

## *Living in Truth and Love*

*2 Corinthians 1: 23-2: 11*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Do you remember the old story about the custodian in a large church? The church kept growing and got more and more active. The custodian fell farther and farther behind in keeping up with all the straightening and cleaning. Finally, he was so frustrated he made an appointment with the minister. “Pastor,” he said, “I know the church doesn’t look as tidy as it used to. And I’m sorry. I just can’t keep up with all this work. But I think I’ve got a solution. Pastor, if you could just keep all these people from coming to church all the time, I could keep this place clean!”

I wonder if the apostle Paul didn’t feel that way sometimes. Paul was a man whose mind was on fire. He was resetting the Hebrew Scriptures into the key of Jesus. He was making connections between the Old Testament and Jesus that no one had ever seen. But he was also incredibly busy sorting out the messes his churches would get into. I wonder if he prayed, “Lord, if you could just keep these people settled down for a while, I could really write some theology.” But that’s not how it worked. In reality, Paul had to say all his great things about Jesus in the context of dealing with some crazy congregations. I would have thought the best way to get half the New Testament written would be to set up Paul in a Roman castle somewhere and give him a few uninterrupted years to write beautiful essays about the person and work of Jesus. Instead, God decided to give us all this news about Jesus in the context of letters to churches that got confused, fought with each other, constantly committed immorality and even rebelled against Paul himself. God made his Word known to us in the context of messy, daily human relations.

So in between the verses of 2 Corinthians that reveal such beautiful things about Jesus, we have passages like this one today. It’s about how we get along as a community of Christ. And it’s every bit as important as our personal beliefs. The Corinthians were a young, dynamic, gifted church. They were also a first class mess. Now we don’t know all the specifics of what Paul was dealing with, but we can figure out the categories. We know that the Corinthians were prone to immorality. The pagan worship they came from included excesses of food, drink and illicit sex. They came from a party lifestyle that had been wrapped in religious words. And they didn’t want to give up old habits. We also know the Corinthians were gullible when other teachers came to them. Some rivals of Paul came teaching the Corinthians that they needed to keep all the Jewish laws if they

wanted to be true followers of Christ. They accused Paul of corrupting the Scriptures. So some became legalists while others were libertines. Moreover, some of the Corinthians rebelled against Paul's leadership. They questioned his motives and his integrity. They also had rivalries with each other. The rich lorded it over the poor. Jealousies erupted over gifting and leadership. Their worship services became disjointed and chaotic. It's not easy to become formed in Christ. There's not a smooth path to a church becoming mature. People are people and it's a messy business. But in these verses today, we can identify three key principles in Paul's leadership that can help us grow as people who pursue Jesus in community with others. They help us become a distinctive community which can bless the world.

**1) Heartfelt Engagement.** In the New Testament, we have 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, two letters that Paul sent to the church in Corinth. But we know that there was also another letter Paul wrote to them. In between what we call 1<sup>st</sup> and what we call 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians was a letter that was not preserved. Scholars call it the Severe Letter. In that lost letter, Paul confronted the problems in the church sternly. He did not overlook sin. He did not suffer challenges to a leadership he received directly from Christ. But, and here's the key point, Paul's strong leadership arose from a heart totally devoted to the Corinthians.

He says, "I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart, and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love I have for you" (2: 4). The Corinthian rebellion against Paul made his heart hurt. Is this your usual reaction to someone accusing you or contradicting you? My usual response to someone questioning my integrity is angry defense. Disrespect me and I want to go to battle. My usual response to people in our church doing stupidly destructive things is exasperation. Really? How did he think that was going to play out? Did she not think, for two seconds, how all this would end up if she followed that path? What's the matter with people?

Now I know Paul got exasperated with his congregations. And we have evidence in 2 Corinthians that he would indeed defend himself against personal attacks. But first he let his own heart feel something deeper. Paul let the strife in the Corinthian church break his heart. He let their rebellion against his teaching make him cry. Not over his bruised ego. But because he was secure that he was telling them the truth. Their turning away from Paul was turning away from Christ, and it gave him anguish for them to turn to error. Paul carried the weight of the churches upon his soul. Their turmoil afflicted him personally.

Last spring as we studied the Lord's Prayer, we noted how much pain we have to open ourselves to if we truly pray, "Your kingdom come." We look out on the broken, heaving, chaotic world and receive the pain of so much lostness. To pray "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" means no longer being indifferent to the world and its suffering. It means reckoning with how far the world is from doing God's will and crying in our hearts that this is not right. When Jesus taught, "Blessed are those who mourn," he meant this kind of heartfelt engagement with the world. It's much easier just to get angry over the world. To join the polarization train and blame everything on "those people." Or, we can just withdraw, turn off the news and keep ourselves to ourselves. Anger and indifference are both ways to avoid pain.

Paul wouldn't do that. He loved so deeply that he felt the pain of the Corinthian problems. He didn't write them off. He didn't just slam them. He wrote truth to them, but he did so out of anguish of heart and with many tears.

Are we willing to cry for each other? When we offer criticism, this is the test: does it come out of anguish, not just anger? Do we care enough for each other to let the messes we make break our hearts?

