**Unsaintly Saints in Search of Sainthood**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**January 12, 2020**

Today we begin a five part series on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. I should say *at least* five part; there are two Sundays in there when I’ll be away, and I can’t guarantee what the Spirit might put on Tony’s heart – or Nick Mullis’ heart – but Tony, we’ll talk, eh?

So, *at least* five sermons are coming your way on 1 Corinthians. I want to begin with a bit of background on this letter. And make no mistake about it: this piece of scripture began its life as a *letter*, from a pastor to a beloved congregation. We’ve come to understand it as a conduit for the Word of God, and it is; but it began as a letter. To put that in more contemporary terms, think of it as an email; or a *very* long text! And yet, it reveals God’s Word to us. Which underscores the fact that God comes to us in very down-to-earth ways. God speaks to us, God touches us, God works through us, God is present with us in the nuts and bolts, flesh and blood, day to day details of life. That’s what it means to worship an incarnational God; One whose name is Emmanuel: God-with-us. As I told our Elders last Wednesday: when you’re visiting one our homebound members, you are the face of God for that person. When someone is in trouble on the highway and you pull over and help him or her, you are the face of God for that person. When someone is going through a rough time and you gently put your hand on their shoulder or sit down with them over a cup of coffee, you are the face of God for that person. If you want to experience God, you have to look for God all around you and within you, because we’re talking about God-in-the-flesh here. If you want to learn about God, you have to investigate the down-to-earth ways in which the Holy has been revealed over time: including a common letter, written by a concerned pastor, whose former congregation has gone off the rails.

 This struggling congregation was in the Greek city of Corinth. Now Corinth is located on the narrow strip of land connecting the main part of Greece with the peninsula called the Peloponnese. It’s right where the isthmus connects with the peninsula. As such it was a very important commercial city in the 1st century, because it was cheaper and faster for ships to dock at Corinth and have their goods portaged over the isthmus, rather than sailing all the way around the peninsula. So, there was a lot of economic activity that serviced that transportation industry. Plus, Corinth was strategically placed to manufacture cloth and farm implements and other goods and distribute them to parts of Greece and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. So, the place was humming economically. And it was attracting all sorts of people from around the Empire. And the great diversity of the City of Corinth was reflected in the Christian congregation that Paul founded there.

It was around the year AD 50 that Paul arrived in Corinth. If we follow the storyline in Acts, he was on his 2nd missionary journey. He spent 18 months there, nurturing the young congregation, before sailing to Ephesus, where he established another new church. It was from Ephesus that Paul wrote a letter to Corinth – what we now know as 1 Corinthians – circa AD 53.

As I said, the diversity of Corinth was reflected in the Corinthian Christians. We’re talking, first of all, about economic diversity. This was a city with a few rich folks and a whole lot of poor folks. And that was true of the congregation as well. And we’re talking about cultural diversity: lots of ethnic groups – lots of *immigrants* – in this city and congregation. Because – you know – if you’re poor, then you move to a place where there’s work so you can better yourself. So there’s economic diversity and cultural diversity. And religious diversity; both Jews and Gentiles; and those Gentiles probably came from a bunch of different pagan cults; so lots of religious diversity. There’s economic and cultural and religious and philosophical diversity: I’m telling you, this was a really interesting congregation!

And they didn’t get along with each other. There were factions in this church. There were fights in this church. There were folks looking down their noses at each other in this church. If you think that church fights are a modern phenomenon, think again: there’ve been divisions in the church since Day 1!

And that’s why Paul wrote this letter. He’s a pastor who is concerned about his congregation. He’s hearing all these reports about the factions and the fights and he wants to help these folks. He’s known them for three years and his heart aches for them.

All those fights and all those divisions boil down to one thought: “I’m better than you!”

“Because I have more money than you, I’m better than you.”

“Because I know more than you, I’m better.”

“Because I’m more spiritual than you, I’m better.”

“Because I’m more gifted than you, I’m better.”

“Because I have more power than you, I’m better.”

“I’m successful; you’re failing. I’m a winner, you’re a loser.” That’s essentially what these folks were saying.

It was a mess! And yet…these are the folks whom Paul calls “saints.” Did you hear that? He begins this letter – as he begins almost all of his letters – by addressing the church members as saints. Or, at least, he says they are “*called* to be saints” (1 Corinthians 1:2). He’s so frustrated with them that maybe wants to knock them upside the head; but he says they are called to be saints. And, by implication, so are we.

