

*And He Has...*  
*I Corinthians 1:1-17*

First Christian Church in Corinth was a church in trouble. It was a church divided against itself. The Christians there fought; they fought about everything you could possibly imagine.

They fought for example, about favourite ministers. Some lined up behind Paul, who had founded their church.

Others preferred Cephas – that's Peter in Aramaic, by the way. Peter, after all, had been the Lord Jesus' closest companion.

Others stood for Apollos; he was famous for his pulpit eloquence– you would definitely invite him to preach on anniversary Sunday.

Others, a truly spiritual group, claimed proudly, "I belong to Christ!"

Now there is nothing seriously wrong with admiring ministers and there is something positively right about declaring allegiance to Christ but, in a situation of church conflict, being right is never good enough, if there is no love – but that would be another sermon and Paul won't get around to that point until chapter 13. But as I say, the Corinthians fought about everything.

They fought about basic Christian doctrine, whether the resurrection had already happened.

They fought about the gifts of the Holy Spirit: was speaking in tongues allowed in church and were people who spoke in tongues spiritually superior to other Christians?

And when they weren't fighting about the resurrection or about speaking in tongues, they were sleeping around. Paul says a little later that some of their sexual behaviour was so appalling that it even shocked the notoriously lax pagans of Corinth. Christians getting involved in sexual scandals?

Have we heard headlines about that kind of thing in recent years?

And when they weren't sleeping with one another, they were suing one another.

They even managed to get drunk at the Lord's Table.

I ask you, when was the last time you saw somebody get drunk at the Lord's table in one of our churches? Even if we use wine instead of grape juice, your elbow would give out with all those little cups...

Here's the worst thing I've heard about at a Lord's Supper in our day. A young man went to be the associate minister of a fair-sized church. It turned out that one of his first duties was to prepare the elements for communion. On Saturday evening in the church kitchen, he cut up the bread into little pieces, put them on a tray, and stuck the tray in the fridge. Then he looked about for the grape juice but couldn't find any. Eventually he did find a bag with purple crystals that tasted like grape. He mixed the crystals with water until the mixture tasted about right, poured the juice into the little cups and put it all into the refrigerator. The next day was communion; the minister lifted the bread and said "This is my body." Then he lifted up the cup saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood ...."

And the congregation raised their little cups to find... Jello!

That's the worst I've heard in a contemporary church but in Corinth they got drunk. Indeed, I know of no contemporary church with as many troubles as the church in Corinth. In any remotely similar situation, our church authorities would move in like a flash, removing the minister, firing the deacons, perhaps closing the place down and starting over. They were a bad lot, the Corinthians:

*drunks and sex fiends and argumentative troublemakers.*

Paul ought to let them have it.

But instead, Paul thanks God for the Church in Corinth.

"I give thanks to my God always for you.

" For you Corinthians, for the *drunks and sex fiends and argumentative troublemakers*, Paul gives thanks to God!

Paul does not see them just as *drunks and sex fiends and argumentative troublemakers*. He calls them "saints."

Our English translations are a bit misleading at this point. We read "To the Church at Corinth ... called to be saints" (NRSV), as if they ought to be saints but, of course, they really aren't, at least not yet. There is, however, is no form of the verb "to be" in the original Greek. They are simply the "called saints" ... already.

The call has already taken place;

they "are sanctified," he says, made holy, made saints, already.

Perhaps only a person of the spiritual insight of Paul could perceive it, but that is what they were, saints.

Now, Paul does not use the word "saint" the way we commonly use it. To us a "saint" is a spiritual superstar, the religious version of Connor McDavid or LeBron James. You get to be a saint by hitting seventy spiritual homers in a season, without steroids. Mother Teresa might be an example. A person becomes a saint, we think, because of his or her own spiritual achievements. It is human effort that counts

There is an old story about a young boy taken for the first time to a Gothic cathedral. He looked up at the stained glass windows, the morning sun blazing through their magnificence, and asked, "Who are those people?" Told they were "saints," he replied, "Ahh, I see. Saints are people the light shines through!"

Yes! "Through," not "from." Not their light but God's. And I suppose that if the light is the light of a Gospel about a God who loves and forgives even sinners, maybe the light can shine even through the Corinthians, because they sure are sinners.

The Corinthians aren't saints because of their own efforts and achievements. Spiritually speaking, they aren't superstars; they're scrubs. Humanly speaking they're still drunks and sex fiends and argumentative troublemakers.

But they have been called -- by God.

They have been sanctified – by God.

Paul says, " in every way, you have been enriched ... by God."

He says, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus."

They are saints, not because of their own efforts but because God has chosen them, has reached out and called them and made them his own. And who was Paul to disagree with God?

