

“Open Wide (Y)our Heart(s)” Job 38:1-11; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Rev. Michele Ward June 20, 2021 Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

The Epistle reading today comes from Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth. Listen now for a word from God.

“As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return--I speak as to children--open wide your hearts also.”

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.
All: Thanks be to God.

Before I begin my sermon, I want to acknowledge where we are. We are celebrating Pride, Juneteenth, and Father’s Day this weekend as a culture. Narratives around the joy and struggle of this day for lgbtq rights may fill our minds this morning. Narratives around symbolic change, such as a Juneteenth becoming a federal holiday without federal voting rights protection, may feel anemic today. Narratives around fatherhood and fathering may fill us with love and affection as well as grief and pain. All of that is allowed, and God sees you in it, and loves you through it. This morning, my sermon addresses the posture of the heart that God invites us to have. Wherever you are this morning, consider the state of your heart and where you are, and what God may be calling you to do in response.

PRAYER

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The Bad News in the Text

Paul seems desperate. He is struggling to get through to the Christians in Corinth what it takes to commit to following Jesus. He seems frustrated with them, almost angry at times. The church in Corinth cannot seem to accept Paul or his teachings. Other issues he has with them include members of the church getting drunk during church, unequal division of food at church meals based on class, and members of the church community sleeping with temple sex workers, just to name a few. Paul is fed up. He decides to appeal to them with nothing else but his raw honesty, hoping that will reach them somehow.

A letter like this would have been read aloud in front of the church community because very few could reach. If we were to hear this passage again, it might sound a little like this to our contemporary ears--here is *The Message* version of this same passage:

2 Corinthians 6:1-13 (The Message)

“Companions as we are in this work with you, we beg you, please don’t squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given us. God reminds us,

I heard your call in the nick of time;
The day you needed me, I was there to help.

Well, now is the right time to listen, the day to be helped. Don’t put it off; don’t frustrate God’s work by showing up late, throwing a question mark over everything we’re doing. Our work as God’s servants gets validated—or not—in the details. People are watching us as we stay at our post, alertly, unswervingly . . . in hard times, tough times, bad times; when we’re beaten up, jailed, and mobbed; working hard, working late, working without eating; with pure heart, clear head, steady hand; in gentleness, holiness, and honest love; when we’re telling the truth, and when God’s showing his power; when we’re doing our best setting things right; when we’re praised, and when we’re blamed; slandered, and honored; true to our word, though distrusted; ignored by the world, but recognized by God; terrifically alive, though rumored to be dead; beaten within an inch of our lives, but refusing to die; immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; living on handouts, yet enriching many; having nothing, having it all.

11-13 Dear, dear Corinthians, I can’t tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn’t fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren’t small, but you’re living them in a

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small way. I’m speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!

Hearing it another time, I wonder if the words feel a little more relevant than they did the first time. I wonder if Paul sounds more like a real person and less like a distant biblical figure. I know when I hear it this way, I cannot help but wonder about Paul’s intensity as a leader. His leaders are full of passionate discourse, and he speaks of living the Christian life with integrity and commitment. He seems to be at his wit’s end with the church in Corinth--he wants them to stop harming itself, their members, and their surrounding community. The church in Corinth does not seem to be listening to Paul, either because they do not understand, they are not hearing what he has asked of them, or they simply do not want to do what he is imploring them to do.

An interesting twist in this section of the letter is that Paul tells them he is not asking them to do anything that he isn’t already doing as a follower of Christ. He does not mince words with them--he explains to them that the wider culture, the Roman Empire, sees the Gospel of Jesus Christ as so threatening that the only way to contain its followers is to beat them, imprison them, and starve them.

He wants them to open their hearts wide--not only to love, but to suffering. Paul is asking them to fully commit themselves to the way of Jesus, no matter the risks, because that is what it means to accept the grace of God completely.

