

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, January 15, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Today is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. If he were still alive, he would be 94 years old. August this year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the March on Washington when Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Like every American student of my generation, January and February were months set aside to study the legacy of Dr. King. In my adolescence, that legacy was little more than a part of history. Just admitting that is proof of my privilege.

But Dr. King's legacy stopped feeling like history when I went to seminary. I left the mostly white Pacific Northwest for the Southern U.S., where more than a third of my class at Duke were students of color. I listened to their perspectives in class. I heard their personal stories. I worshiped alongside them and sat under their authority as preachers and teachers and leaders. Some of those students became my friends. And those relationships changed me. When the news would report another black man killed by police, it was no longer something sad happening to other people somewhere else. Because every time it happened, my friends and classmates would come to school reeling. I was a witness to their grief, fear, and anger.

Dr. King's legacy as a civil rights activist, pastor, and moral leader is inspiring. But I also find it intimidating. He was a giant among men, and a giant among preachers. For a season I willfully chose to ignore my generation's reckoning with racism because I felt so inadequate for the task. I believed I did not possess the knowledge, the understanding, or the skill to make a difference in the work of antiracism. It was just less overwhelming to continue believing that racism was a problem previous generations had already solved. But to continue believing that was a denial of my friends' pain. And it was also a denial of the God I was coming to know more clearly through my friends and classmates of color. The Holy Spirit

convicted me: If I truly wanted to follow Jesus, then I needed to accept that I was called to be a doer of justice, too.

But what do we do when we want to be obedient to God's calling, yet we feel that we are lacking what we need?

In our Scripture lesson, Paul addresses the church in Corinth thus: "I am Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (pp. v. 1). Paul does not address the church this way out of pride. He reminds them of his calling as Apostle to the Gentiles because he wants them to remember they have a calling, too.

We will learn later that the church in Corinth is beset with divisions. Some people are claiming they are better disciples than others because they have the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. Word of this division has made its way back to Paul. And so, he pens this letter. He begins by grounding the Corinthians in the source of their gifts: "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" (vv. 4-5).

God is the source of the Corinthians' spiritual gifts, just as He is the source of our gifts. It is by God's grace alone that we can be disciples of Jesus. Last week we remembered our baptisms and committed to obediently follow the will of God in our lives. But the ability to be obedient to God's will, to be obedient to God's calling, is not within our grasp or power. It is God's grace given to us through Jesus that makes us able to follow God's will.

Paul knows this well. In a different letter he calls himself the "chief sinner" (1 Tim 1:15). It was only by God's grace that he was saved, and it is only by God's grace that he can fulfill God's calling as an apostle, to bring the Gospel to communities like the Corinthians. This is why Paul always starts his letters with thanksgiving: He gives thanks for what God has done through Jesus and thanks for what God continues to do. Because it is only by God's grace that this Gospel and this ministry are possible.

The same is true for us. It is only by God's grace that we are gathered here together in this place, week after week, year after year. It is only by God's grace

that we are able to hear and receive the Good News, able to sing our songs of praise, able to offer our prayers and petitions, able to see something of God in each other and receive something of God at this Table.

This grace forms us. It leads us. It sustains us in our worship and our discipleship. It is by grace that we can claim the title of saint. A saint is not perfect or holier than other people; that is not the meaning of the word as Paul uses it. A saint is someone who recognizes their need for a savior. A saint recognizes their need for grace and says yes to Jesus, allowing God's grace through Jesus to transform them, to sanctify them. In fact, the words saint and sanctify share the same Greek root in the Bible.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that their calling is twofold. They are called to be saints – to live their lives by grace alone and allow that grace to transform them. And this grace then sets them apart for a greater purpose than simply their own sanctification. They find themselves called to serve something larger than themselves: The kin-dom of God.

Our winter worship series is titled “Glimpses of the Kin-dom.” That word ‘kin-dom’ is not a mistake; it is intentional. When I first encountered it, I resisted it. Jesus speaks of the *kingdom* of God, a realm over which he reigns as king. The language of kingship is biblical and has an important place in our faith. But so too does the language of kinship. In God's kingdom we are *kin* to each other. Significantly, Paul never uses the word saint to refer to an individual. He always uses it to refer to the common vocation that Christians share. The Corinthians' calling to sainthood is a communal calling. They are “called to be saints,” he writes, “*together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (v. 2). As followers of Jesus, we belong to each other as members of the same family. Together we have been set apart as a new kind of people, a new society, formed to transform the world in peace and reconciliation just as we have been reconciled to our Father through Jesus Christ.

Dr. King was a passionate believer in this vision of the kin-dom of God where all people belong to each other. He called that kin-dom “the beloved community.” The Rev. Dr. Derek Weber at Discipleship Ministries writes this about Dr. King's legacy:

*“Both of these points [sainthood and communal belonging] are a part of King’s legacy to the church... We are called to live not by our own wisdom, not by our own preferences and prejudices, but by the call of God, the vision of the kin-dom that defines our hopes and prayers and service... We are in this together. It is not just me or my church, my circle, the ones like me, the ones I get along with. No, our vision is always bigger, always for inclusion, always for beloved community. That is how we honor the memory of this servant of God who became the conscience of a nation for a brief time, and is needed again today.”<sup>1</sup>*

Sometimes we are like the church in Corinth, misunderstanding our calling as followers of Jesus because of our pride or arrogance. But more often we doubt or even reject our call because we do not feel equipped to do what God has called us to do. Paul reminds us that we must never think of ourselves as too small and insignificant to make a difference for God’s kin-dom. It is God that calls, and it is God that equips. God has given us everything we need to be disciples. This is the nature and function of grace.

Paul writes, “The testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any 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 whom you were called into the partnership of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (vv. 6-9).

We are not fully formed on this side of eternity. But God’s grace makes up for all our weaknesses. “Where I am weak, he is strong.” Our ability to fulfill God’s mission is not because of our own knowledge or skill, but because God has imparted His grace to us and faithfully continues to do so. And when we are overwhelmed by the task before us – the call to be lovers of mercy and doers of justice as we build the beloved community – Paul reminds us that we are not alone in this calling. We rise each morning, taking up the way of discipleship and trusting that God will provide the grace we need to follow Jesus that day. And when we lay down at night and close our eyes in sleep, we can set our work down for a time because we are assured that a sibling in Christ somewhere else in the world is picking up where we left off. We are not lacking in any gift because we have been called as God’s saints *together*.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/glimpses-of-the-kin-dom/second-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/second-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-a-preaching-notes>

So friends, as we prepare to meet Jesus at his table, receive this blessing:

To the church in Coeur d'Alene  
Located on Hanley Street  
Called to make a difference.  
To those sanctified in Christ Jesus  
Saved to serve humbly and dependably.  
To those called to be holy  
Serving as living witnesses of God's transforming grace.  
Let us raise our voices unashamedly  
Rivaling heaven's angels  
To praise our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ  
Let us lift every voice and sing to our Master and Maker.<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Kwasi I. Kena, *The Africana Worship Book, Year A*, Valerie Bridgeman Davis and Safiyah Fosua, eds., (Discipleship Resources, 2006), 53.