

SLD05.01.05
Emory Presbyterian Church
I Cor 15:1-11
Jill Oglesby Evans

“A Mess of a Man of God”

Today's text from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth reveals a great deal about the person and personality of the Apostle, and, I believe, the nature of his faith. To be sure, the primary thrust of Paul's message is his deep conviction about the saving grace of Jesus Christ. But along with learning about Paul's deep commitment and perseverance in sharing that grace, we also glimpse something of Paul as an ordinary human being, flawed, struggling, divided, perhaps even tormented, as he pioneers evangelism and new church development throughout the Gentile world. It's the transparency of Paul's nature in the text, at least as I hear it, that I hope will teach us something not only about the apostle, but also about the nature of God's grace.

You remember that the book of I Corinthians is really a letter. It's Paul's first letter to the little church in Corinth, Greece that Paul had recently founded. In those days just about everybody was new to the Christian faith and only beginning to sort out for themselves what it meant in their largely pagan, largely secular world to be followers of Jesus Christ. And, mostly they got it wrong. I mean, they tried and all but, you know, they didn't have a called pastor and folks were worried about the budget and they felt like they had to increase membership only most people they knew weren't church goers or either went to the biggest temple in the neighborhood, the one that had the best youth programs. Plus, not everybody in the church got along, or agreed about how to go about things, and there was fussing in the church. Well, Paul got wind of all this and decided to write the Corinthians a letter to help straighten them out.

And in his letter he said things like ‘y’all get along,’ and ‘don’t worry about money,’ and ‘take care of each other,’ and ‘reach out to the community,’ all the stuff you’d expect a pastor to say.

But by the time Paul gets to the 15th chapter of his letter – he tended to be a man of many words - he says to the Corinthians, he says, ‘Now look, here’s the thing. In fact, here’s the most *important* thing you need to know, and it doesn’t have anything to do with the size of your church or getting along or taking care of business. It’s just this - Christ died for our sins. He was buried, and then he rose again on the third day. That’s it. As Christians, that’s the most important thing you need to know. The very foundation of our faith is the mysterious, awesome, death-conquering, life-giving resurrection of Jesus Christ. So hold firmly to that good news, for it is of *first* importance.”

But then, you know, Paul’s been around. He’s been a traveling preacher and teacher for a while now and he knows how these Corinthians think. He knows what makes sense to them and what doesn’t. And the resurrection doesn’t. I mean, they’re Greeks, for heaven’s sake, and the minds of Greeks hail from the likes of Plato and Aristotle. Greeks are thinkers, philosophers, scientists, politicians and computer geeks, and they like for things to make sense. And as thinker, philosopher, and political Paul knows only too well, the resurrection flat doesn’t make sense.

So in the second part of today’s text, Paul makes a stab at solidifying a reasonable case for the resurrection by enumerating all, or at least, most, of the people who witnessed Jesus in the flesh after his resurrection. (For some reason, he leaves out Mary Magdalene, whom scripture records as the first to see the resurrected Jesus.

For one creative spin as to why, see [The Da Vinci Code](#).) In any case, Paul does mention everybody else including Cephas, who is Peter, and the twelve disciples, and the apostles, and the 500 brothers and sisters to whom Jesus appeared en masse. He lets the Corinthians know, too, that, most of these folks are still alive, in case anybody wants personally to confirm what they say they saw.

And finally, says Paul as he comes to end of his list of eye witnesses, there's one more somebody to whom Jesus appeared. Nobody important, really. Probably not even worth mentioning. Really, it was to the least of the apostles. Not even somebody fit to be called an apostle, since he persecuted Christians before he was converted. I mean I shouldn't even speak the name of this miserable wretch of a sinner to you. Oh, okay, I will. It was me. Jesus also appeared to me. Sort of.

I mean, I'm not making this up, am I? This really is how Paul is presenting himself in this passage isn't it? Isn't that how you hear him? Self-effacing? Equivocating? Practically groveling? Not the confident, assertive Paul we hear in most of the epistles.

What's going on for Paul here? When it comes to his relationship with Jesus, why does he feel like he's on such shaky ground?

Well, for one thing, we just heard Tim read the account in Acts about the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Remember how the passage ended? "And Saul approved of their killing him." That was Paul's first name, his Jewish name, 'Saul.' And Saul/Paul endorsed of the stoning of Stephen by the elders and priests of the synagogue. Elsewhere in Acts (9:1) it says that he, Saul/Paul "breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." Got a pretty spotty history behind his claim to

apostle-hood, doesn't he? No wonder he waffles.