*All* Christians are called to be saints. We are, at the very least, on a journey toward sainthood. We’re not exactly paragons of virtue. Unlike Mary Poppins, we’re not “practically perfect in every way.” Not yet, anyway. But we’re headed in the right direction. That’s what my dad would say when we were driving somewhere and we somehow got off the beaten track. We might’ve missed a few turns. Perhaps we had to make a u-turn. Maybe we were zig-zagging across country and we were making the journey longer and more difficult than it needed to be. But my dad’s internal compass was pretty good and more often than not we were going roughly parallel to the highway; we were headed in the right direction. So it is with the church. If our moral and spiritual compass is functioning even a little bit, were headed toward the Kingdom; we are pursuing our calling toward sainthood.

And Christ is with us all along the way. He is strengthening us and nurturing us and reshaping us so that we might be “blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Things might be all messed-up now and we might be fighting with each other now – in both church and nation we might be fighting with each other now – but by the day that Jesus returns in *all* of his glory, we’re going to be blameless and righteous and acting like the saints whom God has made us to be, as we live together in peace and unafraid in the Beloved Community that is the Kingdom of God.

You see, Paul is convinced that history is moving inexorably toward that blessed day. No matter how bad things seem now – in both church and world – the whole Creation is in the process of giving birth to God’s Kingdom. “We know that the whole Creation has been groaning in labor pains,” he says in his Letter to the Romans (8:22). The “sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us,” he says (Romans 8:18). We’re moving in the right direction. By the grace of God we’re being guided toward sainthood.

And any progress that we might be making in this regard is totally God’s doing. To the degree that we’re already saints, it’s not because of any virtue that we *ourselves* can claim, but only because of the virtue that God is giving us as a *gift*.

We are unsaintly saints, perhaps, but nevertheless we are *called* to be saints, and we are moving toward that day when Christ will come and embrace us all.

Believe it. Believe that you’re a saint. Believe that you’re on the road to sainthood. That’s not always easy to do. When you’re out driving, when it’s dark and you don’t recognize any landmarks and you’re hungry and you’re wondering if you’re ever going to get there, it’s hard to believe the compass that’s telling you that you’re going the right way. And when you feel like a jerk and you just had a fight with your wife or husband and your self-worth is dwindling down to next to nothing, it’s hard to believe that you are chosen and beloved by God. But you are. Believe it. Have faith.

But don’t just believe it. *Act* like it. To act like a saint is to show forth the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22). To act like a saint is to seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). The Corinthians had a chance to seek justice right there in their own congregation, where most were poor but a few were rich and the few who were rich were marching into church events with their entourage of servants and claiming far more than their fair share of the food. And Paul says, “You all got to share!” That’s the gist of chapters 11-14 of 1 Corinthians: “You all got to share.” In a congregation and a world of gross economic inequalities, we all have to share. In a rigged economy such as Corinth’s, where the wealthy and the powerful at the top of the social pyramid were getting far more than their fair share, the saints were called to share. I hear Paul saying to the Corinthians, “If you all can’t resolve problems of economic inequality within your congregation, how do you expect to serve as a model of God’s justice for the rest of the City of Corinth?” You’re a saint. Act like it. Have love.

You are a saint. Believe it, act like it, and trust it. Even when you don’t see any evidence of sainthood – in yourself or anyone else – trust it. Even in the midst of these troubled and fractious and difficult times, when it doesn’t look like the world is on the road to anywhere except spiraling down into a dark pit of despair, trust it. Dutch saint and Christian activist Corrie ten Boom survived the dark despair of the Nazi Holocaust by telling herself, “Where I cannot see, I will trust.” You are a saint. We are saints. We are on a journey toward sainthood. Trust it. Have hope.

The Corinthians were flawed Christians in a flawed congregation. They were struggling Christians in a city and an empire reeking with injustice. And sometimes they gave in to the very inequalities of wealth and power that they were called to oppose. But they were saints. Sometimes they were mean to each other. But they were saints. Sometimes they thought they were morally and spiritually superior to each other. But they were saints. And so are we. Believe it; act like it; trust it. To put that in the language of 1 Corinthians 13: have faith, and love, and hope. As one hymn writer put it, we are pilgrims on the way to starlight; or unsaintly saints, on the way toward the fullness of sainthood. Amen.