

June 23, 2024 - 2 Corinthians 6:1-13 - Open Your Heart Series
“In Sorrow and In Rejoicing”

As I shared at the beginning of worship, we’re starting a new three-week worship series designed to help us answer the question: *How do we live our faith day to day?*

- Inspired by a few chapters in the New Testament epistle of 2 Corinthians, it is my hope this series will provide us guidance for our everyday lives, which, whether we like it or not, often includes conflict and disagreement.
- But I especially hope it provides us some guidance as we join with United Methodists all across the world as we learn to live into a new chapter as a denomination following the disaffiliations of 2023 and the actions of the 2024 General Conference to remove the exclusionary parts of the Book of Discipline and create a more inclusive and welcoming expression of the Methodist movement.

If you’ve been part of the UMC for a while then you know that for many years (decades really) we’ve been engaged in conflict over human sexuality - more particularly who has proper apostolic authority to serve as ordained or licensed ministers and who possesses the “right” way for us to offer Christ to the world

- While it may feel that we have finally settled the argument, an honest look tells us that we are only at the very beginning of living into what it means to be an inclusive and radically welcoming church.
- A great deal of harm has been done to our LGBTQIA2S+ siblings in Christ and while this decision is a huge step, it doesn’t repair all the sorrow and suffering that has occurred over the past 40+ years.
- And if you happen to be paying attention to the news coverage, or the social media chatter, then you know there are a lot of things being said about the UMC right now by those who

disagreed with the action to remove the restrictive language and grant the rite of ordination to all people regardless of sexual orientation.

- This can leave those of us who “stayed” and supported the action (or at least were able to abide with it even if not fully in agreement) feeling a little defensive.
- And when we get defensive, we’re not always the best at reflecting the values of Christian community that we’re called to offer each other in all seasons - whether sorrow-filled or joy-filled.

The truth is that while many of us are rejoicing at the General Conference decisions there’s also some who are experiencing sorrow as they see friends no longer be able to stay with the church they’ve been a part of for so long or lamenting that their disagreements over how we should be the church have caused harm to their relationships.

- It might be tempting, but I don’t think we can just move into a new future without acknowledging that we’ve covered some rough road together and have some real repair work to do in order to authentically engage our new reality as an inclusive church and re-engage ourselves in the shared ministry to which we’ve been called with *all* Christians - even those with whom we disagree.
- I realize that this might serve as one of those “preaching to the choir” sermons but I don’t think it ever hurts for us to check in and confirm that we’re on the right track and to do some self-reflection, particularly after challenging seasons in our life as a church.

To help us learn how to offer reconciliation and repair in the midst of a season of great change in the UMC, and to help challenge our assumptions about how to live our faith day to day (especially when it involves people with whom we don’t agree), I’m inviting us to turn

to a person experienced in dealing with church conflict: the apostle Paul.

To understand why he's a good candidate to guide us, allow me to offer a little context and background information before we engage our passage for today.

- After being one of the early church's most fervent opponents, Paul had a radical conversion experience and became one of the greatest evangelists for Christ, planting a number of churches throughout the Mediterranean.
- After establishing the church in Thessalonica, Paul and his co-workers (as he calls them), Timothy and Silvanus, arrived in Corinth and started once again with preaching the Good News and seeking to bring people to Christ.
- From the book of Acts, we know that Paul set up a side business to support himself and ended up working with a Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla who shared his profession and then partnered with him to plant the church in Corinth.
- After successfully planting it, Paul moved on to Ephesus to repeat the pattern and birth yet another church in the name of Christ.

After leaving Corinth, Paul corresponded frequently with the nascent church to offer encouragement and sound teachings, as well as to keep them focused on the mission of Christ in a socio-political climate that wasn't particularly friendly toward it.

- While we don't have any record of the letters that the church wrote *to* Paul, we do have what some of what Paul wrote *to them*.
- Though our Bible would have us think there were only two letters from Paul to the church (1st and 2nd Corinthians), these two books actually contain or refer to a total of *seven* different letters sent by the apostle to the church.

One theory holds that 2nd Corinthians was the 4th letter while another suggests that the mix of different styles and variety of elements probably indicates it's a combination of fragments of the extensive correspondence Paul had with the church after establishing it.

- But honestly, the number and sequence of the correspondence isn't all that crucial for what we're seeking to learn - we don't need to know either of those things in order to gain a greater understanding of how to live our faith day to day in the midst of complex conflict and cultures of Christian competition.

And that's because the fragments we do have, make it clear that the church in Corinth was really dealing with those types of issues and that Paul inserted himself right into the middle of the mess.

