

2014_01_19 Epiphany 2
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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God Sends Greetings of Grace and Peace

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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

Wait a minute. Can I really say that? Who am I and who are you that I should bring greetings of grace and peace from God?

The same questions may be asked of any congregation. And I'm thinking of one congregation in particular. The congregation I'm thinking of was a large congregation; a large congregation filled with large problems. The members had become divided. Many didn't like the pastor, they thought he was dry, not as exciting as other pastors they had heard. There were quarrels and contentions. The congregation was divided.

There were moral problems, issues of sexual immorality, marriages that were falling apart. There were legal issues, Christians taking each other to court. Then there were doctrinal matters; some claimed the gospel gave them freedom to do and act however they wanted and others claimed there was no freedom at all so that even what you eat was a matter of conscience. Their worship services were best described as chaos – people coming to church drunk, a mess of different people sharing different ideas in different languages. And worst of all, there were some saying that Christ never actually rose from the dead – confusion about the gospel making faith itself useless and empty.

And now I ask you, if you were the pastor of this congregation, and you had to sit down to write a letter or an email to this congregation what would you say? Suppose you had to speak to them, addressing the whirlpool of issues just mentioned. Where would you begin?

The Apostle Paul had to write such a letter. He writes to a congregation struggling with these very problems. Over the course of the next month we'll be considering this letter in a series of sermons; it appears in your Bible with the title 1 Corinthians.

When Paul arrives at Corinth for the first time in A.D. 50 or 51, he finds a whirlpool of people and problems and teachings. He finds a city caught at the crossroads of popular cultural and commerce in the Roman Empire. Located on the narrow isthmus which

connects southern and central Greece, this port city was at a crossroads. It provided a shortcut for cargo traveling to and from Rome, and so brought through it every sort of character traveling to and from the eastern and western Mediterranean sea. This city had become a whirlpool of travelers, sailors, business men, artist, philosophers, and religions.

To quote John Mueller's book: *The Church at Corinth*: "Here the vice of the East and West met and clasped hands in the work of human degradation. Religion itself was turned into prostitution. The presiding deities were the sea-god Poseidon, in whose honor the Isthmian Games were held, and Aphrodite, whose beautiful temple crowned the Acro Corinthus, which towered above the city to a height of about two thousand feet. ... So vile was the debauchery perpetrated in the city that the verb *korinthiazesthai*, or to do a thing in 'Corinthians style,' became a synonym for the most vicious immorality. ... This gives us an idea of the conditions which Paul found when he entered upon his work at Corinth. The life of the Corinthians was utterly corrupt; and so was their philosophy. A prominent Biblical scholar remarks: 'Greek philosophy in its decay showed itself in endless discussion about words, – non-essentials, – a tendency to set intellectual above moral distinctions, and a denial of the future life for the sake of limited enjoyment of the present.'" Yes, this was the whirlpool which stirred the Corinthian congregation.

But Paul saw the city for something else, something deeper. He saw what this city had to offer and what God had to offer this city. He saw drowning souls in need of rescue; he saw the need for the message of Christ's resurrection to bring life to a dying culture; and he also saw the advantage this trade route would provide for the gospel to swiftly travel to and from all parts of the Asian world.

He experienced a city in need of an epiphany – a people in need of the revealing of God's Son. And so he worked fervently in this city for over a year and a half, proclaiming the foolish-but-powerful message that lives and changes lives in the preaching of Christ crucified – a rescue mission which would continue in the Apostle thoughts and prayers throughout the course of his earthly life.

Although his ministry would take him elsewhere, he thoughts and prayers would remain. Paul caught wind of the whirlpool of issues and sins that had begun swirling in the congregation since his departure. So he sits down to write. He sits down to write them a letter – a letter we know as Paul's first letter to the congregation at Corinth. And how should he greet them? How should he address this congregation caught at the crossroads? With all of these issues stirring in his mind, he sits down and writes:

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

¹ Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, ² To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, ⁵ that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, ⁶ even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷ so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Over the course of the next month we'll study this first epistle Paul wrote to Corinth. It will be for us our own epiphany as we witness how the fellowship of God Son is ours through the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead. A fellowship which joins us to these Christians in first century Corinth – as we read Paul himself addressing the letter: to all who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In a greeting of grace and peace, the faithfulness of God emerges right in the middle of the whirlpool which swirls around us. In the foolishness of this simple message of Christ crucified and risen, a troubled congregation is calmed, even as we are steadied today.

For we can see ourselves at a crossroads. We can see ourselves in a bit of a whirlpool here also – living here in the suburbs and outskirts of Chicago. There are many problems that swirl around and within our lives also.

