

Reconciled in Christ

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on January 20, 2019

This morning we turn to the second sermon in our seven part sermon series on 2 Corinthians. Reviewing the background information, 2 Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul somewhere around 56 A.D., while he was in Macedonia, during his third missionary journey, approximately ten years before he was martyred. The letter he wrote was addressed to the church in the Greek cosmopolitan seaport city of Corinth, as well as to believers everywhere. Paul had planted the church in Corinth about five years earlier and had nurtured it for a period of eighteen months during his second missionary journey.

Being the founder of the church in Corinth, Paul was held in high esteem. However, in his absence, his authority and his teachings were being challenged by others in the congregation who had a different agenda. As a result, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to affirm the gospel that he had preached, and to put the church on notice that he was coming to visit them in person, bearing the authority and power of an apostle, for the purpose of putting God's house in order.

Quickly summarizing the entire letter, 2 Corinthians can be divided into four sections. In the first section, Paul gives an update on what has transpired in his life since their last communication. In the second section, Paul explains his actions in ministry. In the third section, Paul justifies the collection he initiated for the church in Jerusalem. In the fourth section, Paul authenticates his apostleship. Again, all this was written as part of a warning to the Corinthians that Paul was coming very soon in the authority and power of Christ to confront the false teachers who were leading the church astray.

And now, turning to today's reading, let us hear the Word of God as found in 2 Corinthians, chapter one, verses twelve through twenty two.

2 Corinthians 1:12-22

12 Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God - and all the more toward you. 13 For we write you nothing other than what you can read and also understand; I hope you will understand until the end - 14 as you have already understood us in part - that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast. 15 Since I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a double favor; 16 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judea. 17 Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I

make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? 18 As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been “Yes and No.” 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not “Yes and No”; but in him it is always “Yes.” 20 For in him every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.” For this reason it is through him that we say the “Amen,” to the glory of God. 21 But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, 22 by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.

In life, one of the greatest challenges we face, is interpersonal conflict. In our homes, we have battles between husbands and wives, between brothers and sisters, between parents and children. At school, conflict occurs as kids vie with each other to establish their place in the popularity pecking order. At work, conflict among employees and between the various levels of management is commonplace. In all areas of our lives we are exposed to interpersonal conflict.

In today’s Scripture reading, the Apostle Paul was addressing an interpersonal conflict he was having with the church in Corinth. Like most interpersonal conflicts, the issues he was addressing were complicated, dealing with them was messy, wisdom and patience were required, but, it needed to get done.

So, what was the conflict? As we noted in the introduction and in the first sermon in the series, the central problem that Paul addressed in his second letter to the Corinthians was the problem of false teachers. These false teachers were corrupting the doctrine that Paul had delivered to the church and they were advocating lifestyles that were contrary to the will of God.

While on the surface it would seem like an easy problem to fix, after all, all you had to do was reaffirm correct doctrine, remind the church of what it means to live a Godly life and issue a cease and desist order to the false teachers, in reality it was not so simple. As we discussed in the first sermon in this series, in all human problems there are spiritual forces at work that cannot be addressed through providing basic education. In other words, Satan and his legions don’t respond to public service announcements. So, sorry, no easy quick fix solution to this problem.

A second reason it would be difficult for Paul to address the false doctrines and the unbiblical lifestyles that were being promoted by the false teachers in Corinth was on account of people’s ego. After all, Satan does not have a monopoly on pride. As I learned in my social psychology class in university, there are three big rules that govern our interactions with others: we like to be liked, we like to be

right, and we like to be free. Notice how the ego is deeply connected to all three of these rules. Thus, as I learned in class, and as life experience amply demonstrates, when egos are challenged, sparks tend to fly, and things tend to not go so well.

Looking at the situation at a more personal level, we can see a third reason why it was difficult for Paul to resolve the problems created by false teachers in the church of Corinth. In dealing with the false teachers Paul experienced great distress because these were people that he knew and that he loved. They were also people who were loved and respected by the congregation in Corinth. And for all we know, they may have been great financial givers and volunteers within their faith community. It was not an easy situation to deal with.

Thus, in today's reading, which is yet another attempt to address the issue of false teachers, Paul was exercising great care in his choice of language. In fact, if you listen to the tone of today's reading, it almost sounds like Paul was walking on egg shells. If you read the text again, it may even remind you of delicate conversations that you have had to have in your life with family members, neighbours, co-workers, or even church members. Or perhaps if you have ever written a difficult letter, or an e-mail, and agonized over each word, and second guessed yourself over each paragraph you may sense some of that tension in the words we read this morning.

Again, dealing with this interpersonal conflict was not an easy task. And it was not a pleasant task. But, it had to be done. So, in today's reading, Paul begins by affirming his sincerity in his relations with the Corinthians. To pre-empt any suspicion, he declared that he had not exploited them or manipulated them, as would be expected from a false teacher. Rather, Paul tells them that his attitude towards them had been characterized by openness and selflessness. Furthermore, recognizing that their relationship had been damaged, Paul was seeking restoration to the point where both he and the Corinthians would admire each other and be proud of each other. This is the essence of verses twelve through fourteen.

From there, Paul described his previous plans to visit them. As is evident in the text, Paul was not able to fulfill his plan which caused great disappointment in the church. When I think on this section of the text, it makes me think of a child whose parent made them a promise which they then had to break because of a change in life circumstances. If you have ever been in this predicament, you know how heart wrenching it can be. Plans had to change. You know it. But, your child can't see it, no matter how many times you try to explain. What do you do? Sometimes it seems like you just can't win!

This is the impression I get when I read verses fifteen through nineteen. Circumstances had changed, Paul had to act in a manner that went contrary to expectations, but the Corinthians couldn't see the big picture and took things personally. What do you do?

In responding to this hurt, Paul offered words of consolation in verses twenty through twenty two of today's reading as he spoke about the good news of God's eternal promises that we can all count on to never be broken. As Paul writes: "For in Christ every one of God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason it is through him that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God. But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment."

In writing these words about God's redemptive faithfulness towards us, Paul also described his firm conviction for how the interpersonal conflict he was having with the Corinthian church would be solved. Even though there was a wedge that was being driven between them by spiritual forces, by ego, and by worldly thinking, Paul was certain that God would make a way.

In the midst of the challenges that were driving them apart, Paul was certain that God would bring them back together and complete the good work He had begun in their midst because they had been established in Christ and they were sealed by the Holy Spirit. This was the hope that Paul presented to the Corinthian church to encourage them in their time of division. This was this hope that compelled Paul to continue the work of healing and reconciliation. This was the hope that compelled Paul to persevere in his calling, even though the road was difficult to navigate.

And this is the hope that Paul offers to us today as we face conflict in our lives. So, if we find ourselves facing one of those difficult times of interpersonal conflict: whether it be in our homes, or at school, at work, in our community, or even at church, may we not be discouraged. May we not give up. For it is God who established us in Christ and has anointed us, by putting His seal on us and giving us His Spirit in our hearts as a first installment. And because we are in Christ, we will prevail. Because we are in Christ, we will overcome. Given this hope that we have, may we continue to persevere and may God use us as instruments in this world to build bridges, to bring peace, and to bring healing and reconciliation as we bear witness to the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. Amen.