

Message: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 – Called to be sanctified

God has not forgotten you. Ann Mulligan of Dearborn, Michigan knows this first hand. She wrote to the Guideposts magazine with the following story¹:

“Winter mornings in Michigan were often cold and bleak, especially since she was getting up earlier than usual to pray. The quiet time with God helped keep her inspired at her job as an elementary school teacher. Some mornings, though, waking up in the dreary darkness, she couldn’t help but wish she had someone to wake up with. Ann loved her job, but more than anything she hoped to be a wife and mother. So far she hadn’t met the right guy.

‘Lord, you promise that if we delight in you, you’ll give us the desires of our heart,’ Ann said aloud. ‘I have delighted in you, so...when?’

The room was silent. Seemingly out of nowhere a Bible passage popped into her mind: “*I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*” It was Isaiah 49:15-16.

‘God?’ she thought. Could it be that he was speaking directly to her? When Ann opened her daily scripture book, the lesson for the day caught her by surprise. It was Isaiah 49:15-16, the passage that had popped into her head! It seemed like God really was speaking to her, and yet she had troubling thoughts, ‘Lord, I don’t want to be a doubting Thomas, but if you truly are encouraging me with these words, could you say them once more?’

That afternoon Ann swung by the house of one of the ladies in her prayer group. They were trying something different, each of them choosing someone in the group to pray for anonymously, encouraging each other with notes and small gifts. She stealthily dropped a little something in her friend’s mailbox.

When she got home Ann found a gift in her own mailbox. Her secret prayer buddy had been by! The gift was a pewter pin shaped like a hand, and in the hand was a little child. The card with it contained a short Bible passage. Yeah, you guessed it: Isaiah 49:15-16.

¹ <http://www.guideposts.org/faith/prayer/power-of-prayer/what-prayer-can-do-not-forgotten>

Less than two years later Ann met the man who would be her husband. Together they’re raising four children. But the truth is Ann found love before she met her husband, when God reached down and – three times – reminded Ann that she was not forgotten.”

God often does small miracles to remind us that we are not forgotten. We are His children and God loves us very much. God seeks to assure us in many ways, each and every day. We are called to be in fellowship with Jesus Christ as a community of believers and as persons within that community. We are called by God to be separate and different from those who do not believe in Jesus so that we can help others to know Jesus and to build up the church, the community of Christ on earth.

This is the way that Paul began his first letter to the church in Corinth. Our passage for today is the first nine verses of that letter. To appreciate Paul’s letter, it’s helpful to know a little bit about the church, the city of Corinth and Paul’s relationship with the congregation.

According to scholars, Paul founded the church in Corinth, spending almost 18 months there, more time than any other missionary visit. The church was mostly made up of Gentiles. Corinth was a metropolis, a sea coast city and trading port, a center of commerce. While Romans made up a significant portion of the population, there were enough Jews to have a synagogue and people from many other countries.

Unfortunately, Corinth had a bad reputation. There was a large temple to Aphrodite, the Roman goddess of sexual love. That means there was a large population of temple prostitutes. Since it was a city full of transients, particularly sailors, there was a lot of gross immorality and debauchery. The Greeks had a word “corinthianize” which meant “to behave as they do in Corinth.” These cultural vices were not only present in the larger population, they were practiced by members of the church in Corinth. This led to division, quarreling and lawsuits.

There are several modern day equivalents to Corinth. Los Angeles is one of them. Consider these facts: LA is on the sea coast, has a very diverse population and it is one of the busiest ports in the world. LA is also the home to a billion dollar sex industry that impacts not only southern California, but the whole world through human trafficking,

pornography and the packaging and distribution of media and entertainment that broadcasts the message “sex sells” worldwide.

We should be concerned. Like the congregation in Corinth, we certainly must have members who have been affected by the immoral message of our culture. The battle of every man is to keep himself pure and free from the lure of pornography and the demeaning image of women that it portrays. The modern, independent woman of today is not isolated from this same temptation. The battles and conflicts that Paul writes about are the same ones we experience.

Paul was concerned and so he wrote several letters and visited at least twice. 1st Corinthians is primarily a letter that Paul is believed to have written in the winter of 55 AD, when he was in Ephesus. Like most letters of his day, it begins with a greeting from the author, a reference to the addressee and a blessing in vv1-3. As a point of information, Sosthenes is believed to be a leader of the synagogue who has become a believer and friend.

