

“Christians Cleaned Up by Jesus”

1 Corinthians 1: 1-9

Today we begin a new sermon series where we will be focusing our attention on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. In this letter, Paul is writing because he has been receiving reports that although the group at Corinth have become “Christians” in name, nothing of their behavior has changed. They were still acting, speaking and doing the same sort of rude and crude behavior that they were doing before they even heard a word about Jesus Christ. The fact that this group had heard the good news, had heard that they were claimed and named as God’s Beloved didn’t even make a dent in changing their behavior. And for Paul, enough was enough.

Now let me stop right there and say, I know last week I did this whole spherical about how we are all God’s Beloved. I did this whole big sermon on how we are enough because God loves us more than we could ever imagine.

And I’m sure that it seems like with this sermon, I’m going to start contradicting myself, that I’m going to start saying that we need to do more to become God’ Beloved. It is almost like one week, we get one preacher and then the

next week, we get a completely different preacher although it is the same person who steps up in the pulpit.

Well, I'd rather think of this sermon as not contradicting myself but rather exploring more deeply what it means for us to be God's Beloved. Sort of like last week was Step 1 and this week is step 2.

Meaning that Step 1 is we actually allow the grace of God to come into our hearts and really start understanding and holding as truth in our lives that we are God's Beloved, holding as truth that we know we are loved more than we could ever imagine, and that this bit of good news is such a gift, a gift that is so life-transforming, so life-giving that we want to know more about it

Which brings us to Step 2. Today's sermon, Step 2 in the process is about gaining the understanding that this "new" identity, which is really our true identity, gaining the understanding that our identity as ones created in the image of God, has implications for the rest of our lives. It has implications on what we do. It has implications for what we say. Thus leading us to a journey in faith, a journey filled with lots of other steps, filled with lots of twists and turns along the way.

So as we process on our journeys of faith, We realize that once we hear the good news that we are God's Beloved, we are transformed. Our eyes are opened to the Kingdom of God in our midst. Once we claim our true identity, we realize that

this is also a way to call us here and now to be and to act as the new creation that God has made us to be through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Or let me say it another way: I always find it ironic, amusing, or yes even a sad commentary on the state of Christianity, that when we find ourselves in traffic, you know those moments in traffic that I am talking about when No car is moving and Tensions are running high. In those moments of traffic, it seems like never fail, that one of the first persons who honks his or her horn, or yells at the other drivers around them, or yes even gives an obscene gesture is also the same person who has the bumper sticker on his or her car that proudly proclaims “God is my co-pilot” or invariably has the vanity plate proudly displayed on the front of the car that says “I’m a member of such and such church. We love everyone.”

Now I know that was just one example and yes I know that there are more. We’ve probably all got some stories like this that we could share that illustrate this point because the fact of the matter is that just because people claim to be Christian doesn’t mean they automatically starting being nice to others. Day after day, we all hear horror stories about how certain people of faith forget what it means to be a person of God. They forget that their actions, their words really convey the picture to the world that this person has never really heard of the grace and love of God, much less allowed that grace and love to truly transform their lives.

Isn't it Funny how a letter written over two thousand years ago still seems relevant for our faith journey today? Isn't it Funny how we as Christians are still having the same conversation. Even today, we as people of faith still can't seem to accept how deep and wide God's grace really is. And isn't it Funny how the Holy Spirit works, preparing us for the journey, showing us examples of how not to be, and filling our lives with experiences that truly do show us how we hope we will be.

Just Last week, we started the journey by reclaiming and renewing our relationship with God. We heard the good news that we are all God's Beloved. And now This week, we are continuing the journey by asking ourselves now that we know we are God's Beloved, how are we going to let this bit of life transforming news shape us into the person God created us to be.

And the starting place for that conversation is acknowledge that it is not enough to simply say we are Christians. Our actions and our words must reflect this bit of transformation as part of our journey of faith. We who understand that we are all created in the image of God, as we continue the process of becoming the people God created us to be must acknowledge that a change in our name is not enough so show the world how much God truly does love us as God's children. We must go beyond that initial step and continue the journey.

And that's where Paul's first letter to the Corinthians comes in. As I said, as modern day Christians, we are still having the same conversation that Paul had with the group at Corinth all those years ago. We are still trying to figure out what it means to allow God's grace and God's love to transform us completely. And unfortunately We still hold a different perception of what it means to be "God's Beloved" than God does.

For most, we hold the understanding that the title "Christian" or "God's Beloved" sets us apart from the rest of the world. And for the most part, Paul completely agrees with this way of thinking. He even goes as far as to use the word, "saints" to describe the people of God, to show that indeed we are set apart as people of faith.

Now we may be a little uncomfortable with this title. We don't tend to think of ourselves as saints. That title is usually reserved for people who do something really amazing like perform miracles or people like Mother Teresa. And to be honest, last time I looked, I was not Mother Teresa.

