

January 9, 2021

And now for something completely different ...

1 Corinthians 1:1-17

Monty Python would suddenly change directions – *"And now for something completely different ..."* In a world of culture wars, political polarization, Covid polarization, and anger we need something completely different ... Carey Nieuwhof muses, *"Christians have been sucked into the nastiness, division, and partisanship along with everyone else. Often Christians aren't providing an alternative to the anger and outrage online, they're fueling it ... Some days, I've been upset, frustrated and lash out at people with my words and viewpoints too. But your friends are watching and listening, and so are unchurched people. Here's what's at stake: When Christians lose their minds, people lose their faith."*

"And now for something completely different ..." Our church. Jesus' church. Imagine a group of people united by our love for Jesus. In a fractured, frustrated, angry world, we love one another, forgive one another, share one another's burdens, serve one another, live in harmony with one another, build up one another, encourage one another, pray for one another, do good for one another, and care for one another.

We are not graduates of the same school, in the same profession, or united by our politics or opinions. In ordinary circumstances few of us would ever meet, let alone choose to spend time together. We are a multicultural, intergenerational, economically, socially, and politically diverse family. We model things more important than politics: love, forgiveness, grace, compassion. Why? Because we are all about **Jesus**. That is something completely different from any other organization in the world.

What is a church?

This morning we're beginning a series in 1 Corinthians: what – or who – is a church? In the Bible, church is not a building, though we may meet in a building. The church is not a service, though worship is central to the church's life. The church is not a club, though it is a loving family, a genuine community. The church is not a service organization, though it cares for people in need. The church is not even a mission, though mission is key to who we are.

In the Bible, the church is people – special people. Paul addresses his letter to the church in Corinth, to those, *"who have been called by God to be his own holy people. He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus."* We are people who *"call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1:2). We are something completely different. Let's unpack these phrases:

1. **The church is the people *of Jesus*.** In today's short reading, Paul mentions Jesus 14 times. What makes us a church is our common faith in **Jesus**, common commitment to **Jesus**, common desire to follow **Jesus**, and common goal to obey **Jesus**. The single thing that makes us ONE is a **Person: Jesus**. We are people

united by our love for **Jesus**. This is who we are – first, foremost, for all time. Everything else – our culture, ethnicity, occupation, background, politics, Covid opinions – are NOTHING compared to the new life we have through **Jesus** and in **Jesus**. Our hope, our peace, our love, and our joy are ONLY found in **Jesus**.

2. **The church is people of Jesus who are "called by God."** In Jewish faith, most people understood God as distant, intimidating, and impersonal. You related to Him, with fear and trembling, through rituals at the Temple. You brought offerings to give to God. You hoped if you gave enough, He would forgive you. If you were really brave, you dared to pray to God, hoping He might hear you, not zap you.

Now for something completely different. With the coming of Jesus, God calls out **to us**. He calls out that **He** loves us. He calls us to look at our lives and see who we are compared to who we could be. He calls us to come back to the One who wants only the best for us, back to a renewed, restored relationship with God Himself, with one another, and peace within ourselves. He calls us to repent, to change our ways. He now calls us His beloved, His redeemed, His forgiven ones. Through Jesus, God calls us His "*children*" – "*sons and daughters*" of our Heavenly Father (e.g. Matthew 5:45, John 1:12-13, Romans 8:14-21, etc.). Jesus calls us His "*friends*" (John 15:13-15). What does that kind of a relationship look like?

3. **The church is people of Jesus "called by God to be his own holy people; He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus."** Instead of us trying to make peace with God with **our gifts to HIM**, **God gives US** every imaginable good gift. With the coming of Jesus, the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus, He gives us Himself. "*For God so loved the world, He gave His own and only Son ...*"

He, Himself, comes among us. He understands what it's like to be human, with all its limitations, frustrations, ups and downs, joys and sorrows. Ultimately, through Jesus' death on the cross, Jesus takes upon Himself all our sin – the sins of the whole world. Through taking upon Himself the punishment we all deserve, God makes us His own holy people. God gives us the gift of forgiveness. God gives us a restored relationship with Himself. God gives us the gift of new life.

By means of Jesus' death and resurrection, God has made us holy. Now we are called by God to **BE** His own holy people. Let's be honest: being holy does not come naturally to most of us. At least not all the time. So Paul encourages us then, to be people who "***call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord***" (1:2).