Dear friends, troubled churches are not just a first-century phenomenon. I say, "There are a lot of troubled churches out there," and you reply, "Tell me about it!"

I'm going to make an assumption about you as a congregation. I imagine that there are a few of you who are seekers but I also imagine that the vast majority of you are regular, faithful, committed churchgoers. And I am going to guess that anyone watching a video of a sermon on a summer Sunday knows about the church.

You know about the child molesting priests, adulterous ministers and corrupt evangelists. And nobody in Kamloops should need to be reminded about Residential Schools these days.

You know about the fights over inclusive language and feminine imagery for God and homosexuality. Above all you know about the small-time pettiness that infects so many of our congregations.

You know that we Christians don't just fight over the big issues of life, we fight about the colour of the new carpet.

You know about the troubles because you know about the church. A critic of the Christian Church (and there are many) would, without looking very hard, still be able to find *drunks and sex fiends and argumentative troublemakers*.

That's not the whole truth even humanly speaking, but this is not the main thing I want to say here. The main thing is this: it does not matter in the end what the critic sees in the Church, because God looks at the Church and sees saints.

We like to think sometimes that we are our own creators, self-made men and women. But even in purely human terms that's not true. It is often, very often, the case with us humans that we are what the most important people in our lives think we are. I understand that with most children but particularly with little boys, they often become what their kindergarten and first grade teachers think of them. If those teachers think the child is wonderful and able and full of promise, it is very likely that child will turn out well. If they think of that child as a little troublemaker with no promise whatsoever, well, you know what will likely happen.

I remember taking my mother out to lunch one day. As we left the restaurant we saw a fine little boy, perhaps four years old, standing handsome and neatly dressed, by the restroom doors. My mother, who was always very fond of little boys, bent over and said to him,

"You're a fine young man, aren't you!"

He looked up at her and confidently replied, "Yes. That's what my mother says too!" That's a child who will turn out well. Why? Because the most important person in his life looks at him and sees someone wonderful.

Of course we should strive with every sinew and every muscle to make the Church a more fit instrument for God's freeing, saving purposes, but that's not the main thing today. The main thing is this:

*the most important Being there is looks at us and sees someone wonderful, sees saints.*

And, as a result, God's light still shines through the church. It still may be the case that if us God's light is a Gospel about love and forgiveness for sinners, then we don't serve all that badly as windows.

The light in the Church does not arise from what we have chosen, or the fact that we have called on God; it arises from this: that God has called us and chosen us.

This language of call echoes the old Presbyterian language of election and even of predestination: the doctrine that God calls us and chooses us before we ever choose God. Old John Calvin called this the "comfortable doctrine of predestination.." If we ever do think about the doctrine these days most of us don't find it very comfortable at all. But there is this for our comfort: that God's choice of us is more reliable and more dependable than our choice of God.

On the day when our faith burns like little more than a candle guttering in the socket, when our Christian life has diminished to almost nothing, God's love for us is stronger than ever. God's call, God's choice, is firmer than ever. And in that choice we may rest secure.

There are very few times in parenting when there is a completely right answer but I do know of one. I have been told that in a family where there is an adopted child as well as biological children, the adopted child will eventually ask the mother whether she loves the adopted child as much as the ones born from her body. There is a right answer to that question. It is this:

Of course I love you. I chose you."

Yes, God sees the troubles in the Church

But God looks at us and says, "Of course I love you. I chose you.

*Not drunks or sex fiend or argumentative troublemakers, but saints.* Not failures but the called of God, the chosen of God, the loved of God, the Church. *Saints!* And maybe, just maybe, eventually we'll live up to what we are.

In the meantime, may I tell you just one story about a saint? During the Second World War it was not just Jews who were sent to the Nazi concentration camps. In those dreadful camps were gypsies, homosexuals, Poles, communists, socialist, Protestants, Catholics, and people who had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. One

such person was a Polish, Roman Catholic priest named Maximilian Kolbe. He was an ordinary priest and probably quite flawed. But that is not the point of the story. The Nazi guards became displeased with the prisoners in Maximilian Kolbe's hut for some reason, and announced that they would execute one out of ten prisoners, their names to be drawn by lot. One unlucky prisoner to whom the lot fell was a young Polish man, a husband, the father of young children.

Maximilian Kolbe volunteered to take the young man's place and was executed.

Some years ago Pope John Paul II went back to his native Poland to declare Maximilian Kolbe a saint of the Roman Catholic Church. There was a special guest at the magnificent ceremony in his honour - an old Polish man, now a grandfather.

Of course he was there. Of course he was there!

After all, wouldn't you be there? Wouldn't you be there at a ceremony in honour of somebody who died for you?

You are.

And what is more, you're here as a saint.

Because to be saint, you don't actually have to die for somebody.

Somebody has to die for you ...

And he has.