

Rev. Dr. Camille Cook Howe
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.

January 15th, 2023
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
Tattoos for the Heart

A minister friend of mine told this story, “I was visiting with Jean more than a year after the death of her husband. She said, “We were married for 53 years. I can’t remember not being married. There is nothing that I do now that seems complete. He was a part of everything.” I said, “He surely loved you.” And she said with amazement in her voice, “He did, didn’t he. That’s unbelievable. I never really understood why he loved me. But he did.” She said, “I know a million reasons why he shouldn’t have loved me, but I guess they didn’t matter in the long run.”

There are lots of reasons not to love each one of us. We have a long list of flaws, shortcomings, regrets, mistakes, and sin. Not one of us is perfect, not even close. Sadly, that is the state of our fallen humanity – lots of reasons not to love us. Apostle Paul was the first pastor at the Church in Corinth. He knew them well. Well enough that when he left on his travels and heard about the ways they had been behaving in his absence he could have just started his letter to them with a long list of reprimands. ‘Dear Corinth, let me count the ways you have screwed things up.’ But that is not at all how Paul begins his letter.

He begins by reminding them of their core identity. “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, call to be saints...I give thanks to my God always for you...the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you. Christ will strengthen you. God is faithful; by him you were called.” Paul begins with this beautiful picture of the church, which is called together as a unit, which has been filled with saints, which has been strengthened by God, to whom God has been faithful.” It is flowery, it is poetic, it is inspiring. This is how Paul greets the church.

And *then* Paul lays out for them the ways they have fallen short. He calls out the divisions that have grown within their church. He calls them arrogant. He tells them they are being sexually immoral. He yells at them for raising their grievances with each other in court. He says that he is horrified at how they are treating the Lord’s Supper. He calls out the rich for being obnoxious. He pulls no punches. But then, most incredibly, he tells them that none of this, none of this behavior, none of these mistakes, none of these violations invalidates the grace of God given through Jesus Christ. “*I know a million reasons why he shouldn’t have loved me, but I guess they didn’t matter in the long run.*” Paul begins reminding the Corinthians that they are loved. Write that on your heart. 1 Corinthians 1:9 – God is faithful. First, God loved you. Second, God was faithful to you. Lastly, God loved you. Tattoo that into the marrow of your soul. That was the starting assumption for Paul, and he wanted it to be heard first and foremost.

Now what many people have learned is that shame is a very powerful tool, a weapon really. Shame doesn’t say to someone they have done something bad. Shame says you did that things because you are bad. Shame says you are not worthy. Shame says you are not loveable. Shame makes you lose your self-esteem and self-worth. Sadly, for a long-time religious institutions and religious folks have used shame to do crowd control. You all are bad, bad people who need this religion. Paul, who seems like the kind of guy who might have enjoyed naming and shaming, does he not take this approach. Paul begins by telling them just how good they are. You are church of Jesus

Christ. You have been called by God, the Almighty. You are saints. Not one spiritual gift is lacking among you. You people are good, good people, who are equipped to serve. You are fundamentally lovable.

When Yogi Berra was asked about his slipping batting average he said, “Slump? I ain’t in no slump...I just ain’t hitting.” That’s a different way to frame it.

Paul framed his letter in a particular way. He did not want to tell them they were bad. He wanted to remind them that they were good. They just weren’t playing very well together. It was a different approach. First, remind them how good they are then help them see the right way to live. It was the way Paul himself needed to be called from his own sinful and misguided ways, “Paul, Paul you are better than this. Paul, you are called to serve. Paul, you are equipped with extraordinary gifts. Paul, I call you by name you are mine. Paul, You are deeply loved.”

“I know a million reasons why he shouldn’t have loved me, but I guess they didn’t matter in the long run.”

What if we started every day with that reminder. We are called to be saints. We are profoundly good. We are loved by God. We have been equipped for unique callings in the world. Instead of waking up to see the bad news that happened overnight. Or waking up to scroll through social media to make us feel bad about ourselves. Or looking at our calendar and feeling tired before we even get started. How about starting our day with a reminder of our core identity. Identity rooted in being truly and deeply loved. Beginning with loved rather than shame; fundamentally changes how we see ourselves.

In a high school Sunday School class in a Presbyterian Church on the first day of the class the longstanding teacher named Cal was leading a lesson about times in the wilderness. “Let me tell you a story,” the Cal said...” A recent University graduate set off on a road trip for an Alabama football game. He and his buddy started drinking before they left, drank the whole way to the game, drank through the game, and drank their way home. He was too drunk to make it up the stairs into his apartment where his young bride had waiting up all night worried about him. The next morning, he awoke in a puddle of his own vomit. Do you know who that man was?” Silence from the class. “That was me,” the teacher confessed, (his two teenage children in the class were stunned to hear this story for the first time...) She forgave me, took me back in, and gave me another chance. The next Sunday I began to teach this class and have hardly missed a Sunday. I need this class. I need to be centered in the Word of God.”

“I know a million reasons why he shouldn’t have loved me, but I guess they didn’t matter in the long run.”

God loves us. God’s love for us is profoundly difficult to understand because it is so much more steadfast, loyal, and forgiving than our versions of love for God or for each other. None of the problems the Corinthians were facing changed the identity of the Corinthians. They were still God’s church. They were still called. They were still saints. The church was not defined by the mistakes of its members. The church was defined by God’s sustaining love for them. That inspires us more than anything else to try again when we have fallen short.

When you sit down to read Paul's letter to the Corinthians it is easy to skip over the introduction, thinking that it is some proforma ancient letter writing header that can be just glossed over. Yet the letter really cannot be understood without digesting these first nine verses of the letter. Nine verses to set the framework before launching into sixteen chapters of instructional teaching. Nine verses to set the stage.

1 Corinthians 1:9 – God is faithful. I do not have any tattoos but if I did that would be a strong contender. Because I need that reminder. That while I might waver, I might mess up, I might wander into the wilderness – God will not, God is faithful. Our mistakes do not define us. Our calling as God's children begins with God's remarkable love for each one of us.

Give God a million reasons why God shouldn't love you, but they won't matter in the long run."

Paul's letter is instructional for so many reasons. But one of the take aways is that we should never tell anyone that they are bad. Never tell your children that they are bad. Never tell yourself that you are bad. We all make mistakes, but those mistakes should not define us. All of us are good. All of us are lovable. Start with that assumption and it changes the whole framework. God is faithful. God's love is trustworthy. Tattoo it on your heart and live into that truth with gratitude and humility.

Thanks be to God. Amen.