

## What's Behind Door #3

Folks, I'll be away the next two Sundays. Given the logistics involved, my guess is there will be a hiatus in emailing/snail mailing the sermon until I return on March 6th. Your understanding is appreciated. - Rev. Mike

### **1 Corinthians 15:12-20**

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead,  
how can some of you say  
there is no resurrection of the dead?

If there is no resurrection of the dead,  
then Christ has not been raised;  
and if Christ has not been raised,  
then our proclamation has been in vain  
and your faith has been in vain.

We are even found to be misrepresenting God,  
because we testified of God that he raised Christ —  
whom he did not raise  
if it is true that the dead are not raised.

For if the dead are not raised,  
then Christ has not been raised.

If Christ has not been raised,  
your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

Then those also who have died in Christ have perished.

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,  
we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead,  
the first fruits of those who have died.

## **What's Behind Door #3**

I Corinthians 15:12-20

February 13, 2022

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

### **I.**

I begin today by telling you that when I sat down to write this sermon, I had absolutely no idea where it would go, and no sense of what I was being called to say about this passage from 1 Corinthians. Unlike the Old Testament and Gospels with their parables, stories, and interesting characters which allow for great latitude in understanding and interpretation, the Pauline epistles are just flat out words and ideas with very little cover, and precious few diversions. In other words, where the Old Testament and Gospels are really fun to preach, the Pauline epistles are either very *easy* to preach, very *hard* to preach, or, you don't preach them at all.

### **II.**

I was raised in an evangelical Presbyterian Church where just about 50 out of the 52 Sundays in a year you would hear a sermon preached from one of Paul's letters: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, or last but not least, Philemon. Biblical scholars are quite confident that some of these letters were actually written by Paul while others were, perhaps, written by a disciple of Paul who claimed Pauline authorship not for purposes of deception, but to merely indicate that here are ideas in keeping with what Paul *might* have said or *would* have said if he wasn't traveling, or in jail, or in some other way indisposed. These "pseudo-Pauline" letters, as they are called, consist of: 2nd Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. This leaves us seven *undisputed* Pauline letters: 1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, Galatians and Paul's great opus, Romans.

### **III.**

One must always remember when reading Paul, that these letters were not written for you and me. Whereas the rest of the bible has been written to either preserve history for you, or tell you a story, or teach you a lesson, or to explain how things have come to be this way, each of Paul's letters was written

to address a particular problem or issue, in a particular church, at a particular time, which, is not our own. So one must be a little careful with Paul, one must recognize that the sword he wields although sharp indeed, was not meant for us.

After Paul died, all these letters just sat around on a shelf gathering dust for about a hundred years. Then, along came Marcion, a heretic, who eventually got him excommunicated. He dug out these old letters and started using Paul's explicitness for his own purposes. Basically what he said was this: the Christian Gospel was wholly a Gospel of Love to the absolute exclusion of the law, leading him to a complete rejection of the Old Testament. According to Marcion, Paul was the the only one who fully understood this.

#### **IV.**

Now, given this dubious beginning, it is a wonder that Paul's letters have even survived to reach us today. Marcion enjoyed only a brief period of success, but he did manage to leave us a legacy which is both beneficial, and problematic. We owe great thanks to Marcion, because in many ways his ideas so consternated the early church that they set about to systematically compile a scriptural canon, the end result of which is the bible which sits before you in the pew.

The downside of Marcion's little endeavor is that he began what has become a long tradition of using Paul as a hammer to establish theological and ecclesiastical absolutes, usually to the exclusive benefit of one particular group or ideology. Take just this one example 1 Cor. 14:34-35:

*Women should be silent in the churches.*

*For they are not permitted to speak,*

*but should be subordinate, as the law also says.*

*If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.*

*For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*

Oh, Poppy Cock!

#### **V.**

This does not mean, however, that we should throw the baby out with the bath water. Just as did the early church, we must recognize the great value of the totality of Paul's ideas, and see Paul not as a hammer to wield against others, but as a gentle breeze which God has sent to caress us. No

contributor to the bible has a better grasp of what God is doing through Christ, than the Apostle Paul. The guy is deep, he gets it, he is in tune with the profundity of the cross, and the radical nature of God's action in human history. Paul is a heavy dude, sure enough. But, you have to know where he is coming from and you need to understand him not in *isolation* from the rest of scripture, but rather, in the context of the big picture being painted by the bible, which is informed by the Spirit, as we move through the history of our planet.

