couldn’t *he wait a little*, be patient.

They objected to public demonstrations because demonstrations made people *uncomfortable*. They objected to

people outside of Alabama coming in and stirring up trouble; “outside agitators” they called them.

Sitting in his jail cell, with lots of time to think, King wrote a reply, a long letter. King addressed the letter: “My dear fellow clergy men” and provides a paragraph of his credentials and connections to Alabama. Even though King rarely defended his work, he wrote to these clergy since “I feel that you are men of genuine good will.”

He mailed his letter to those pastors and sent copies to national Christian magazines.

His “Letter from Birmingham Jail” has become a classic in American history and serves as a model for what it means to be a Christian, united in God across all churches, cities, time, and place.

King’s letter quotes their shared Christian faith. He also argues with the wisdom of Socrates, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Jefferson, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and T. S. Eliot, ethicists and theologians who span the ages. Patiently he answers his critics, his fellow clergy, point by point.

Outside agitators? King answered, “Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Why demonstrate? Isn’t negotiation better they asked? King explained that negotiations don’t work. The Whites proved that. Promises are not kept. Tension is necessary for growth in any avenue of life.

Isn't it inappropriate for a minister of the gospel to break the law? They should have known better than to ask that. Starting with the prophets of Israel, to Jesus and St. Paul, both arrested and executed by the state, to Christians in Nazi Germany, and Hungarian Freedom Fighters, King schooled his brother clergy in the long and honorable tradition of civil disobedience. He closes with a quote from St. Augustine, "An unjust law is no law at all."

For those moderate clergy, his words cut to the heart like a scalpel. He questioned if they compromised their form of religion to support the status quo and save their version of the nation.

King concludes of shedding tears of love for there can be "no disappointment where there is not deep love."

King was released and civil disobedience continued.

A year later, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In his acceptance speech, he said

"To achieve peace, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which *rejects* revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love."¹

What are we here for – you and me? Jesus commands us to love one another.

What are we here for – the church? Paul writes ...the church is here to overcome our tendency to divide by the way society

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, Ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

tells us to oppose one another. God unites our diversity in the church through the gift of love.

Later in the letter Paul writes; “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Maybe we should stand up for Paul ... and I do not mean when we read his words in worship. We should stand up *because* of Paul.

Paul wants us to stand up for unity of the church. To stand for the cause of justice. Paul wants us to stand up for the rights of those long neglected and pushed aside. Paul wants us to stand up for the love of God.

Love letters come from the heart of love and call us to do the brave work of loving. Let me close with a letter posted from the Rev. Dr. Mark Sandlin last week on his social media feed ... It too is a love letter.

We were taught to pray for peace.
For calm.
For things to settle down.
And honestly,
sometimes that's what we want too.
But Love keeps showing up
right where things are messy.

Right where nothing is settled.
Right where silence would be easier.
Love keeps reminding us
that peace isn't the same thing as quiet.
And harmony isn't faithful
if it only works for the people already comfortable.

So today,
we pray a little differently.
Where there is hatred,
don't let us rush past it
with nice words or nervous smiles.
Let Love disturb us.

Where we've gone along to get along,
interrupt us.
Where tradition matters more to us
than actual human lives,
and we benefit from that,
even quietly,
don't let us pretend we don't notice.

Love keeps whispering,
and sometimes shouting,
Because peace without justice
isn't peace.
It's just harm
with better manners.
Let Love disturb us.



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