- a. ***We call on Jesus.*** When life is a struggle – we call on Him. When life is a dream – we call on Him. When we need wisdom – we call on Him. When we need guidance – we call on Him. When we are celebrating – we call on Him. Paul refers to this as "praying continually" – recognizing that wherever we are, whatever we're doing, whatever our circumstances, in good and in tough times, we place our lives in God's hands, we trust in Him, we seek His counsel, we

follow His way (1Thessalonians 5:17).

- b. *We call **Jesus our "Lord."*** Paul's context is a master/slave world where your lord owns you, body, and soul. Your "lord" has absolute control over your life. Everything you have belongs to him; it is "yours" only by his grace. If your lord tells you to do something – anything – you do it. In our hyper-individualized, I'm-master-of-my-own-destiny culture, the concept of having such a "lord" is, frankly, offensive. I want **my** rights, **my** privileges, **my** goals, **my** dreams, **my** future, **my** likes and dislikes, **my** stuff, **my** opinions, **my** this, and **my** that.

Personally, I find this truth that Jesus is my **Lord** is a huge challenge. It means **my** life is not about **me**. It's not about **my** rights. It's not about **me** getting **my** way. It's not about **my** self-fulfilment. It's all about **Jesus**.

So, when Jesus, my Lord, tells me, *"Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Love your neighbour as yourself"* – I have to do that.

When Jesus, my Lord, says, *"Since God chose you to be the **holy** people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you ... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony"* – I have to do that (Colossians 3:12-14).

When Jesus, my Lord, says, *"Whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus"* – I have to do that (Colossians 3:17).

When Jesus, my Lord, says, *"Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone. See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people. Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus"* – I have to do that (1 Thessalonians 5:14-18).

It's not who you are yet, but who God sees you can be ...

Paul goes on, *"I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you now that you belong to Christ Jesus. Through him, God has enriched your church in every way ... Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns. God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord"* (1:4-9).

Paul is thankful the people of Jesus in Corinth have been blessed by God (1:4-5), have spiritual gifts (1:7), are strong in their faith (1:8) are holy and blameless in God's sight (1:8), and are partners with Jesus in being His Good News in the world (1:9).

The church in Corinth is not actually that wonderful. Although Paul is thankful for what they know, it's a church riddled with division, heresy, and major issues. Paul is thankful for their gifts, but they are abusing those gifts and stingy in their giving. Paul praises their strength but highlights serious conflicts within the body. This church is far from "free from all blame."

As Paul begins this letter, his focus, is that this church exists and has any blessings at all **only because they belong to Jesus** (1:4). Despite the church's obvious problems, Paul is thankful that Jesus is its heart and soul. Yes, it has lots of issues, but thank God it even exists. That's a miracle. It's a Jesus miracle. And through Jesus, there is amazing potential for this deeply troubled, deeply divided, church. With Jesus they can be so much more.

Some of us – every now and then – have been known to grumble and complain about our church. People in our church are not perfect (if only everyone were just like ... me). Some people are a bit stingy with their time, help, or finances. We have differences of opinion on things (if only everyone agreed ... with me).

Every church is less than perfect (a wise pundit said, if you find a perfect church, don't join it; it won't be perfect anymore 😊). But it is a miracle that this church even exists, isn't it? It's a miracle that that we ever came together. God looks at us and sees amazing potential – we have every spiritual gift we need (1:7); He will keep us strong (1:8); He forgives us and will hold us free from all blame even though we stumble and fail (1:8). Yes, we are a work in progress. But God is faithful – He will build His church in us and through us (in spite of us).

We live in a hurting, lost, confused, desperate world that needs something – Someone – completely different than the division and animosity we see around us. The world needs Jesus. We need the people of Jesus. We need the people of Jesus **to be** the people of Jesus, who call on Jesus as their Saviour, and who follow Jesus as their Lord.

The world needs us to model that, despite our differences on all sorts of things, we are one in JESUS. The One who unites us, Jesus, is so much BIGGER than anything that divides us. Other things – politics, opinions – just don't matter as much as does our faith in Jesus.

- We are so diverse. How can Jesus be the most important thing in my life, so those other things fade to the background? How can our church be a church centred on Jesus? How can we be all about Jesus? How can that make us one?
- We are people of Jesus, who call Jesus our Saviour **AND** choose to follow Him as our Lord. What does it actually mean for my life that Jesus is my Lord?
- Am I willing to let go of the reigns of my life, and allow **Jesus and His Word** to actually shape what I believe? How I live? How I love? How I forgive? How I relate to others within the church and the community?

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