

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 49:1-7
SECOND LESSON: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9
January 19, 2020

“God Is Faithful”
Sermon ©Lisa C. Farrell

We’ve all heard the marketing slogan, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Of course what generally stays in Vegas is all your money. It’s been said that the best way to leave Las Vegas with a small fortune is to arrive with a large one. But in order to keep the customers coming and handing over their money, Vegas has made a name for itself as “sin city” promising total freedom from all normal moral restrictions. It’s not the first city to have built an economy on gambling, prostitution and excess, however. Welcome to Corinth. We’re going to spend some time there for the next five weeks. *It’s a very interesting place!*

You know it’s bad when the name of your city is a euphemism for the most intimate form of sexual relations between a man and a woman. To be doing the Corinthian is the best paraphrase I can come up with for a Greek word I have a lot of trouble pronouncing--**korinthiazesthai**. Admittedly, this was in the heyday of the city’s Greek past when the Temple of Aphrodite dominated the city with its over a thousand cult prostitutes. The city of Corinth was once a Greek powerhouse of trade, international commerce, and notoriously scandalous lifestyle until the Romans crushed it in 146 BCE. Life in Corinth after that point limped on in ruins with a tiny population until 44 BCE when Julius Caesar decided to rebuild it, for the very good reason of its strategic location. Corinth is located on what is known as an isthmus, a narrow strip of land only 4 miles wide. Goods could be brought to a port on one side and ships transported over land by road to the other side. The Corinthians had been unsuccessful at building a canal but did build a stone roadway designed for easy transport. It took the invention of dynamite in the 19th century to build the canal. While hauling things by road sounds like an incredible pain to us, we need to consider that the ships were relatively small and the journey all the way around was extremely treacherous. It was worth it. By the time Paul arrived in Corinth in the middle of the 1st century Corinth was once more a bustling metropolis. The Romans had resettled it with freed slaves and retired army officers, and Corinth was filled with a multitude of nations and languages, although Latin and Greek dominated. Aphrodite had been joined by gods and goddesses far and wide, and the city did a brisk business in prostitution and gambling. It was the 5th largest city in the Empire with a population of about 200,000.

Paul came to Corinth because it was a major center of trade. He began by preaching in the synagogues until he was thrown out of them. Then he preached to the Gentiles. The church at Corinth did have some Jewish believers, but most of it was made up of Gentile converts. The majority was

socially humble in background. Some were even slaves. But there were those who were more well to do. We do know from some of the conflict that erupted that tensions existed between rich and poor. While it's hard to know how large this congregation was, scholars estimate anywhere between 40 and 150, so basically the size of your average American congregation. They either met in believer's homes or rented halls. Private clubs and associations were common then and they often rented halls for meetings and meals.

Paul spent about 18 months in Corinth evangelizing and getting the church established before he left to go to Ephesus, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Galatia (Acts 18:18-23), but the fact that the majority of the members came from Gentile pagan backgrounds meant that they did not have a strong foundation in the faith. Many basic assumptions about what was right and wrong were different.

Here is what was "normal" in Corinth:

1. It was normal for men to visit prostitutes, temple prostitutes or just brothels, and not think anything about it. For them this did not constitute infidelity. *If their wives did it, that was another matter!*
2. It was normal for men to have sex with their slaves. Slaves could not object.
3. It was normal to go to court and sue people. This was a litigious society.
4. It was normal to take sides. Arguments and factions were common. This was a diverse society and as we well know, diversity does not always result in harmony. Often there are deep cultural biases at work.
5. It was normal to eat food offered to idols. Temples operated almost like restaurants do today.
6. It was normal to ignore the needs of the poor and be selfish about food and drink. Getting drunk was also not a problem, although being a drunk might be. That alcoholic uncle who shows up uninvited has never been popular.
7. It was normal to flaunt wealth.
8. It was normal to gamble, although that doesn't seem to have been an issue in the Corinthian Church.

The fact that the congregation at Corinth soon encountered difficulties is not surprising. When word reached Paul he had to respond. What we have as the First Letter to the Corinthians, however, is actually not the first letter. That letter was lost. This is Paul's follow-up letter. We might not realize it by just reading the introductory part of the letter that we read today, but Paul was about to confront a whole lot of crazy. He already knew all about it because word had gotten to him. **Keep these facts in mind when you hear his measured and kind introduction. This is what was happening:**

First, a prominent member of the church was shacking up with his step-mother. In that culture this was clearly understood to be incest. And people weren't even upset about it. We're not told where his father was.

In addition, some members were taking other members to court. They had an argument and they sued. It's what you did, right?

Also, there was a group of people running around who could speak in tongues who thought they were super-spiritual and better than everyone else, so blatant spiritual pride was rampant.

And last but not least, when they gathered as a whole for worship and shared communion they made it a party and the rich people brought a lot of food and wine with them, didn't share it with anyone else, and proceeded to get drunk. Life in the Corinthian congregation had become a bizarre mix of pseudo-spirituality and anything goes.

So how does Paul begin and what does he say? First he reminds them that he is an apostle. He has authority. He introduces himself as, "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." But after that he thanks God for them! He says, "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge." He goes on to note that they don't lack "any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed." Of course those who spoke in tongues would say that those who didn't were lacking. And finally Paul says— "He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Would we be thanking God for a church as messed up as this? Probably not. We'd be calling in the consultants and getting the Committee on Ministry at the Presbytery involved. But Paul evidently knew these people and cared about them. He knew that in addition to the mess there was also good there. He knew what their struggles were, and he wanted to remind them of what their strengths were. No matter what state we are in, God's grace is available to us.

We all screw up in life. And none of us want to admit it. We don't want our embarrassing failures paraded before others. We don't want our hidden flaws made public. And sometimes our sense of shame is so deep, that we don't even let God near, let alone anyone else. If we keep ourselves busy and we don't admit that there has ever been a problem, maybe it will just go away. Except that it doesn't.

The game was up with the Corinthians. The horse had left the gate. It was ALL out there. But Paul didn't condemn them or write them off, because God didn't condemn them or write them off. Yes, a few changes had to be made, and in some places in this letter he does do a little parental ranting and raving, but underneath it all there is love. This is the love we live in, and this is the love we offer each other. God is faithful. No matter what we have done or failed to do, God has called us into new life, and will supply us with everything we need to get there. Amen.

Isaiah 49:1-7

49 Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the Lord called me;

from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.
² He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
 in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
 he made me into a polished arrow
 and concealed me in his quiver.
³ He said to me, "You are my servant,
 Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."
⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain;
 I have spent my strength for nothing at all.
 Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand,
 and my reward is with my God."
⁵ And now the Lord says—
 he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
 to bring Jacob back to him
 and gather Israel to himself,
 for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord
 and my God has been my strength—
⁶ he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
 to restore the tribes of Jacob
 and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
 I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
 that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."
⁷ This is what the Lord says—
 the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—
 to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
 to the servant of rulers:
 "Kings will see you and stand up,
 princes will see and bow down,
 because of the Lord, who is faithful,
 the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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 in Corinth, to those sanctified in
 Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those
 everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and
 ours: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
⁴ I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ
 Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of
 speech and with all knowledge— ⁶ God thus confirming our testimony about
 Christ among you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly
 wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will also keep you firm to the
 end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is
 faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our
 Lord.