Paul uses the term “*called*” three ways in the first four verses. First, he is called to be an apostle – this is a sign of his authority, as apostle literally means “sent one” in Greek. Paul was sent to the church to offer instruction on how they should live in the middle of an immoral culture. Second, those who are sanctified in “*the church of God that is in Corinth*” are called to be saints in v2. Another translation of the Greek word for saint is “*holy one.*” Paul is reminding the congregation and us that the church is God’s and only those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus to be holy are true members. Finally, in v3 Paul identifies “*those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*” as being sanctified and holy because of our common faith in Jesus Christ. This identification goes beyond the local church in Corinth and beyond our church; it is a reference to the greater church, the network of all who believe in Jesus Christ on earth. This call is all inclusive: all are called to follow Jesus by the grace, love and mercy of God.

A couple of questions come to mind: will we answer the call? How do we know if we have truly answered God’s call? I believe the key to the answer is found in the term “sanctified.” When we are sanctified, we

will know God’s call. To be sanctified means to be “set apart” for God. We are to separate ourselves from others by our attitudes and actions. That doesn’t mean that we separate ourselves from others physically: Jesus ate with sinners telling church leaders “...*the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost*” (Luke 19:10). Once we acknowledge that we have sinned against God, we believe in Jesus and we confess our sins, calling him by name - the Son of God, we are justified by Christ, saved and cleansed from all of our sins. We are purified, set apart and given the gift of the Holy Spirit, along with many other grace gifts. This is what it means to be sanctified. We are no longer the same as we once were. We are transformed and our minds are renewed. We are refreshed and filled by the Holy Spirit.

But, all too often, we fall back into our old habits. It starts in a simple way. Having had our mountain top experience, we are cruising along, enjoying our new life. But, all at once, we encounter some difficulty. We work through the difficulty, but we don’t feel any different afterward. There is no difference in our experience. Nothing seems change, as we are led to expect. So we are confused and we ask, “How do I know that I’m saved? (Or, how do I know that I’m sanctified?)”

This is temptation at work. It’s the same temptation that will come back to us each and every step along the way of Christ. That’s why it’s called the narrow way – it’s not easy to get onto the path and it’s hard to stay on it. The temptation hits us in our feelings. We cannot believe we are saved and set apart for God unless we feel that we are. And, because we do not feel that God has us in his hand, we cannot believe that he does. We put our feelings first, faith second and the facts last. God wants to change that order: put the facts (His truth) first, faith second and our feelings last. That’s not to say that emotions and feelings are not good, but if we rely on them first in matters of our walk with Christ, we will not be assured that God does not forget us and that God helps us by giving us gifts by grace.

Paul gives thanks for these gifts, which are help from God, in vv4-8. The first gift is the grace given in Jesus. This is a gift of the past. Jesus makes us right with God by giving us an undeserved and unpayable gift of love and mercy: his death on the cross. Jesus forgives us of all our

sins. The second gift is the enrichment of grace gifts. This is a gift in the present. Paul mentions two specific gifts that were given to the Corinthian church in v5, the gift of speech and the gift of knowledge. I believe the passage is a reference to all spiritual gifts from God. Paul writes in v7, “*you are not lacking in any spiritual gift.*” This is a gift for the future. We are given all the spiritual gifts we need and we have them – right now! Regardless of our maturity or spirituality, God gives all of us spiritual gifts. It doesn’t matter if we have sin in our lives, God is helping us, molding us and shaping us, day by day. We have all that we need to succeed in the mission God gave us: we are called to reach out to the lost and to build up the community of faith, the church.

The two specific spiritual gifts that Paul references are an example. Have you ever known someone who has the ability to speak well but nothing to say? Have you ever known someone who has something to say but doesn’t know how to speak well? In the church in Corinth and in some churches and people today, God gives people something to say and the ability to say it. This is the gift of knowledge and of speech. They are to be used to give testimony to Christ, to tell others of the good news that we have to share: Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. He came to save us from sin and death so that we can follow him and have eternal life. These gifts allow us to reach out to the lost.

The many other gifts that we are given by God help us to build up the church, the community of all believers. As we live, work and look forward to the day when Christ will come again in glory, God is helping us every step of the way, strengthening us as we wait for Jesus to once again be revealed in glory. Past, present and future unite in the grace of God. God helps us by giving us grace gifts, strengthening and enriching us when we reach out in prayer, so that we have all we need to live life well. We are called to be made holy through Christ. Let us share our joy with others, trusting in the faithfulness of God and live each day with assurance that God is helping us every step of the way. We are not forgotten.

I pray for you to be assured. You are unique and loved by God, gifted and called to be part of the community of Christ on earth, His church.

Isaiah 49:1-7 (NRSV)

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God." And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength - he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 (NRSV)

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind - just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you - so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.