

Sermon: June 13, 2021 – 2 Corinthians 5: 6-17
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Occasionally, a Sunday Scripture from the Lectionary will sort of stand there, defiantly, as if to dare the preacher to say something about it. And occasionally I will look back at it with my shoulders in full shrug and reply, “like what?”

This week’s reading from Paul’s second letter to the Church at Corinth was like that – talking about faith and courage, life in the body vs. eternal life, seeking God’s favour without becoming boastful, and the newness of all creation in Christ. Having taken me on this circle tour of theology, daring me to say something, I was reminded that the Body of Christ is a big and varied entity; and knowing that many preachers and scholars have had similar stare-downs with scripture and are willing to share their learnings, I at least had a starting point.

Watch at <https://youtu.be/LSJ7BbiJbNA>

What I found were two very different yet complementary approaches to this roundabout piece of writing by the Apostle Paul. Both of them surmise that a big part of the reason Paul kind of rambles off in many directions here is that he was hurting, and needed, in writing, to defend himself. Reformed Church scholar Scott Hoezee approaches it this way:

“When we were younger, we perhaps naively thought that so long as we were sincere and well-intentioned then, even if we made mistakes... we could avoid creating any enemies, avoid having anyone who so disliked us as to avoid us in public even as they derided us in private. But then one day you wake up and suddenly realize that, as it turns out, you now have a small list of folks with whom your relationship... is ruptured. And it hurts.

“Paul knew what that felt like. He’d had a good experience in the city of Corinth. The church he planted was filled with people dear to his heart, and though the Corinthians were a feisty group loaded with potential problems, Paul loved them and, even after leaving Corinth, prayed for them every day. So how it must have hurt to learn that in Corinth his reputation has been shattered. After Paul’s departure some nay-sayers came to town and called Paul into question. They impugned Paul’s credentials, claiming he had no right to call himself an apostle. They alleged that Paul was a money-grubber and a charlatan whose motives were impure and whose so-called “gospel” was just so much hogwash and heresy. So in this second letter to the Corinthians Paul, with grit teeth sometimes and through tears at other times, has to defend himself.”

Those who came after Paul in Corinth mocked and made sport of him because in their estimation, he didn’t have the cut of a leader. Elsewhere in 2nd Corinthians, Paul speaks of a “thorn in the flesh” which seems to be a noticeable, physical thing. Did Paul have epilepsy, wonder some commentators? Did he stammer, was his vision so poor that he didn’t recognize people...what was it that made him an easy target of the cruel? This we do not know, but we do know that his chosen defense, at least in this letter, was to lift up his connection to Christ. If Paul has strength of any sort, it is because of the powerful presence of a God who went through the ultimate humiliation of crucifixion and emerged beyond that, a God whose love for the world and all who dwell therein will not be extinguished. In answer to his critics, Paul points to the intention of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, author of a new way... a new heaven... a new earth. Undoubtedly stung by his critics, and by friends in Corinth who were so easily swayed by the critics, Paul eventually changes the rules of engagement, and lifts up the hope that Jesus gives to anyone who has been unfairly challenged, denigrated, mocked. I hear these words from back then, and think of

our world circa 2016, and the ability of a mocking, mean-spirited person not just to run for President of the United States but to win, and Paul's important words ring true yet again. What the world sees as impressive, God sees as empty; what the world sees as broken, is where the Spirit starts its marvellous workings.

Paul, then, is scrambling after words in order to defend himself against these after-the-fact critics and bullies. But there's more to it than this.

While some of the criticism levelled at Paul was cruel and unfair, some of it was not unfair at all. If you remember, Paul started out as Saul, persecutor of the early Christians. Before his conversion experience he was one of the nastiest pieces of work a Christ-follower could encounter. And as much as we've all heard Jesus' words about forgiveness, we also know what it feels like in our guts to know we are around someone unsafe. Regardless of his big turn-around, Paul would carry with him a different kind of "thorn in his side" – his personal history of extremism and violence. Those who had been targeted and terrorized by him, or who had seen a family member subject to that, would have every reason to keep their distance. Anyone who has been targeted – be it a Residential School survivor, a concentration camp survivor, a victim of ethnic or religious or sexually-motivated hate crime – can tell you the importance of keeping safe in the presence of perpetrators.

