

One thing the news of this past week makes clear to me is that tomorrow’s news is unknown to any of us. In such unpredictable times, a path to peace that is both individually transforming and globally effective is welcome and vital. We who follow the Prince of Peace, therefore, have a decisive calling in the world in which we live. Paul begins his epistle to the overly confident, politically complex, habitually conflicted and controversy-ridden community of believers at Corinth with a strong reminder of this very thing—our calling.

Paul opens his letter to the Corinthians by **first** saying they were “*called to be [Christ’s] holy people*” (v. 2), even as he was “*called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus*” (v. 1). When he uses the word “called” he means that we are brought into the Christian life through God’s invitation. And it’s clear Paul thinks all believers are meant to pursue the calling designed for them by God. For Paul, “called” was a dynamic word. He remembers when God called him to preach the Gospel (Acts 9:1-19). And he remembers when God called many of the people to whom he was writing to salvation, not just as individual Christians but as, “*the church of God*” (v. 2). For even as Israel was the congregation of God in Old Testament times, so the church was God’s congregation in New Testament times. Paul wanted the members of this small congregation in Corinth to be reminded that they were a part of that larger historic purpose of God for humankind. In an ordinary greeting Paul has reminded them of the relationship they have to each other and to God in such a way that it will be easier for them to hear his message to them.

Likewise, it’s important for us to remember that in matters of communication, relationships are very important. When I was new to Pittsburgh Presbytery I met with a student under care of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, on which I served, who would be ordained soon after we met. While we had lunch I asked him to tell me everything he knew about the church that had issued him a call—the community, the opportunities, and about the specifics of his move from the seminary campus to his new call. We also talked in general terms about preaching and pastoral care. When we got onto the subject of his role as leader, he surprised me with a suggestion that had been given to him by one of his classmates. “I’ve been told,” he said, “that if I want to make changes at the church, I’d better do it when I first get there because after I’ve been there awhile people will be less likely to follow my leadership.”

This was totally opposite my approach to leadership, but then I realized that in a nation where the average pastor may serve a church only three or four years, this might be a dominant leadership strategy. But I still couldn’t agree with his friend’s suggestion at all. It seemed to imply that the more a pastor and the congregation get to know each other the less they can accomplish. Actually, the opposite is true, for it is the sharing of life experiences and working together through both good and bad times that relationships are strengthened and a larger potential for leadership is created. After almost 27 years working with the “holy people” of Ken Mawr I have a much better sense of our church’s real needs and how best to address them effectively. The new broom may sweep cleanly, but the old broom has the potential to sweep more effectively.

It was Paul’s habit to encourage and praise those with whom he worked—and Corinth was no exception. When we were at our son’s church in Philadelphia over the holidays, I gained a new appreciation for those who care for the youngest members of the congregation in the church nursery. Doing so requires

much patience, care and genuine love. So today I want to praise and encourage all our nursery volunteers. You are a huge blessing to all of us!

Paul made several statements of thanksgiving for what God had done through the church at Corinth. First, he said, *“I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus”* (v. 4). Grace is God’s unmerited favor given to us. It’s a gift. So often in our sinful pride we try to bargain for God’s favor, but this is impossible to do. And eventually we must face the truth that grace is a sheer gift of God. Behind our efforts to try and impress God is the feeling that God will not love us the way we are. And we fall prey to that feeling because we live in a world of people who make us try to earn their love by conforming to their expectations for us. Since we tend to go through life auditioning for the love of others, it seems only natural that we would have to do the same thing with God. But the greatest discovery in life is that nothing in our minds or hearts or actions is hidden from God, and God still loves us.

Second, Christ has brought us spiritual riches. Paul wrote, *“For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge”* (v. 5). Here Paul follows a Biblical tradition of speaking of the relationship with God we are privileged to have in terms of wealth or riches.

In Luke 12 Jesus spoke critically of the farmer who amassed a fortune but was not *“rich toward God”* (v. 21). The themes of spiritual bankruptcy and spiritual wealth are very prominent in the Bible, and for good reason. Those to whom Paul wrote this letter lived in a society that produced great material wealth but then created spiritually bankrupt people. Sound familiar? In a society that thinks of nothing but making money and having fun there is a noticeable deterioration in the quality of life. When the worth of self and of persons is diminished, the quality of relationships drops. Soon, distinctions between right and wrong fade and values are distorted; there is pressure to act on evil impulses. This was precisely the mood and pattern of life in first century Corinth, but it’s also a fairly accurate description of most cities today.