- Here's what happened: while in Ephesus, Paul received a report from Timothy informing him that Jewish-Christian missionaries ("super apostles" as Paul calls them) have come to Corinth and are opening criticizing Paul's teachings to the church and that some of the church members are starting to be swayed toward the false teachings which is causing conflict in the community and undermining the ministry Paul established there.
- In the hopes of fixing things, Paul goes back to Corinth, but things DO NOT go well - in his own words, shared in a later but missing letter he refers to as the "letter of tears", Paul describes the visit as "painful" because of how he was treated by a particular, unnamed person who disagreed with him and his way of doing ministry.

What we read today, is part of a letter wrote in an effort to both defend his and his co-workers' ministry *and* attempt reconciliation with the church *after* that visit.

- In other words, having been treated as though he's not an authority on following Jesus, he's basically written his own letter of recommendation to the church he himself planted but who has betrayed him and now questions his legitimacy as an apostle of Christ.
- As you can imagine, Paul's emotions are high as he defends himself against those who would reject his apostolic authority and disrespect his ministry to his face...
- but the stakes are also high - this nascent church is at risk of falling away from the true teachings of Christ and becoming embroiled in conflict and competition and, as we will see, Paul cares too much for them to let them go without a fight.

Because our reading today picked up in the middle of Paul's effort to defend himself and his co-workers whilst simultaneously calling the Corinthians back to the way of Christ, it's important that we go back to Chapter 5 Vs 20 so that we have in our heads that what Paul is exhorting the Corinthians to remember is that as disciples drawn together in the body of Christ they are ultimately *ambassadors* for Christ.

- They are called to view their ministry as he does his: embodying the reconciling work of Christ and serving as the presence of Christ for others in the world no matter what.
- So, with that ambassadorial metaphor in mind, let's turn to our passage and explore what Paul has to say to the Corinthians.

He begins his defense by urging them to *not* accept the grace of God in vain.

- Now, we're used to talking about grace as being something we *receive* from God and that is one of the truths of our faith.
- God gives us grace...but like any gift, it's not enough to simply receive it - we need to *do* something with it, we need to employ it as it's designed to be employed.

- And that's the issue that Paul has identified with the Corinthians - they have been given the grace of God, but they aren't putting it to use, and it shows.
- Instead of demonstrating the fruits of grace, they are struggling to get along with each other, touting their superiority over one another, and distorting the theology he taught them to support their wayward behavior.

So, when Paul exhorts them to not accept the grace of God in vain what he's essentially saying is "don't receive it and then do nothing with it like you've been doing" - put it to use and the fruits of doing so will be as obvious as the signs of *not* putting it to use!

And there's good reason to be putting it to use *right now* - as far as Paul is concerned, the acceptable time has arrived.

- You'd have to be as much of a scholar of the Old Testament as Paul was to know that the quote he includes in vs. 2 comes directly from the Second Servant song of the Prophet Isaiah in which the prophet offers a vision of a time when the day of salvation has drawn near.
- This phrasing, "at an acceptable time", or "Kairos" as it was in Biblical Greek, was used in the Old and New Testament to indicate the appointed time in which God's purposes would be fulfilled.
- For example, at the very beginning of his Gospel, Mark records Jesus himself using it when he proclaims, "The acceptable time is here, and the kingdom of God has come near!"

In using it in his letter, Paul is indicating that now that Jesus has risen from the dead and commissioned apostles to carry on his mission, apostles like himself and Timothy, that the time is NOW - God's salvation is at hand and like he has done, the Corinthians need to activate the grace of God and get with the program!

And if they're wondering what it looks like to be IN the program, what the signs of God's grace working in your life look like, Paul offers himself as an example.

- Truly, that's what he's doing but, I will name that when viewed through the lens of *our* culture, using oneself as an ultimate example often comes off as bragging.
- That's not what Paul is doing here (though it can be argued that he does self-promote in other places!).
- Instead, he's offering an authentic, passionate, and sincere testimony of his experience of ministry with some tough love truth-telling of what it looks like to activate God's grace in your life *and* live as though the kingdom of God is NOW!
- Hint: as new creations in Christ there is no room for competition or quarrel!
- Instead, those who commit themselves to following Christ are called to a life of servant leadership - serving others *and* leading them to Christ no matter what!

And there's A LOT of "what" that comes along with it! To both defend his apostolic credentials and test those of anyone who's questioning them, Paul offers a long list of obstacles that he and his co-workers have endured as well as virtues that they have demonstrated through all the "no matter whats".