So what is Paul talking about when he uses the language of "saint"? Well, Paul holds a different understanding of this word than we do, an understanding that is more biblically based. When he is uses the word "saint" to describe all of us,

Paul is thinking in terms of “holy”, meaning set apart for the service of God. And in that sense, we are all holy. We have all been called to be servants of God.

That’s why I say Paul’s understanding of this word is more biblically based. This type of understanding of the word “saint” has always been a part of the vocabulary of the people of God. Even back in the Old Testament times, the people of Israel understood themselves to be special. They understood that they had been set apart, made holy by God, for the use in the service of God. They held the belief that they had been marked by God.

Now here is the biggest difference between Paul’s understanding of that term and the Corinthians’ understanding, all of which has implications for us as modern day Christians and how we should live out that understanding in our lives. Yes, this title of saint, of God’s Beloved should be viewed as a badge of honor but for some among the Corinthians and yes, for some Christians today, it is used to separate, to disassociate. It is used as a way to say, “I’m better than you”

But Paul took a different stance on these titles. He understood that these titles when laid upon our shoulders, when laid upon our hearts, came with the understanding that we play a distinctive role in God’s plan to bring about God’s Kingdom here on earth. Once we embrace these titles, we also embrace a calling to

show the world that there is another way, a way of peace, a way of love, a way of grace, and yes, a way of justice.

What Paul is telling the Corinthians is that our lives in Christ are not “manifested simply by a change in attitude or by simply taking a new name. Our lives in Christ must make a difference in the choices and decisions we make, the actions we take, and the way we treat not only ourselves but also the way we treat others.”

In other words, my faith, your faith, the faith we proclaim collectively as the Body of Christ is not only about internal attitude adjustments. It is also about the external attitude adjustment as well. And it also means that our lives in Christ were certainly never meant to be lived out as an individual experience. It has always been meant to be lived out in community.

At the heart of our faith, our lives in Christ have never been about us. They have always been about how we relate to those around us. They have always been about the community surrounding us. They have always been a way for us as Christians, as people of faith, as God’s Beloveds to bring healing and reconciliation to God’s creation.

Just because we are named and claimed by God does not mean our work as the people of God is finished. The Kingdom of God is not fully realized here on

earth. And it will not be until we work together so that everyone has experienced the peace, the grace, the love and yes more importantly we work together until everyone has experienced the justice of the Kingdom of God here on earth. And for that to happen, we must allow the grace and love of God to truly transform us into the people God created us to be and empowers us to be as the servants of God here on earth.

We as God's Beloved represent God's Kingdom. Our words and our actions must be in synch with our calling to be God's servants here on earth. And that can't happen if we are only living out our title as "saint" as "God's Beloved" in name only.

Our lives in Christ must reflect our transformation through our words and our actions. Then and only then we will fully understand what it means to be God's Beloved, what it means to know that God loves us more than we could ever imagine.

I will tell you, that now, at this point in the sermon would be a really great time for some fantastic illustration or story to bring my point home but as I sat down to write this sermon, my mind was blank. I struggled with the ending of this sermon. And that's when the Holy Spirit went to work. I came across a remarkable

document that someone had posted on Facebook as we remember Martin Luther King's work and legacy this weekend.

this document, written in 1956 by Dr. King, was a letter of some sort filed with suggestions following the decision that segregation of the buses was found to be unconstitutional. I was struck by some of the suggestions like, "In all things, observe any rules of courtesy and good behavior. Remember that this is not a victory alone for the Negroes but for all Montgomery and all the South." Suggestions like: "Be quiet, but friendly, proud but not arrogant, joyous but not boastful." Suggestion like, "Be loving enough to absorb evil and understanding enough to turn an enemy into a friend."

I was struck by how Martin Luther King really understood how our actions and our words reflect what we believe about God's grace and love.

But as powerful as these word were from Martin Luther King, my God moment came while I was reading the comment section. One story caught my eye. A woman shared how she lived in Montgomery at that time because her husband served at the Air Force base stationed there. She said that the women on the base organized personal taxis for the African American women at that time. And here is where I found God. She said that for many people, it looked like we were just a bunch of white women worried about not getting our house cleaned. But they were

wrong. We knew that for many of the women we helped, their families relied on the money they earned at their jobs, jobs they couldn't get to because of the bus strike. "We didn't care what the rest of the world thought. Fine, you can think we were a bunch of white women, selfish and worried only about ourselves, worried about not having our houses perfect but we knew in our hearts, that segregation was wrong. And we were going to find a way to share God's grace and love, even if we were just a bunch of women, no one thought was dangerous. Ha! What did they know!?"

Step 1 of the journey is hearing the news that we are God's Beloved. Step 2 and all the other steps of our journey in faith is figuring out ways to show the world what exactly that means.

May we always have the courage to continue the journey, not caring what the world may think but knowing in our hearts, we are called to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth, no matter the cost. Amen.