

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Second Sunday after the Epiphany  
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Lectionary Year A: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

This Sunday and next offer us the opportunity to become acquainted with the opening verses of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. What we might sometimes forget is that these parts of the Scriptures weren't intended to be sacred texts; rather, they were actual letters written to actual people who lived in an actual community. This community is known as Corinth, an ancient Greek city whose ruins are still visible in and around the modern city of Corinth. The Corinth of Paul's time, as you will discover, faced some very real problems such as division, immorality, idolatry, and false teaching.

But before Paul launches into all that nasty stuff, he begins quite graciously, as he writes:

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 -- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you -- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:4-7).

It's pretty clear that, for Paul, there's plenty to be thankful for in spite of all the concerns he has over the Corinthians' situation. Corinth is still a place where God's grace has been poured out, and God has enriched the Corinthians with spiritual gifts. You might call this a strategic move on Paul's behalf --

he's more or less "buttering them up" before he gets to the stuff that's really bothering him. But this is not bad strategy; rather, it puts people in a positive mood so they'll more graciously hear the bad news that Paul has to tell them. And we all know that bad news doesn't "sound" as bad when we're in a good mood.

Today, though, I'm not going to do anything like that with you, because, now that I've let the cat out of the bag, whatever nice things that I say will surely be followed by bad news. Rather than use this time as an opportunity to butter up and tear down, I would like to look at this text from First Corinthians and try to get at the underpinnings of Paul's thought.

Churches with some grounding in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, of which the Episcopal Church would be one, tend to have an affinity for the apostle Paul. Why? One could say that it's because of his theology of grace and good news of Christ crucified and risen. But children of the Reformation have varied considerably in their appropriation of Paul's theology. Some, for example, speak of grace only after talking at length about the bad news -- as in the wrath of God and the damnation that we deserve. And the amount of time devoted to talking about grace is far less than the amount of time devoted to talking about wrath. I'm still not clear about how this is to motivate people into joyful and positive activities beyond the walls of the church. Think about how that would make you feel. If that were your diet of preaching week after week, you'd probably just go home and beat yourself up every Sunday following the service.

If, however, the good news were proclaimed, you might find that to be far more transformational than beating people to death with the bad news. Somewhere in

the world of bumper stickers was one that said, "The beatings will continue until morale improves." I think the point should be pretty clear by now -- you don't get good out of people when you treat them badly. And, unfortunately, the pulpits of the Christian church have been places where harsh and even abusive words have been spoken instead of the good news of Jesus Christ.

That brings us back to the apostle Paul, who was able to recognize the great gift the Corinthians (and we, too) have received in the Gospel that we are to proclaim. Remember Paul's words, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus..." (1 Corinthians 1:4). The underpinnings of Paul's thought are based on the good news of Christ crucified and risen for us -- and thus, all of his argumentation for whatever cause or purpose points to the ways in which the Christian community ought to act accordingly.

Therefore, if you have been blessed by the grace of God in the good news of Christ Jesus, there is an expectation that you behave as a blessed person. You ask, "How would a blessed person behave?" Well, I might say that he or she would be loving, patient, kind, thankful, and gracious. We can't be like this all the time, but when we count our blessings, we might find it coming a little easier.

The opposite could be said of a cursed person, or one who is clearly not blessed. He or she would be hating, impatient, rude, ungrateful, and unpleasant. But what the apostle Paul found out was that the Corinthians weren't "cursed" people. Whatever hate, impatience, rudeness, ungratefulness, and unpleasantness they showed forth had nothing to do with being cursed, but had everything to do with not living according to their blessings.

Speaking personally, I made a big change in my life just over one year ago; I found that there was something preventing me from living according to my blessings. In fact, for the most part, I was capable of seeing ways that I was cursed, and not much else. But, with the help of my favorite beer, wine, or liquor, I could anesthetize myself against having to deal with my resentment, sadness, and anger. People in recovery, including myself, will tell you that this works...up to a point. If you do not deal with these things, your addiction will kill you (if you don't kill someone else in the process). Recovery has given me the opportunity to not feel hopeless, abandoned, and victimized, and, in fact, it has opened to door to projects and challenges I never would've considered a year ago or more. For example, I never would've painted a car; I would've just talked about it...and then cracked open another Budweiser!

All of this has been a way for me to live according to my blessings. God has given me my life, and God has called me to do something with it -- in my personal as well as my professional life. Now, as we shift back to the general from the personal, why would blessed people -- who likely don't have a problem with addiction -- behave badly? Yes, blessed people have the grace of God poured out on them, God has provided them with everything they need, and they have every other possible blessing and creature comfort they would ever want. Still, though, there's hate, impatience, rudeness, ungratefulness, and unpleasantness. Why doesn't God's grace wipe it all away? Well, there's still sin -- not sin in the sense of "moral transgression" or "wrongdoing"; instead, sin here is the separation from God and his gracious will. When sin rears its ugly head, it does so where people have stopped counting their blessings. In my case, drinking only encouraged this bad habit; with others, it might just come naturally.

Regardless, Paul takes the approach of gently reminding the people of Corinth of their many blessings, which maybe will make them say to themselves, "Oh yeah, that's right." They then will be able to see things in a different light and behave better...or, more clearly put, behave according to their blessings.

It should be abundantly clear that we are a blessed people -- blessed with life, love, and salvation. Now is the time to recognize where our blessings come from: Christ himself. Christ is the Word made flesh and comes to bless us in word, water, bread, and wine. It is through the regular partaking of these precious means of grace that we are formed into loving, patient, kind, thankful, and gracious people. Thus, behaving according to our blessings means sharing the grace that God has given us, because God's grace doesn't do the world much good if we're hostile, petty, or angry toward someone else for whatever reason.

As we have been blessed, let us be a blessing to others. As we have been given the grace of God, let us share the grace of God with others. As we have spiritual gifts, let us offer them to others. The reason why factions, disputes, and even wars break out in the name of God is because people forget that they have something good to share with each other. My job is not entirely unlike that of the apostle Paul's, which is to remind you of "the grace of God that has been given [to] you" and that you have many blessings to count. Sure, there will always be challenges ahead, but if you just take a moment and see the abundance of gifts and talents around you, you'll see that there's nothing that we can't do, provided we remain within the laws of physics. May we draw from the abundance around us, remembering always that it is with God's amazing grace that we are continually blessed.

Amen.