Maybe you witness it at work... At work where the people you work in the midst of a mix of every sort. Every sort of character – from the atheist who argues that a Creator God is a fantasy to the dooms day cynic who is disrespectful, who lies and cheats to the immoral mouth who glamorizes sin and makes fun of you for not participating.

Maybe you witness it at home... Maybe violence and anger have simply become a way of life. You can't seem to find a way to settle disputes in the family. You have trouble dealing with emotional difficulties, so you either yell or storm off in silence. Every conversation seems to become a debate and every criticism makes you put up your dukes. Rather than seeing marriage and family in terms of Christ reconciling the Church; you see it all as a burden, an obligation, a lost cause, or something that will never be what it is supposed to. From your role as a parent to your calling as a child, you know things are not how they should be.

And then there is a chaos within... There are past sins which still bother you. You have a present struggle which you don't think you'll overcome. You know what you should be doing and thinking as a Christian, but you don't do or think these things. Instead you revert to the same old ways again. Problems have arisen that even have made you question God's goodness and you wonder if it is really worth being a Christian, wondering why you even come to church anymore.

It is possible for us to get caught up in this whirlpool we know as the 21st century. We turn on the TV in the evening and there it is – all around us; on the news; in sitcoms; in dramas. It might take a slightly different form or name, but we too know *korinthiazesthai* – we witness in the world around what it means to do a thing “Corinthian style.”

Yes, we are sinners, caught up in a whirlpool of problems and sins. What sort of greeting should we expect from God today? How should we expect God to address us, here, a gathering caught at a crossroads of different cultures, different ways of thinking, different backgrounds, different sins and weaknesses.

God sits down to write you a letter. He knows every sin. He knows every problem that you've brought into your own life or someone else's. And just when He has every right to address us with: “Wrath and punishment to you” – He instead writes a greeting filled with something else. God sits down to write you a letter, and as His Spirit takes up the hand of the Apostle Paul, He writes,

To all who in everyplace call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord ... Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

God sends you greetings of grace and peace! To people caught in a whirlpool of problems, Paul writes, grace and peace. Grace which means that through the sacrifice of His Son, God's undeserved, unmerited, unearned love is yours. And peace through the resurrection of His Son which means God has made all things well for you and your future with Him. Grace which means that God will keep you firm in Christ to the end. Peace which means that despite the influences at work, despite the family struggles at home, despite the guilt you feel within, God has reconciled your body and soul to Him and endeavors to keep you blameless in His grace and peace until the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:1–6 1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also glory in

tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. 6 For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

This is what Paul sees. But he must look beneath the surface. It is only by God's epiphany. That is, only by God's revealing does Paul see beneath those stirring waters of Corinth, something still, something calm, something lasting; he sees a deeper reality in you which is "the fellowship of God's Son." And this belongs to all who in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. That is, in every congregation – in this church, synod, in every church, synod where the name of our Lord is active and alive – despite the sloshing, swirling scene on the surface, Paul sees, beneath it all, within it all, a Savior.

It is an epiphany. And I see it too. I see it here beneath our sins, beneath the troubles we create and the problems we face. Look deeper with me. Look beyond the human weaknesses in the people that surround us. And Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Look deeper into that water. Look deeper with John the Baptist to see not just him who baptizes with water, but to see Him who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Yes, gaze into the font with me and see that those swirling waters have drowned your old man or woman and put to death the sins that so easily ensnare you. And see from the stillness a saint which rises forth.

Paul greets the saints – "those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." That is, to those who are made holy – truly set apart from sin and dedicated to God's holiness. This is not some sort of higher class of Christian. He does not strictly address monks, or nuns, or pastors. He addresses people with a mess of problems and sins, who have been called into the fellowship of God's Son. He addresses you; you who have risen from the swirling waters, baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Romans 6:3–6 Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

Epiphany is all about God revealing His Son. We read it in our Gospel text when John says "Behold the Lamb of God!" Epiphany is about saying: "Come and see!" And here in this fellowship of God's Son is where we come to see Jesus. Both in the message

proclaimed, in the Sacraments distributed, and also in our relationships with each other. Just look a little deeper. See in your own life a new man, a new woman coming forth who truly does live as Christ lives. Let words of grace and peace be the greeting which you extend in all you say and do.

Greet one another with grace and peace. We need it. We need that greeting from God. Despite the world which swirls around us, we need to hear from one another that God still greets us with grace and peace. So next time you greet someone, when you come home from work, when you send an email to another Christian – say something a little deeper, a little more meaningful, say “Grace and peace to you...” and know that it is ultimately your calling as a Christian to be a living epistle who from God to the world, an epistle which sends greetings of grace and peace.

Amen.