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Learning from Long Ago: The Corinthian Christians and Us 1. "Called to Be Saints Together" - A Reflection for Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday

I Corinthians 1:1-9 1Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: 3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, 5for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind- 6just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you- 7so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 8He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

At last Sunday's children's moment, I recalled the now contemporary classic Christmas movie, "Home Alone." How many of you have seen it? It's kind of a silly movie but fun even as it gently and comically plays on the fantasies and fears of both parents and children. If you don't recall it, the setup is this: the McCalister family and about a dozen of their relatives are preparing for a Christmas trip to France. Eight-year-old Kevin McCalister gets in a fracas the night before they are to depart and ends up getting unfairly blamed for a mess at the family dinner after he is bullied. He is punished and sent to bed in the spare bed far up in the attic. Before his mother shuts the door on him he says to her "I don't want any family. Families suck!... I don't want to see [any of] you again for the rest of my whole life.... I hope that I never see any of you jerks again!"¹

The next morning, after a nighttime windstorm cuts the power and phone lines to the house, all of the McAlisters oversleep. In their mad rush to get dressed and get to

¹The movie's screenplay can be found (and all the quotes from the movie are from this source) at: <http://www.godamongdirectors.com/scripts/homealone.txt>

the airport they accidentally leave Kevin behind, still sound asleep in the far reaches of the attic. Kevin later wakes up and wanders through the eerily empty house. When it finally dawns on him that he is indeed “home alone” he first says in a very sad voice “I made my family disappear” – but then a few second later his grin widens and he says triumphantly “I made my family disappear!!!”

There were more than a few folks in the church at Corinth which Paul founded that could have shared Kevin’s gleeful exclamation about his family disappearing. For the next several weeks we are going to be looking at that church and discovering what it has to teach us as Paul worked to build them up to be the Body of Christ. First, though, a bit about Corinth. In the first century, “Corinth was one of the most significant cities of the ancient world. It would be mentioned in the same breath as Rome and Athens, the way we talk about New York, London, and Paris today. Since it sat on an isthmus between the Aegean and Adriatic seas, it had not just one but two thriving seaports. Goods from Corinth were exported all over the Roman Empire.”² It was also incredibly diverse, ethnically, racially, and economically. It was the home of refugees and oligarchs, slaves and working-class families, a place for people to run away to while they either put their lives back together or simply hide out. And the Corinthian church, founded by Paul on one of his missionary journeys, attracted some of all of these folks and more. It was diverse in every way and the church was both Paul’s pride and joy and the one that caused him the most grief and at which he could get angriest. They had several strong-willed leaders in their midst and factions were constantly forming, breaking up, and re-forming. They both sought Paul’s counsel often and also often seemed to ignore him. Most scholars believe that what we now have in our Bibles as First and Second Corinthians is actually a collage of several different letters that Paul wrote the church in response to their letters to him about this or that problem. Of

²<http://www.lifeway.com/Article/sermon-fractured-family-church-conflict-1-corinthians-1>

course, we don't have the letters that occasioned Paul's letters and we have to be careful when reading Paul because, as someone once put it, we are "reading someone else's mail" and doing so from a two-thousand year distance.

As I said, given their fractiousness, there would have been those in the church who could have gleefully echoed Kevin's "I made my family disappear!!!" Those who counted Paul as their primary influence disdained those who saw Apollos as their main mentor. The well-off, who got off work early could come to the fellowship dinners and eat all the good stuff were tired of the complaining of the workers who came to dinner late. Those who were from Rome looked down on the native backwater bumpkins in this uncultured blue-collar port city. Each group might have gladly hoped the rest of the family would disappear, leaving them un-bothered by those who had a different take on life, those who came to their faith differently, those who were not like them in some respect. Just go away, okay!?! Do you begin to see why you and I, as 21st century American Christians might see our situation mirrored in the Corinthian church? Do you begin to see why we might want to pay attention to what Paul has to say to them, given that their situation is so similar to ours in too many ways? For we too as a people have struggled with how we deal with difference, we too have been inclined to either demonize or deify those who seek to lead us with angrier and angrier words aimed at those who don't see it the way we do and with truth and facts becoming a casualty. It was a worrisome time that the Corinthian church lived in and it is a worrisome time that we live in – and like them and like Kevin, we sometimes think that if everyone who didn't have the good sense to think exactly like we do would just disappear everything would be alright.