- The "highs and lows", if you will, of being a servant of Christ.
- The lows are many and Paul offers nine that he and others like him have experienced (all of which are documented in the book of Acts):
 - afflictions, hardships, calamities , beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger.
- The road has clearly been rough, but Paul is careful to not say that God's grace takes away the obstacles - but what he's seeking to prove is that activating the gift of grace does give you the endurance to, well, endure them.

The evidence of that is the long list of *virtues* that Paul and his co-workers have been able to demonstrate by the grace of God while enduring the long list of obstacles - virtues like:

- purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, power of God, and righteousness.
- And they've been able to offer these fruits of grace even when others have honored them and dishonored them, and when they have been considered in ill repute and in good repute - in other words, in all situations.

Not only that, but they've been able to endure and stay virtuous even when the paradoxical nature of servant leadership hits up against the values of their detractors who only see what is on the outside but don't realize the truth that resides on their inside.

- Though their critics may say they are imposters, Paul and his co-workers know themselves to be true to Christ.
- Though treated as no bodies, they know themselves to be well known by God.
- Though considered followers of one who died, they know themselves to be eternally alive in the one who rose from the dead.
- They may be punished but they don't perish. They may experience sorrow, but they also rejoice. They may be poor in money, but they are rich in spirit. They may seem like they have nothing, but in truth they have everything a person could ever want or need.

And Paul wants the Corinthians to know they, too, already have everything they could ever want or need - they've just lost sight of it because of all the conflict and competing theologies they've allowed to dominate in their church.

- Which is why he's so passionately writing to them about his own experience - to show them that being part of a new thing

God is doing may look incomprehensible to others who don't get it.

- Not everyone is going get that the ministry of reconciliation in Christ and all they are called to do as ambassadors of Christ will paradoxically take everything from them, sometimes even violently, but also give them everything in the power of God to give.
- Yes, the ministry brings suffering and sorrows - but their suffering, as did Christ's, lessens the suffering of others.
- Just as Christ suffered to show God's true love to others, so do Paul and his co-workers now suffer and endure to keep showing that love.

And to prove that by the power of God he is able to show that love despite everything they have put him through, Paul offers words of reconciliation to the Corinthians saying, "our heart is wide open to you".

- Though they have hurt him and added to the list of hardships he and his co-workers have endured, having planted their church and seeing them as a father regards his children, he still holds strong affection for them and hopes the Corinthians will choose to be reconciled to him despite this break in their relationship.
- He hopes that they will risk the same hardships he has for the sake of their shared ministry and choose to remain in partnership with Christ and with him.
- Truly, his deepest desire is that they will allow the grace of God to work within in them to open their hearts so reconciliation may occur.

We don't have the letter the Corinthians wrote in response, but we know from other sources that the Corinthians were compelled by Paul's wisdom and personal testimony, and ultimately reconciled with him and continued in ministry until his death.

- Though our modern situation is a bit different being that we're part of a global denomination made up of 35,000+ churches, I think there's much we can gain from Paul's passionate appeal to the church in he was in ministry with.
- We've been through a long season of conflict as a church and now we have the same appeal Paul put to the Corinthians in front of us: are we willing to reaffirm our trust that God's grace is working in everyone, that we are all dealing with hardships as we serve as Christ's ambassadors in the world, and that we're all doing our best to reflect the virtues of our faith in seasons of both sorrow and rejoicing?
- Are we willing to open our hearts and take the risk to offer reconciliation and repair with those we have harmed or who have harmed us for the sake of our shared ministry?

While it's unrealistic, and frankly not expected, that we all get along all the time, as Christians, there is an expectation that the way we disagree always be agreeable and that reconciliation always be our ultimate aim.

- While it might be difficult to recall it in a moment of conflict, the example of Christ taught that we are all called to center ourselves in the grace of God and remember that the grace extended to us, is also extended to the one with whom we are in conflict.
- We are also called to remember that to follow Christ is to engage in a radical new way of living that demands total allegiance to the ways of Christ even if it is practically difficult or lands us a place of suffering and hardship or puts us on the receiving end of criticism and rejection.
- We are ultimately the ambassadors of Christ, chosen to witness to his truth in seasons of both sorrow and rejoicing, and opening our hearts to one another and to God for the sake of the Gospel.

As we live into this next chapter of the United Methodist movement, I pray these fundamentals of our faith will:

- provide us the wisdom and guidance needed to endure the obstacles ahead
- while giving us the courage to demonstrate the virtues that define us as followers of Christ so that all who we encounter, whether we agree on everything or not, will know us to be open-hearted, faithful apostles of Jesus committed to the bringing forth the day of God's salvation NOW!

Hallelujah, amen!

"It Is Well with My Soul" - UMH #377