The Bad News in the World

This invitation to open our hearts to both love and suffering is an intense one, coming from Paul. You may recall he had a dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. He was radically transformed by encountering Jesus in a cloud of light, light so bright it blinded him. No longer was he intent on persecution of Jesus followers; he would now become one of the strongest evangelists for the Way. In this section of the letter, he seems to think that he can demand the same level of intensity of commitment, particularly as someone who was bent on torturing and killing Christians in his previous life. He feels a need for deep penance in his own life, so others must respond in kind and be like him.

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I am reminded of what Martin Luther King Jr. said in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, “One of the greatest problems in history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love.”¹

I wonder if Paul had this view of love and power at one point in his life. It is a common one, to be sure. Leaders like Paul are similar to those in our modern society who believe they are set apart from the rest of us. He reminds me of a harsh judge, who might be in recovery or have a history of drug or alcohol use, who then harshly sentences others who are arrested for possessing or using drugs. Or, a pastor with a history of extramarital affairs or embezzlement, who has changed his ways and demands their congregants live up to purity culture’s rigid standards of sexual ethics or give 10% of their annual income to the church each year.

In Paul’s previous life, he lived as if love was weak and power was strong. And, a particular type of power, mind you--the kind of power that dominates and controls, not the kind of power that brings people together and transforms us. But Paul’s reaction to that is so strong that he has created a new kind of dogmatism--a kind that demands a level of intense commitment from all the followers of Jesus in every place converts exist, even if their way of practicing Christianity does not look or sound like his.

While this metaphorical judge or pastor may have reacted strongly when confronted with someone who reminds them of their past, and because the approach they are demanding worked for them, they demand others to use that same method. Perhaps this is the Paul that we are encountering in this letter today; a man whose passion to save those like him causes him to strictly rely on those same methods for everyone simply because they worked for him.

I believe that Paul’s intentions are good and earnest like the judge or pastor, but I wonder if his approach just didn’t work with this particular church. I wonder if they couldn’t understand one another, which is partially why his frustration and intensity seem so clear.

The Good News in the Text

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*.

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Interestingly, Paul did not bring up any of their past transgressions in this section we are studying today. Others may argue that they hear his deep love for the church in Corinth coming off the page. He decides to recount all of the ways that being a Christian looks. It means accepting God’s grace completely, without reservation. It means not putting any obstacles or roadblocks in anyone’s way so they can fully enter the community of faith. Paul then recounts the various ways that he and Timothy, the co-author of this letter, live out their Christian faith: through beatings, imprisonment, and hunger; purity, knowledge, and patience. And after this long list of ways they live, Paul implores them yet again: “Our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours.” Or, as *The Message* says it, “I can’t tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn’t fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you.”

Paul invites them to live a ‘wide-open, spacious life’ in this letter. He does not want to restrict others from full, vibrant lives of faith. He wants them to understand that he is not restricting them. The restriction they feel comes from within themselves. He tells them, ‘the smallness you feel comes from within you.’ Paul sees them living a half-life, not fully bought in on either side of living in Christian community or fitting into Roman culture. Paul implores them to be all in by inviting them into a life that requires them to open their hearts wide to love and to suffering. To a powerful love that will transform them if they let it. But that love, that grace, cannot transform unless they stop living with restricted hearts.

The Good News in the World

I’d like to bring back Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr for a brief moment, and share with you the second half of the quote from *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*. He concludes, “What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.”²

God demonstrates the kind of love that implements the demands of justice.
God demonstrates the kind of justice that corrects everything that stands

² Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*

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against love. And in this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul is inviting them to live with hearts wide open to love and suffering, the kind of wide open living that leads to justice. Because it is in this kind of love that we find our freedom as Christians. It is in this kind of love that we find hope as Christians. It is in this kind of love that we find grace as Christians.

So, I ask you, what are you willing to risk to live with this kind of wide, open, heart? What are you willing to risk to live with this kind of power--the power that does not dominate but transforms?

Open your hearts to that spacious place, that place full of love and justice, power and freedom. God is there, already waiting for you.