But there's another reason Paul equivocates regarding his right to the Christian party card – and he's got a pretty big chip on his shoulder about this – you see...Paul never actually met Jesus. Not in person, anyway, like all the other guys.

All the other guys got to meet Jesus and hang out with him. Peter, James and John, Phillip and Thomas, they all got to listen to the ungarbled Word straight from the Savior's mouth, ask him questions, pray and eat with him, and go on hikes and stuff. All the other guys got to see Jesus in action, watch his moves, read his face, feel his energy, but not Paul. Paul doesn't rate as one of The Big Twelve. Paul's just an apostle, which, in his mind, sort of puts him on the 'B' team.

What's more, to make matters even worse, Paul was the very last one to receive a visitation from Jesus. You know, that's hard not to take personally. I mean, as a Pharisee and a Roman citizen, Paul was pretty accustomed to head-honcho status in the holy hierarchy. And, you know what else? Not only does Jesus' appearance to Paul come last of all, it doesn't even really rate as a full-blown visitation. All that happens to Paul is, he hears Jesus' voice, they have a chat and Paul goes blind. He never gets to see or touch or eat with Jesus the way all the others get to do during *their* post-resurrection experiences with Jesus. I mean, Paul's experience counts and all, but on a divine visitation scale of one to ten?, we're talking maybe a six and a half. If we stretch it. And Paul knows it, and feels pretty bad about it.

In the latter half of today's text, we can hear just how bad. "Jesus appeared to me last of all," he confesses to the Corinthians, "as to one untimely born," as to some malformed, premature baby nobody wanted in the first place. "I am the least of the

apostles,” he says, “unfit even to be *called* an apostle.” And he has a point. Certainly when he's in the mood, *nobody* gets more self-effacing than the Apostle.

But he can't quite stay there, do you notice? Paul can't quite pull off that whole self-flagellating, self-effacing routine because, for one thing, he's human, and like a lot of us, fundamentally Paul's pretty high on himself. Another reason that morsel of humble pie gets stuck in Paul's throat is that he really does, as he can't help pointing out to the Corinthians, he really does work harder than any of the other disciples. In fact, those Greeks are bound to miss the larger picture if they don't get the fact that when it comes to evangelism, mission and new church development, Paul's pretty much off the apostolic chart. As he explains, *nobody* works harder than Paul. Matter of fact, in the entire Christian communion of the day, there is simply nobody who travels more, converts more, comforts more, teaches or preaches more, or, for that matter, suffers more, than the good Apostle, of which unswerving reality he never tires of reminding his readers.

One of my favorite greeting cards of all times has a quote on the front of it from the eleventh chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. It reads, “three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked, and for twenty-four hours I was adrift on the open sea. I have been constantly on the road; I have met dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my fellow countrymen, dangers from foreigners, dangers in towns, dangers in the country, dangers at sea, dangers from false friends. I have toiled and drudged, I have often gone without sleep; hungry and thirsty, I have often gone fasting; and I have suffered from cold and exposure.” You open the card and on the inside it asks, “So, how have

you been?"

That's the Apostle Paul - a man of endless vacillation between self-deprecation and self-aggrandizement with a complex and changeable nature ever minimized by the faithful, puzzling to scholars and fascinating to shrinks. I just finished a novel about Paul by Walter Wangerin Jr. Entitled simply Paul, professor Wangerin manages with imagination and depth to weave an intimate tapestry of Paul's complexity that reveals just how flawed and powerful a human being he must have been. [Paul: A Novel, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Mich., 2000.]

As both a biblical character and a conflicted human being, the Apostle has fascinated me for a long time, ever since I was a kid. Who first introduced me to the Apostle was my grandmother, Gongga, to whom Paul was a source of both wisdom and mild annoyance. Now throughout my childhood, Gongga was the well-established and much loved matriarch of my extended family. To the outside world, her husband, my grandfather, the Rev. Dr. Stuart Oglesby, pastor of Central Church in downtown Atlanta for 30 years, was the official family saint. But inside the Oglesby clan, Gongga was the gray eminence, the power behind the throne, the far more accessible, and reliable, dispenser of indisputable truths, biblical and otherwise.