**2) What each one does effects all of us.** Paul tells the Corinthians that the one causing him pain by his rebellion and false teaching actually causes pain to the whole church. "If anyone has caused [me] pain, he has caused it to all." We are all interconnected. The church is the body of Christ. An aching toe can make your whole body feel miserable. A runny nose can diminish how your whole body performs. A headache clouds your thinking. Of course. Our bodies have several systems, but we are still one person.

Now this is not the way we usually think. We have such radical individualism in our culture that it has caused us to go blind to how connected we are to each other. We hear all the time that each person is a sovereign self. I belong to no one but me. What I do is my business. Then we add, "As long as it doesn't hurt anyone." But we define hurting someone in only the most obvious and exaggerated forms. We have gone blind to the emotional and spiritual hurt we can cause each other and the body as a whole.

By contrast, I love to celebrate half-century marriages because I believe that such commitments are holding our communities together more powerfully than we usually realize. 50 year marriages are like mighty oaks. We shelter under their

shade even as we take for granted that they are always there. They anchor the rest of us.

- So do parents who love their children with consistent rhythms, loving rules and defined boundaries.
- So do people who work faithfully in a job for decades.
- So do people who spend responsibly, pay their bills every single month and don't cheat other people, especially not their relatives.
- So do the people who pray through the night, or gather with others to pray for the needs of the church, day after day and month after month.
- So do people who are open handed with their resources, giving to others responsibly but generously.
- So do people who keep their word and show up wherever and whenever they say they will.
- So do people who support and encourage the body, quietly, loyally keeping us together not pulling us apart.

We effect each other more than we realize. Quiet, steady faithfulness is seldom noticed, but it's the glue that holds everything together. Sadly, we see the truth of this when we see how pain ripples through a family or a church body. I wanted to cry when a student at Gardere said to me one day, "If I was the king, I'd make it so mommies and daddies could never leave each other." It stabbed me in the heart to hear, "His son hasn't spoken to him in years, and no one in the family can talk about it." Or, "She's got millions, but her sister can't even get the air conditioning fixed."

When we break faith, the rest of the family, the rest of the church body, the rest of the community has to take up the slack. When one is pained all our pained. That's part of the weight of life we carry these days. It's hard to hold families and churches and communities together. But we must because we are all connected.

**3) Forgiveness creates forgiveness.** Paul wrote very strongly to those who were sinning. He did not avoid conflict or simply overlook destructive behavior. He spoke sternly to those distorting the gospel or upsetting the peace of the church. But he did so not first out of anger or ego, but out of heartbroken concern. He freely acknowledged that those who had caused him pain had grieved the whole body of the church. But he also kept his heart open to forgive and restore. "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive" (vs. 10).

When someone hurts us by letting down the side, we'd like to write them off. You'll never do that to me again! And that's even more likely if you've hurt not me but one of my loved ones. My children have been quicker to forgive people who hurt them than I have. At one point, I had quite a few names on a list with this title, "You are not to call this house or speak to my daughter ever again young man!" My daughter has had to tell me years later, "Dad, it's ok. I'm ok now, and he's really not such a bad guy."

People do indeed do stupid, destructive, heart breaking things. And Christ's people are called not to overlook such sin. We name it for what it is. But we are also called to forgiveness and restoration. The point is not to condemn someone to exile forever. When we can nail them with their sin, we are not to go on a lifetime vendetta against them. That would be, Paul says, to fall for the schemes of our adversary the devil. Harm is done by people who break faith with the body. More harm is done by people who won't forgive. More damage is done by people who won't restore the one who has confessed, repented and wants to return to the light.

Paul urges the Corinthians to forgive the man against whom he had written. And he promised the church that their forgiveness of this man would lead to his forgiveness. Anger and condemnation are contagious. But so is forgiveness. One courageous forgiver can bring restoration to a community. When you speak to the one who has wronged you, it signals the body that the hostilities can end. When you sit with one who hurt you, you tell us that reconciliation has come to the body. Forgiveness is not nearly as noisy as condemnation. But it's just as powerful.

Jesus Christ represents a new kind of humanity. He is humanity remade. He is man redirected towards God and one another in love. By his Spirit, Jesus has joined us to his body on earth, the church, the people of God. We live from him as we live for him. And Christ forms us into a body with distinct beliefs and distinct morality and distinct practices of love and faithfulness. He makes us distinct precisely to show a weary and broken world a better way. He calls us to a life that is not emotionally flat and disengaged. Rather we love so deeply our hearts break over each other. He calls us to see how what one does affects the whole. We don't belong just to ourselves, but to one another. And he calls us to a contagious forgiveness that constantly keeps opening the body to receive back those who have come home to their Savior.

We live out this reality weekly in worship. But we know that being a community in Christ requires gatherings for more intimate interactions. Your leadership envisions every member of this body being nurtured in a Sunday school,

a home group, a circle or a Bible study. We're called to be doing life together. For this season of our lives, God has placed us together. We're forming an alternate community to the madness in the world so that the lost and weary can see a better way. The loving life of the church is the witness to the God who is love. We're called to be a body growing organically. We're called to a vivid life of shedding tears for each other, of laughing together over the wonder of our savior, of knowing abundant joy and abounding forgiveness. This is the way God decided to do it. To create his church in the midst of all the messy conflicts, the predictable failings and the constant striving. It takes work. It takes faithful commitment. But we know, deep in our bones, that this is the community we long for in a lonely world. This is the struggle and the joy of belonging to each other in Christ.