

A Higher Calling
Third Sunday after Epiphany/Season of Reconciliation
January 25, 2015
Gordon Wiersma

Text: I Corinthians 7:29-31

“How on earth do you preach on a passage of Scripture that seems to have proved dead wrong?”! (*Clyde Fant in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, p.279*) That’s the opening line of a commentary I read this week on the passage we read from I Corinthians – which is what I was thinking too! What this commentary refers to is that Paul seems to write expecting the imminent return of Christ, and that his teaching depends on this view. We are some 2000 years on the other side from Paul, so it would seem fair to conclude that Paul was wrong and also that any teaching related to his misguided sense of timing is irrelevant – and some rather odd-sounding teaching it is here anyway. Perhaps the best answer to the question of how to preach is: DON’T! - but I was drawn to Corinthians with some curiosity of what to make of such a passage as this. I love the Jonah story; and the Gospel call-stories have much in them to explore – but for this time, let’s lean a little into a passage which we might otherwise disregard and see what we might find.

So here we go - Paul writes: *the appointed time has grown short – so, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, - REALLY? - and those who mourn as though they were not mourning – REALLY? and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing – SERIOUSLY? (pun intended ☺) and those who buy as though they had no possessions – HMM! and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.- NOT SURE WHAT TO MAKE OF THAT...*

What Paul offers here sounds like a recipe for a commitment-less, passion-less, possession-less, detached life – I do not find this appealing! And why does Paul say this? – because:

...the present form of this world is passing away.

Well, once we regroup from the oddness of it - perhaps that last line could give us a place to start – perhaps even some common ground with Paul – because what does that say, what does that mean? “*the present form of this world is passing away*”? - I think it simply, profoundly, says that the way things are in the world is not how they are meant to be AND the way things are in the world is not the way they are going to be. Well – do we believe that? – perhaps the ‘not how things are meant to be’ seems clear...but also ‘not how they’re going to be’? Do we believe that? – and if so, does that mean believing in things improving steadily in our world? or believing too in Christ’s imminent return? or in a future fulfillment?

I think it’s worth asking such questions to wonder about what and how we believe – and I think those questions end us up closer to Paul in this passage than we might first think. Think about our world today – might it not seem unmodern or religiously quaint to talk about future fulfillment at all? might it not seem counter-factual or religiously naïve to talk about hope? Rather than focusing on if Paul had his facts right about timing, I think there is a deeper issue – and a deeper resonance – that is spoken in this passage: an affirmation that we as a community of faith believe that life and history held in God’s hands – in God’s love – in God’s creative grace; such faith then or now receives from God a different way to look at our lives and our world. “*The present form of this world is passing away*” is really a statement of faith that corresponds to what Paul says also in Corinthians: *God in Christ is*

reconciling the world to God's self – God in Christ encounters the broken form of this world with the creative power of God's love and grace.

So then - moving our way back through the passage – when Paul says: *those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it* – well if the dealings of this world are grounded in division and greed, in violence and injustice, in cynicism and self-centeredness, in hatred and indifference – well then, AMEN! – that's not how we deal. We see this life and world grounded in God's grace - created for community and abundance, for understanding and nurture, for service and faithfulness – that's how we deal.

And then... those with wives, as having none; those who mourn, no mourning; those who rejoice, no rejoicing; those who buy, no possessions...

...what about that?! Well, before a preacher is too flippant asking if he can preach on a passage proven dead wrong, let's give the Apostle Paul some deep appreciation for the many places he writes profoundly about relationships and joy and suffering and dealing faithfully with the stuff of life; when it is the same Paul who elsewhere writes “rejoice always” then we must see that the lens through which we read Paul here is not about an incorrect calculation but about our life's occupation. Paul gives a word of challenge and of hope – that all the substance of our lives is not an end in itself, but is part of the embrace of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Risen Christ at work to have what is broken in this world pass away into what God makes new. The challenge Paul makes is to always link our lives to a bigger picture; the hope Paul gives is that it is God's picture.

I've mentioned before that in a discussion at Hope Church a few months ago, the thought was expressed that in our communion liturgy when we say 'Christ has died; Christ is Risen; Christ will come again' – that we could instead say 'Christ IS COMING again', because that brings both a future AND a present sense to it. I really like that, and have been thinking about it, and will be thinking about it when we sing in our liturgy today 'Christ's coming we await'; I'll be thinking 'Christ IS COMING again' because it guides us well in how to hear this word from Paul: what is expressed to us is the reality of the Risen Christ among us, with the promises of God sustaining us and calling us forward; what we hear is not a miscalculation but a life's vocation – a higher calling in the midst of all of life's circumstances that does not detach us from the world but that draws us into the reality of God's beloved community which God is bringing into being. We hear of our vocation shaped not by the dealings of this world but by the call of our God who reconciles all things – *for the present form of this world is passing away* – a calling that places our lives in the service of a God who in Christ is making all things new.

That is our challenge and our hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.