

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

FAITH FOR AN UNTIDY WORLD

A sermon preached on January 20, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 *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 Lord¹ and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my¹ 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 -- ⁶ just as the testimony of¹ Christ has been strengthened among you -- ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual 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 him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

John 1:29-46 ²⁹ *The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."¹ ³⁵ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed¹). ⁴² He brought Simon¹ to*

Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter²). ⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

"I give thanks... because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him...so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift..." The Apostle Paul schmoozes the people at Corinthian with admiring, congratulatory words. Then he sets the hook asking why, being so gifted, they squander their time and energy in bickering and insulting one another.

The Corinthians are not the first, nor certainly the last, Christian community that couldn't quite connect their beliefs with their behavior. Their lives and the times they lived in were untidy, unruly, and frequently unpleasant. Sound familiar? Just three weeks ago a new year rolled in. As usual it was an occasion for looking back and looking ahead and at least considering the possibility that in the future we could correct what the past failed to make right. I look back upon my own life and find I'm of at least two minds about it. One side of my brain says I did the best I could under the circumstances. The other side counters with, "If that's the best you can do, you might as well cave in now and save the world a lot of trouble later on." So it goes.

This being a presidential election year we are getting a lot of "man / woman in the street" interviews about why a person prefers one candidate over another. Being myself a person of faith, I'm struck by how often those being interviewed make the faith of a presidential candidate the reason they support him or her. At the same time I'm often dismayed by the simple list these folks offer as signs of the candidate's faithfulness. I hear them speak of definitions of marriage as one sign, a position on abortion as another sign – and that's about it. Faith has been reduced to a stunted, squat little menu, and I find myself wondering how in the world faith ever got so simple? Where is justice, where is kindness and compassion, where is attention to the poor, where is the "good news," for that matter in these undersized lists?

I know...I get peevish. But I fail to understand Christians who speak as though faith is a matter of simply keeping a few rules or coming out on the acceptable side of a set of political causes. Please understand: I'm not suggesting there are no rules, only that it's far from that simple. And if faith – which is essentially a matter of trusting in the absence of certainty – can be reduced to rules, then what is there to trust? Obedience, not faith, becomes the issue.

This is why the Corinthians are so important to us in our time. They were a chaotic crew – bumptious, fractious, disorderly. Their lives were complex; they struggled with what it means to live faithfully and creatively in challenging and more disorderly times. They knew that life goes wacky sometimes and makes living by all the old accepted systems difficult.

As far as we know, Jesus grew up learning the Law, memorizing the Psalms, and practicing the rites and rituals of the Judaism of his youth. Yet, Judaism itself was

struggling to adapt to an increasingly diverse world. For seven hundred years before his birth, Palestine was ruled by non-Jewish foreigners. During his lifetime, Rome was in charge. His people had learned a long time ago that the old established assumptions about life under God needed to stretch to accommodate new realities.

And so we see in Jesus an astounding sympathy for the ambiguities of life, and a grand and loving ability to see how life's complexities can't be forced into neat, tidy, simple laws. We can tell from his encounters with the Temple officials that the time and place they were living in were vastly different from Moses' time when the laws were written – a fact that demanded a new, creative response to moral issues.

In our time we know that it isn't just the spiritual rules, but the physical rules that have changed as well – as have social and interpersonal relationships, understandings of power, society, and commerce. They have all become more fuzzy, malleable, and liquid than once assumed. Once upon a time, theologians – there were no scientists at the time – taught that we lived in a universe run like a clock precisely regulated by the finger of God. Once upon a time, Newton's theories were scientific gospel. Once upon a time some people believed in the superiority of white culture, the inferiority of women, and the sacrosanct changelessness of tribal society. No longer. What kind of faith fits us to live in such a world?

I am reminded of my third grade teacher. My classmates and I would be engaged in some juvenile mayhem, and she would chirp, "A place for everything and everything in its place!" A prim and proper lady, hair stretched back in a carefully-crafted bun, she taught in mottos. "Neatness counts; messiness subtracts!" she would remind us, insisting that the loops of our j's, t's, and s's should never breach the narrow blue lines of our paper. "Cleanliness is next to godliness," was the cadence to which we would march into the rest rooms after recess. "Draw within the lines," she insisted, stifling the creative artist in each of us.

Her name was Gardenia Teeters, and "Teeter's Truisms" still echo in memory, especially when I survey the clutter on my desk. "I'm an accumulator not a filer," I explained to a friend. "You're just messy," she said, and she's right, I guess. But I don't take that as an insult. Cleanliness and tidiness are very important in surgical wards and public rest rooms, but less so in fields of wild flowers or playgrounds. Order is vital in traffic signals, and precision should be a passion in airline maintenance and military marching bands. But snow flakes don't fall in rank and file, friends don't chat according to a script, and no sport can be played in lock step.

It is not cleanliness that is next to godliness, it is grace, something that doesn't always arrive clean and pure and on schedule. It suits grace fine to run about on the smudged and untidy legs of a child, to come filtered and patch-worked like sunlight through a forest, or be spoken haltingly through the tears of a friend. It suits grace best to address humanity through Jesus the Christ who disturbed the peace and disrupted the natural order of things and who was God's own redefinition: the new not the old, the surprising not the expected, grace not gravity.

A faith in Christ does not easily translate into a collection of rules and regulations. Indeed, in Jesus God took on the form of a complex human being, bearing within him the same kinds of contradictions and struggles we know in our own lives. In Jesus God was doing the new and surprising, not the fixed and expected. That's why so many didn't "get" him, and hung him on a cross instead of following him.

When God creates a river, it meanders its way to the sea; it is mankind who carves canals. This earth, God's garden, overgrows in profuse disorder; it is mankind who plants in rows. In Christ "there is no East or West, no North or South," there is "neither male nor female, slave nor free;" it is mankind which erects social boundaries of prejudice which separate one another in racial, sexual, economic, and nationalistic terms.

It is not God who seeks rigid control, but we who do. When we identify legalistic judgments with God, perhaps we are doing nothing more than projecting our own unholy rage for order and control upon others. Maybe we do this out of fear that if we don't maintain control, we will be lost. If we don't keep ourselves rigid, if we don't demonstrate to one another how capable and responsible we are, if we don't set rigorous tests for our spouse, our child, our friend to prove they love us and are worthy of our love, if we can't be in charge of our lives, surely everything will fall apart. And that dull thud we almost hear when we choose rigid order over God's surprise is grace skidding off our hard hearts and falling limp to the ground.

The great British theologian John Oman wrote that without faith in God's grace we "...walk in a narrow beaten path, with the whole vast horizon of life's possibilities hidden from our eyes...we remain deaf to life's calls and blind to its opportunities...(we) recognize no suffering which does not cry in our ears, and see no duty which does not point along the accepted, formulated track...the soul is lost which sees no visions and dreams no dreams of life's measureless possibilities."

A faith fit for these chaotic times will be a faith utterly dependent upon God's grace which forgives and restores and energizes believers for ministry in Christ's name. In the story of creation in Genesis, the Bible tells us that the spirit of God hovered over chaos. Why should we think that God has ceased hovering?

Into our untidy lives God comes, looks upon the harmful choices and painful discoveries we have made and announces, "You are forgiven." In the midst of the world's chaos God stands and announces, "I am making all things new." On these two foundations, expressed most completely in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, can a faith for an untidy life be built? God is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and God is also in Christ who is the shining, gracious path through the chaos calling us to set aside all fear and enter the cataract of grace which, if we can come out of hiding, will drench us with hope.