Seminary Professor Jennifer Pietz puts it like so: "In 2nd Corinthians 5, Paul writes as one who has experienced the unsurpassable love of Christ that transformed him from a persecutor of the church into a servant of the gospel. When he confidently declares in verse 17 that, 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!', he is speaking out of his own experience into the lives of the Corinthian believers. This new birth is humanly impossible. It only occurs because Christ, fueled by divine love, took on the sin and death that alienates all people from God, who is the source of true life.... This love compels Paul and his co-workers to continue their ministry of reconciliation amidst ongoing persecution, suffering, and threat of death."

Paul knows first-hand, God's power to turn things around. And like him, people in our day whose lives have been seriously messed up by rage, or by bad choices, or by addiction, can tell us all about this. People who have broken trust, know also that even when one is forgiven, one remains accountable. God's love infuses all of creation and is more than capable of a re-build of a life tattered by broken relationships. People might have their suspicions of the person in the middle of this transformation, but the gracious, transformational power of God can accomplish great things through the least likely people.

So we have these two approaches: one talking about Paul having to defend him against those who are telling lies about him; one talking about Paul needing to defend himself against those who are telling the truth about what he had done. In reading these two approaches, coming from very different angles, it struck me as quite extraordinary that the next thing that both of them say, is pretty much the same thing.

In defending himself against these opponents, whether they were fairly or unfairly attacking him, Paul hearkens to the big thing that God was doing in Christ Jesus: the big re-set, the inverting of society, the reconciling power of death and resurrection making all things new – all things new. And rather than this big thing giving us an excuse to do nothing, well, I'll turn it over to Scott Hoezee again: "The result of this cosmic reconciliation is that we now look at everything differently. We look at everything and every **one** through the lens of reconciliation. We are ambassadors of reconciliation as we call others to believe in Jesus and so find themselves in a good relationship with God. But it's not just about the vertical

dimension between God and us. Being caught up in God's salvation changes everything on this human, horizontal plane, too."

If we believe that God's ultimate intention is toward peace, love and justice; if we believe that God is all about new life, new ways of being reconciled by grace whether we deserve it or not, then we need that gracious love to reshape our words and actions and priorities, and to re-set the horizon line we are heading towards. At this time of hopefulness, when we are not too far away from the day when we can step back into being physically present and socially interactive with one another, the Holy Spirit pauses us for a moment and asks us how we REALLY want things to go from here. Is the old normal, which served the privileged way better than it served the marginalized, really what we should aim for? – for unless we decide something else, it will reassert itself. After burning a lot less fossil fuels this past year, at least for travel, how will we relate to energy, renewable and non-renewable, once we can move around freely? Will our Church's old ways of relating to the community around us, really serve the fullness of what we are called to do and be in Christ's name? If we believe that God's deepest yearning is for life to be new and beautiful in its fairness and justice and love, what will our yearnings look like once this pandemic ends? Will we, too, yearn to be governed by love?

For these past fifteen months, it has felt like a big re-set is happening: in the way we view hygiene, in the way we approach social connection with others, in the way we understand the racial realities of our lives. These past fifteen days, we have been confronted with realities we'd been told before – the genocidal agenda of the Residential Schools, and the vehicular attack in London, Ontario – and this, too, challenges and calls us to a new way to live life in this land. These are uncomfortable, unsettling things and in their midst, is the Holy Spirit, tugging and confronting and encouraging. Right now in particular I would really like things to be easy and level and predictable, yet God is doing new things right now that require me to open myself to newness... and unfamiliarity... and fresh engagement with justice... and release of privilege. And knowing these things, we open ourselves to the grace and power of God, who sees new, life-affirming ways, and shakes us up enough to find that newness of life.

Over and over again, the Bible introduces us to people struggling with life, who eventually find that God can transform and re-align that struggle in remarkable ways. As you stay engaged with life, the easy things and the hard things, the places where you are well-supported and the places that feel all too solitary, may you meet God and God meet you, and newness emerge. Amen.

References cited:

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Pietz, Jennifer V. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11-2/commentary-on-2-corinthians-56-10-11-13-14-17-5>

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