## VI.

We know from the 18th chapter of Acts, that it was Paul himself who founded the church at Corinth. And, judging from his two letters, we can see that the relationship between Paul and the church was disturbed from time to time by doubts and suspicions on both sides. Paul writes his first letter in order to contend with divisions and disorder in the church caused by doctrinal and ethical problems; the net result of which was one very disturbed and disturbing congregation. They had questions about marriage, and their status as believers in a society which did not share their beliefs. They were confused about how to deal with the pagan practices going on all around them. Most significantly, though, they were struggling to understand how to live and worship together in community. Issues which were specific to the Corinthians, but certainly not limited only to that church. So, unable to make a visit, Paul decides to write a letter which is both theologically articulate and pastoral in concern.

## VII.

Look, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, I'm going to break this down for you in the simplest of terms. You say you have all these questions and all these issues which need to be resolved. Fine, we can work on that. But the only way I know to go about this, is to start with the cross.

Was Christ crucified and raised from the dead, or wasn't he? If he *didn't* die, that is if didn't experience the full range of human reality, then resurrection wasn't necessary, and we are a people to be pitied because we are just wasting our time here. If he *did* die but *wasn't* resurrected (that is if he didn't conquer death) than his death is of no value to us, and our faith is futile and in vain because all of this has been a false alarm. However, if he *did* indeed die, and we if *do* believe that he was raised from the dead, then what

I'm saying to you is that we may also expect to be raised from the dead with him: he, who is the first fruits of those who have died.

## **VIII.**

So, this morning I ask you to consider the Apostle Paul. Do you not want to hear him at all? Do you you want to hear him easy? Or, do you want to hear him hard? Is this life just about putting one foot in front of the other in order to keep up with the Jones? If so, you can skip Paul, because you are living in a world without hope or promise; a hell on earth which makes death seem a welcome sight. No? Ok, how about the easy Paul? Where you hear what you *want* him to say about us having all the answers, so now we can use our life together as a hammer to try to save others? Or, will you take what is behind door #3, and listen to the "hard" Paul who says, we may not have all the answers to our questions, but we do have a place to start: by believing that God has sent Christ into the world and conquered death so that we might, now, be about the business of enjoying this new life Christ won for us, in our families, in our society, endeavoring to live and worship together in an authentic and truth-telling community which feels to us like a gentle breeze God has sent to caress, renew and restore us.

## **IX.**

Tomorrow I will begin a two week break which, frankly, is much needed having written a sermon for what is now 20 consecutive Sundays (a record I care not to repeat). Chris Remick has graciously agreed to preach next week, and the following week which is Transfiguration Sunday. Upon my return, on March 6th, we will begin the liturgical season of Lent.

Though some might construe today's sermon to be a tad "dry" (and I know I do) it is important for us to review and remind ourselves of the basics and basis of our faith every now and again; particularly as we head into Lent. First of all, lots of folks in our society may do many of the same things which we do as a congregation; albeit for very different reasons. Though from the *outside*, we may appear much the same, the rationale at work on the *inside* is quite different and distinct; in short, theology matters.

## **X.**

Which brings us to the second, and more important point: it is the *theology* which matters most. Not in terms of theory but, as Paul very well understood in saying what he did to the church at Corinth, in terms of *practical* application in our very own lives. Especially when the going gets tough, and it most assuredly will; for each of us and for all of us. In those moments of life filled with trial, tribulation, profound sadness, conflict, heart-ache, and bone-aching grief, having easy answers to life's most challenging questions will in no way suffice. In fact, at the end of the day, such questions may simply have no answers at all. How then, do we persist in living with such questions; and to do so with hope, and purpose and no small amount of joy? Paul's answer? Our answer? By knowing where to begin, and where to end. That God sent Christ not to judge the world, but so the world might be save through him; and we along with it. Amen.