And what Gongga had to say about the Apostle Paul was, "he talks too much. He talks too much, complains too often, brags too loud, and is otherwise forever meddling in other peoples' business." That's what Gongga said. She wasn't mean about it or anything, but just because Paul and his writings were canonized didn't put him above her having an opinion about him. And as far as Gongga was concerned, you just had to take the Apostle Paul with a grain of salt. It wasn't that she wasn't fond of him but the

affection Gonga had for Paul was like toward a tiresome older brother who only occasionally says something worth listening to. And since Gonga seemed easily old enough to be Paul's sister, I pretty much took her word for it. I suppose I still do.

Because the way I hear it, today's lesson from I Corinthians comes to us from a mortal mess of a Man of God, a self-effacing, self-important, whiny, loquacious, preachy sort of fellow with a questionable background, who goes around with a chip on his shoulder because he wasn't one of the Big Twelve. Which bears remembering as we listen again to what I believe to be Paul's special word to us today.

Here it comes now...from the second half of the passage, stuck right at the end of his diatribe about what a dismal but disciplined, unworthy, unimportant but invaluable but unsurpassable disciple he is, when this mortal mess of a Man of God says, "But by the grace of God, I am what I am."

That's it. That's what jumped right out at me from the mouth of this highly complex, deeply conflicted, stunningly passionate, occasionally poetic and frequently annoying mess of man of God – "By the grace of God, I am what I am."

Now I recognize these words might not convey the central point Paul's trying to make in this passage – after all, what he's *trying* to establish with the Corinthians is the primary importance of the revelation that Jesus died for our sins and was resurrected on the third day. That, and something about his complex self and how he came to this confession.

But something about those vulnerable words, coming as they do right after Paul's revealed so much of his history and personality to us, speaks to me of how Jesus' resurrection worked itself into Paul's own life. After all, he and Gonga just

sketched out for us why we should regard Paul as such a mixed bag. He persecuted Christians. Endorsed the stoning of a man. Hunted the faithful. Never met Jesus. Heard voices. Went blind. Saw truth. Works hard, travels a lot, preaches, teaches, and gets under peoples' skin. And *all* that is by the grace of God?

That's what I hear. I hear Paul clumping not just the good stuff about his life under the category of God's grace, but also the pain and suffering and mistakes of his past, the cruelty and misery he imposed on others, his annoying personality, and all the rest of his flawed, hyperactive, struggle-filled existence that led him to this point in his life.

"By the grace of God, I am what I am. As far as I'm concerned, those words hold a whole lot more meaning when they come from a sinner than they do when they come from a saint. So what I want us to do today is to see past Saint Paul to Sinner Paul and hear the radical faith, and even the surrender, of *this* confession of his. Because I think what we're offered here is a glimpse of the radical, unapologetic self-acceptance that comes from looking at the whole package of one's messy existence through the loving, redeeming eyes of God.

I think Paul's showing us how, through God's power and grace, all the complications and ambiguities of our serpentine lives end up making a kind of sense, or might one day, when God gets through with us. Even the parts we hate, or fight, or hide, or are ashamed of - all our dark corners and rough edges and broken centers - it's all raw material to the grace of God, with which God intends to do God's kingdom work.

'Course I don't mean to cast any aspersions, here. Maybe none of y'all has any

bad habits. Or history. Maybe nobody here besides me has ever acted selfishly or self-destructively, or hurt someone, or disappointed God. But in case you're like me and have a shadow side, too, then maybe you have some idea about just how hard it is to *bless* what we like least about ourselves, never mind claim it as God's grace.

But that's what I hear Paul doing in this text and I admire him for it. I mean, nobody messed up more than Paul before his conversion, and to be honest, he isn't all *that* easy to live with afterwards, either. But that doesn't stop this particular mess of a man of God from declaring the whole mixed bag of his life as a gift from God, redeemed by the saving death of Jesus Christ, and salvaged by the Holy Spirit to do God's work in the world.

And I say, if Paul's life is any example, it's as though God's love reaches deep into our darkest places, using our own shadow to teach us about the grace of God's light. A persecutor of Christians becomes Christianity's most famous evangelist. A crack-addict admits her powerlessness over drugs. A pastor-less church re-claims the priesthood of all believers. When seen through the loving, redeeming eyes of God, all the messy challenges of our limited lives become the raw material of redemption, through which God saves the world.

"By the grace of God, I am what I am." "By the grace of God we are what we are." Hear what these words have to say to you, and to Emory Church, about the radical nature of God's gracious love through Jesus Christ. Hear it, receive it, and hold fast to it, for, as Paul reminds us, it is of *first* importance. Then let's get over ourselves, and get on with the work the Holy Spirit is salvaging us to do.

To the glory of God. Amen.