Paul’s claim is that in a world of such spiritual poverty Christ has *enriched* the lives of those to whom he is writing. Paul is pointing to some past action in their lives and could have referred both to their conversions and to whatever growth they had subsequently experienced. My first inclination upon reading Paul’s opening lines was to think that it must have been a tongue-in-cheek statement since Paul will soon write to them about their lack of love and unity. But Paul was not making a comparison between who they were and who they ought to be. Rather, he was thinking of the kind of people they were and the kinds of lives they had lived before Christ had come into their lives. Measured against their pagan neighbors or even against their former selves it was perfectly clear that Christ had *enriched* their lives. They had confirmed the gospel in their own experience. The life that grasps the truth of God is rich.

Years ago, after a funeral at a local funeral home I rode in the procession to the cemetery for the interment. This particular burial was at Allegheny Cemetery in Lawrenceville. I remember thinking as we entered the stone gates of the cemetery that many famous residents of Pittsburgh were buried there. Thomas Alexander Mellon was buried there about 112 years ago. Mr. Mellon is best known as the founder of Mellon Bank and patriarch of the Mellon family. But the person whom we buried on that day had no such legacy. She was known, however, as a person whose life God had enriched, and hers was a kind of wealth that lasts forever. I think I would prefer her legacy.

Third, God has given us great potential. Later in the letter Paul would devote three whole chapters to the understanding of gifts and their use in the church, but here in this early thanksgiving section he thanks God that, “*you do not lack any spiritual gift*” (v. 7). He is trying to encourage them, and us, with the realization that God has held back no gift, no grace, no blessing, that would help them to do his work and be his church in Corinth. Paul isn’t suggesting that they are even aware of all their gifts or begun to develop them, but he wants them to see that by virtue of having accepted Christ, they have received special gifts. One of the great insights of the Scripture that we need to be aware of and to claim is that God has already given us the gifts which we need to do his work and will.

The small country congregation that I served in 1983 following seminary graduation had a vision for ministering to the families of the South Side school district that had been impacted by the downturn in the steel industry in Beaver County. We organized a co-op ministry among eight area churches to distribute food and good used clothing to anyone in need. A reporter from the Beaver County Times came to interview us and the next week I was embarrassed to my photograph was attached to the article about our work. I mention that ministry because I strongly believe that great untapped resources, whether in Corinth or in the church today, are in the wonderful variety of gifts God has given to his people.

Fourth, in his thanksgiving Paul reminds his friends of the ultimate hope they have in Jesus Christ. It seems strange to find a reference to the second coming of Christ right here in his opening words of the greeting. But what Paul is trying to do is to set the problems which they now face in the context of eternity. He wants them to be “*blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (v. 8) and then he emphasizes that the basis of hope is not their good works but the fact that “*God is faithful*” (v. 9). It’s so easy to get bogged down in today’s failures that we lose sight of the ultimate victory we have in Christ.

Ken Chafin says that “My grandmother lived with our family for a few years while I was in junior high school. Grandmother loved to read, and often I would find some author she enjoyed and check a book out of the school library for her. But every time I brought her a book, she would open it to the last chapter and read that first. This both amazed and upset me because it seemed to me that would take all the fun out of reading the book. One day I just couldn’t stand it any longer, and I asked her why she always read the last chapter first. Without a moment of hesitation she said, “If I don’t like the way a book ends, I don’t see any sense wasting my time reading it” (*The Communicator’s Commentary*, Vol. 7 ©1985 Word, Incorporated, by Kenneth Chafin, p. 31).

As I read the opening lines of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, I think that many Christians today need to take a page from Ken’s grandmother. We of course know what’s in the last chapter, and this means that we can live in the present with confident faith. I believe Paul wanted to assure his Corinthian friends right up front that their future was as secure as the promises of God.

When we engage in spiritual hand-wringing, when we act as though reversals of fortune are permanent, we must remember that our hope is based on the *grace and peace* of God that allows us to believe, no matter our circumstances or tomorrow’s news headlines, there will come a day when life will overcome death, when love will overcome hate, when good will overcome evil, and the kingdom of God will triumph over the kingdoms of this world.

This is the life to which we are *called*. We are all “*called to be [God’s] holy people.*” No exceptions.
Amen.