

## Sermon, January 24, 2021

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today again we welcome Sean and Evan Beachy who are providing special music. Hopefully before long we can worship in person again. Meanwhile if you would like to help support our ministries and benevolence commitments, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Please note our annual congregational meeting will be a virtual Zoom event next Sunday at noon. You have been sent the Zoom invitation and the dial-in number for those who want to participate by telephone. If you did not receive or have misplaced the invitation, please call the church office. Now today's stupid joke—which today is appropriately about fishing.

Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he'll buy an ugly hat.

*Music*

**The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, by grace alone you call us and accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and make us worthy of your call, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, Amen.**

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## **A reading from First Corinthians, the seventh chapter.**

Brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. Here ends the reading.

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## **The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the first chapter.**

Now after John (the Baptist) was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen.

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

## **The Gospel of the Lord**

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**Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.**

Today we read Mark's account of Jesus calling the first disciples, and if you remember, last week we read John's account of the same thing. Although the characters and location have changed, both accounts have Jesus commanding a select few to "Follow him," and they do.

So maybe today we should talk about something else. Our second readings both weeks came from Paul's so-called, "First letter to the Corinthians." And it turns out we will be reading from either First or Second Corinthians quite frequently in the year ahead. So maybe we should first take a look at Paul, the city of Corinth and its famous (or some might say infamous) church.

It was five years ago this week that Donald Trump was criticized for quoting from what he called, "Two Corinthians," but that didn't bother me. Especially since Second Corinthians is an arbitrary title that likely isn't accurate anyway.

Paul's so-called, "First letter to the Corinthians" is probably his most quoted Epistle. But it wasn't really his first letter to them, because in chapter five he refers to an earlier one. Most scholars think that one is lost to us, at least for now. But others think parts of it are incorporated into what we now call his second letter to the Corinthians. Which I guess would really make it Three Corinthians. Some also think Second Corinthians includes parts of another letter as well, which I suppose would be Four Corinthians.

In any case, Paul wrote mostly to churches he founded, either to correct mistakes in theology or behavior or to try to help them resolve internal disputes or divisions. (Wait a minute Scott, are you saying churches have disputes and divisions?) Yes I am. And they have pretty much since the beginning. Anyway, with all those corrective letters addressed just to them, the church at Corinth was apparently Paul's problem child.

Unfortunately, his various writings to the Corinthians mostly address very specific issues that do not always generalize well, so they are often misunderstood.

To understand the troubles in Corinth it might help to know a little about its location, its history and its people. I'm sure I have talked a little about them before, but I'm guessing a review wouldn't hurt.

Once an important and wealthy Greek city-state, Corinth was destroyed by the Romans in the second century BCE. It lay in ruins for nearly a hundred years. But then Julius Caesar started to rebuild the city, and he and later his adopted son Augustus populated it mostly with displaced foreigners, poor people, trouble makers, ambitious entrepreneurs and freed slaves from all over the nascent Roman Empire.

The Caesars recognized the potential of Corinth, and thought it might provide ambitious folks good opportunities to better themselves and enrich the empire in the process. And they were right—by Paul's time Corinth was a boom town!

The city is strategically located on an isthmus that includes an important east-west trade route, and it connects the northern and southern halves of Greece. Said isthmus separates the Adriatic and Aegean Seas, and it is very narrow at ancient Corinth, which sat between small ports on each sea.

In fact it was so narrow, that in ancient days they used to load ships on large trailers and transport them from one port to the other on a primitive railroad that essentially ran through the middle of town. A bit awkward of a task to be sure, but it knocked several days and hundreds of miles off the trip for passengers and cargo traveling between Europe and Asia by sea. Julius thought they should probably build a canal through Corinth to connect the waterways directly. And they did, but not until 1893.

By Paul's time the population of Corinth was a mixed bag of the upwardly mobile elite and the still-struggling poor. Residents came from widely-divergent backgrounds, with different ethnic identities and cultural norms.

Unfortunately the promise of quick riches, rapid growth, high visibility, wealthy tourists and ambitious business people brought some problems to Corinth. Today people call Las Vegas "sin city." But all the sins of Vegas probably couldn't hold a candle to New Testament-era Corinth.

The city was known throughout the empire for lawlessness, and self-indulgence. Period writings indicate drunken debauchery was a favorite pastime, and the town had a large and popular "red light district."

