

*You Winsome*

Season of Reconciliation/Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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Text: 1 Corinthians 9

I want to begin this sermon with you as we began the Cran Hill youth retreat last weekend – (not with silly mixer games, although we did do some of those) - what we did with the youth on a Friday evening is to ask each person to take a moment to “check in with yourself” – that’s what we called it, which simply means to honestly ask yourself “what’s going on in my life?” I’d like you to let your mind wander a bit (you don’t often hear that invitation from a preacher!) and think about, feel...what’s going well and what’s difficult for you right now? - what are places of gratitude and of pain? – what going on in the world makes you anxious or interested? – what are things you’re wondering about? – and, as you do that to also, to also ask yourself, “am I remembering that God loves me?” It’s a simple thing to do, but it can be profound – can get a lot percolating – and I’m going to ask you as best you can just to let all those things simmer and we’ll come back to it at the end... But for now we need to turn from checking in with ourselves to checking in with Paul.

Paul! – the apostle Paul – it seems lately I’ve been wanting to delve into Paul in the lectionary, which is a bit bemusing to myself – since I think it’s not being snide or disparaging to say that there’s plenty of material from Paul that comes off as complicated, or obscure, or even annoying. But of late what I think I’ve often been appreciating about Paul, is that I’ll read something from Paul which at first blush sets off all those negatives of complex and annoying and not-helpful - but then I end up eventually really appreciating what’s there, what Paul has to say. Which, as you may be guessing already, is the case with the passage we read from Paul today – I Corinthians 9. And so I want to go through with you my move from off-putting to appreciating, to see if the same might be the case for you.

So I want to point out 2 off-putting things that I think we have to get past in this passage –and as we deal with those things, then we’ll see if some meaningful things can emerge from

this passage. The first thing is that what we read in Corinthians can come off as just being all about Paul – which is not unusual for Paul! – about Paul’s calling to preach the gospel; Paul’s way of carrying out his calling; Paul’s sense of struggle and reward and blessing in doing so. It all sounds very particular to Paul; and along with that, Paul has a very unique role, he’s a major figure looming large in the leadership of the entire early church. And none of this sounds connected to us, does it? – I don’t imagine you see much of yourself at all in Paul’s description of himself.

But I want to challenge that perception – certainly I agree that it does little good if we simply hear this passage as being about a famous apostle wrestling with his unique circumstances...that might be an interesting study for some, or not, but doesn’t speak to our lives. But it occurs to me that we have this wonderful theology in the Reformed tradition of the ‘priesthood of all believers’, which has to do with each person having a calling from God to express the Gospel in their lives. I say it is a wonderful theology because it speaks profoundly of how God’s gifts and Spirit are at work in each of us in particular ways; but I don’t know how wonderful it necessarily sounds to you, or to me, since it does insist upon each of us considering that calling – and some days I’d rather not. But nevertheless what that theology does is make listening to Paul be not all about Paul – but rather hearing through Paul the need for each of us to face that we have a calling – to realize that we are people through whom God has decided to share good news, like it or not, sometimes.

So that’s the first thing. But once I’ve made the case for this to be not all about Paul, but about us too, then right away in this passage I run into a problem with the language Paul uses about what it means to share the gospel in your life. And if you were paying attention when I read from Corinthians, I’d be surprised if it didn’t rub you the wrong way too. Paul says that he has to “win” people – win more people – he goes through a whole “win” litany about that; and along with that, Paul says he has to “save” people. Now perhaps you are an exception to this, but I know that for many of us, the language of winning souls and making sure that people are saved has accumulated a lot of negative baggage – and that is true both for people who are a

part of Christianity and for those who want no part of it – it’s the baggage of faith used as pressure and manipulation, faith that is some sort of calculation about who is in or out. And I’m simply going to assert that for us today such language of winning and saving is not helpful or appropriate, given our history and culture. And with that rather sweeping claim from me, then what do we do with Paul here?

Well, let’s start with the ending of this passage, because that’s what saved Paul for me (see what I did there?!). This passage concludes: “I do all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” – that strikes me as a rich statement of faith: to connect your life to the gospel is about sharing in the blessings it gives – the blessings of knowing a God whose love creates life and community, whose grace restores and renews, whose gifts bring wholeness – that resonates with me. So then, if I read that ending of ‘blessing’ back into Paul’s language of “win” and “save”, things change for me. If I can try to let go of all my baggage, and instead bring a sense of “sharing in blessing” to what Paul says, what I can start to see is that what Paul is talking about with “winning” people is the desire to connect all people and circumstances to that blessing – connected to God’s grace and love and gifts. This is not one team winning over another (that’s my mandatory subtle Super Bowl reference), this is a kind of winning that is sharing in gain with all. And if you’ll come along with me with this, then it turns out that saving is the same kind of thing – that “saving” is Paul’s desire for people not to be trapped in an outlook on life that is disconnected from blessing. After all, when you notice that Paul says “I will save” – and as professional theologian I can assure you that it’s God who saves - it must be that Paul is speaking of connecting people to that shared blessing – to God’s love and grace and gifts.

And I think what that can do, is to turn Paul’s “win” litany in Corinthians into something for our own time - a powerful and beautiful litany that we can adapt for our lives. Try this on for your life of sharing the gospel:

- I will become as one who feels lost with those who feel lost, that we may know we are not alone

- I will become as one who doubts with those who doubt, that we may simply doubt together
- I will become as one who is oppressed with the oppressed, as one who suffers discrimination with the discriminated against, as one who is abused with the abused, that together we may seek justice and claim God's ways of life;
- I will become as an immigrant to one who is an immigrant, that together we may see ourselves as sisters and brothers
- I will become as one who is conservative or progressive with one who is a conservative or progressive, in order that we may see each other as children of God, loved by God
- I will become as a Muslim with one who is Muslim, that we may bless God and one another together; will become as a "NONE" with one who is a "NONE" that together we may care about the world
- I will become as one who grieves with those who grieve, that together we may abide in God's grace; as one who rejoices with those who are joyful, that together we may share in God's gifts; as one who hopes with those who hope, that together there may be light
- I will even remember that I am an irritable person with those who irritate me, that I may try to live out the good news even then ☺

I wonder what Paul would think of that list? – I can wish that he would see that it understands what he was getting at: that the good news of Jesus Christ is the truth that wherever we are, whatever the circumstances are, God's grace and love and gifts are present; that doesn't make everything all better, but it does mean we have a blessing, God's blessing, to share with this world, through our lives.

We started by checking in with ourselves – and what I want to say about that is that whatever gratitude and need, whatever struggle and hope and yearning you know in yourself - God becomes as those things to bring God's grace and love and gifts there. And whatever of those things we meet in other people, in this whole beautiful broken world - God becomes as those people, as those circumstances too, as we are called to share and meet the blessing of God's grace and love and gifts in all things. Thanks be to God. AMEN.