As I mentioned last week, the Greeks even invented a word based on Corinth's reputation. To be Corinthianized meant to become immoral and materialistic. I suspect Corinth was the number one destination for college students on spring break.

Fortunately for Paul what happened in Corinth didn't stay in Corinth. After founding the church there, Paul left the city but was kept up-to-date on its continuing spats and struggles by a guy named Stephanus, along with two of his friends, and a mysterious group known as "Chloe's people." Some scholars think they were employees of a successful regional business woman. Others guess they were her slaves.

Seems the Corinthian congregation, like many modern Christian congregations on any given day, was sharply divided into two distinct groups: "Us." And "Them." And it didn't much matter what the issue was, folks always seemed to gravitate toward one side or the other.

The wealthy wanted nothing to do with the poor, those with a higher social status didn't get along with folks from the wrong side of the tracks. (And as I mentioned—there actually were tracks!)

The Jews didn't care much for the Greeks, and the feeling was mutual. The free folks were uncomfortable rubbing elbows with former slaves and the servant class. Factor diverse ethnicities into the mix, and "Us" versus "Them" distinctions were all-to-easy to make.

They argued over trivial property disputes, often taking each other to court. One group thought there was nothing wrong with frequenting the red-light district—thinking morality didn't really matter anymore, since Jesus already atoned for their sins, past, present and future. Paul disagreed.

Some thought a particular church member's intimate relationship with his step-mother was just fine. Paul...not so much.

Based on these so-called letters, the Corinthians apparently fought over all kinds of things. Like whether or not it was okay to wear hats in church. Same with jewelry and different hair styles. There were opposing political factions and diverse people leading many different lifestyles.

Some of the issues Paul took on with the troubled Corinthians still divide the Church today. So I'm surprised the lectionary folks didn't just skip over chapter seven—because that's a chapter that deals with something we modern Christians all pretty much agree on. In fact, most of us think Paul got it wrong.

Taken out of context, our three verse Second Reading seems to address all sorts of situations, from the end of the world to marriage to mourning to joy to materialism. But not really. Read the rest of chapter seven and you'll realize this chapter is mostly about marriage. Which Paul was pretty much dead set against.

The late British scholar Dr. Duncan Derrett, a world-renowned expert on ancient Near Eastern law and religion explained that Paul was, in reverse order, addressing the five steps of marriage under Jewish law and

tradition; from betrothal to paying the bride price to losing a daughter vs. gaining a son.

Paul advised those planning to get married to reconsider, and said that widows should never remarry. And while Paul doesn't necessarily insist that married folks separate or divorce, he does say married couples should live like they aren't married. Whatever that means.

But there are two things we should keep in mind before we buy into that: first that Paul earlier conceded that his ideas aren't always God's ideas. And secondly Paul believed the world was ending soon, like any day now, and didn't think it was a good time for folks to be turning their lives upside down, which getting married or divorced tends to do.

It is a shame we didn't include verse seventeen in today's reading, because that's where I think Paul best expressed his overall point of these middle chapters of First Corinthians. It's where he wrote, "Each of us should live the lives to which God calls us,—the life which we were divinely assigned."

So if you are fulfilled in marriage, okay-- stay married. If you aren't, don't. More importantly, don't let ANY other things, including divorce or marriage, or for that matter the opinions of other people about same distract you from your number one duty, which is serving your God.

God made you who you are. Strive to be that person, and as such do your best at what you do best. Come to think of it, that's the pretty much the same point Jesus made in Mark's story of the calling of the disciples.

We didn't learn what Philip or Nathanael did for a living last week, but Mark makes it clear that Peter and Andrew and James and John were fishermen. And today Jesus called these fisherman to fish. This time, for people. To be themselves, and do what they are good at. In other words, to be the people God made them to be. He didn't expect fishermen to preach from pulpits or sing in the choir or go door to door

passing out tracts. As fishermen, he expected them TO FISH! For the glory of God and the benefit of Christ's Church.

His call to us is the same: To be the people God created us to be and not to worry so much what "they" of the "Them" group expect; or for that matter what "we" of the "Us" group think.

To use the specific knowledge and gifts and talents with which we have been endowed by our creator in the service of our Lord, our church, and our neighbors in need.

Regardless of what they look like, how rich or poor they are, or where they come from. Heck, if even those whacky Corinthians could learn to get along like that...then surely so can we.

Amen.

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