After Kevin realizes his family is absent he gleefully gives in to his worst impulses, and there is a scene in the film which shows a gross kitchen counter and Kevin eating a bowl of ice cream the size of a Volkswagen and watching trashy tv while

he hollers out to his now-empty house: "Guys, I'm eating junk food and watching rubbish. You better come out and stop me." But, of course, no one does, as Kevin gives in to his worst impulses.

It is this giving in to one's worst impulses that has too often played out in history. One of those impulses is to separate, to "purify," to exclude those who are "different," the impulse that says that everything will finally be great again if we can just be rid of certain folks. The classic novel Lord of the Flies horrifically chronicles the madness that comes when one of the first decisions made is to draw a line between some of the boys stranded on that island and the others. The deluge of what get called "prepper" novels and films in the last ten years that purport to show what life will be like after some sort of apocalypse often grimly portray what happens when folks under extreme stress start dividing into hostile groups – and it is the weakest and most vulnerable who suffer the most. Amazon's recent made-for-tv series "The Man in the High Castle" imagines an America in which Nazi Germany won World War II and ends season two with a teenage boy with muscular dystrophy being euthanized in the interest of keeping the society "pure." Growing up in Texas, I can still see in my mind's eye the sign on the outskirts of Greenville that said "Texas' Blackest Dirt and Whitest People," and laws all across this country, from Mississippi to Oregon, not that long ago made it a crime for African-Americans to be in town after sunset. Thousands of loyal and patriotic Americans who looked "different" – several of whom Barbara and I got to know in Hawaii – were rounded up in the cruelest of ways in 1942 and sent to far-away interment camps simply because their parents or grandparents were Japanese. *"I made my family disappear."*

But Paul will have none of it. Not at all. Did you hear how he addresses them? *"Called to be saints together with all those who in every place"* who count themselves Christians. What does that mean? **Just this: If you are a Christian, if you count**

yourself a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, then you don't get to decide who your family is – God has already decided that! And that family, at its best, helps hold us accountable, helps us not give in to our worst impulses, helps us not to give in to the fear of those who are “different.”

And I, for one, am finally very glad for that. For if I had been allowed to choose who my “family” was, if I had been allowed to make some of them disappear, my life would be so much poorer.

- If at the age of sixteen a powerful and eloquent African-American preacher by the name of David Cole had not preached the gospel to me, I might not have known that some of the biases and prejudices of my suburban Texas culture needed to be questioned and repented of.
- If I had listened to the voices that said that women could not be ministers and were to be “disappeared” from the family, I would not have found the courage to do something I had long needed to do when confronted by the amazing preaching of Bishop Leontine Kelly.
- If I not allowed myself to be taught over the years by several folks in the Army and Air Force, I would never have known just how much the military has long been in the forefront of seeking to erase the lines of racial discrimination.
- If over the years I had never come to know some pretty amazing, faithful, and righteous gay and lesbian folks, I might have abided in the casual but devastating homophobia that is a product of our fear of difference.
- As a teenager, if I had not read a novel by Leon Uris and then as an adult been schooled by some very wise teachers, I might still believe the lie of Christianity's original sin – the claim that the Jewish people had been replaced in God's love – instead of coming to know that it is we Christians who are through Christ “honorary Jews,” in one theologian's phrase.

- If I had not over the years witnessed and learned of the integrity, courage, and love demonstrated by so many Muslims and the huge contributions that they have made to American life, I might have thought these folks were worthy of being written off, demonized, and made to disappear.

"I made my family disappear." All of us understand that impulse, don't we? All of us have no doubt had it. And it's hard work to be a family together, and it's even harder work to be God's family together. We will fight sometimes. We will disagree. Some of us will say and do things that simply don't comport with the will of Christ and then the best gift a family can give each other is hold each other accountable when someone makes the kinds of claims that some in the Corinthian church were making – that certain folks are not as good as others, that some are worthy of being discriminated against, that some are and should be second-class. Again and again Paul both calls out – sometimes rather sternly – the folks who are distorting the gospel of God's love for each and all AND he calls them back to the Table together, to keep contending in love together, to keep trying to better represent the fact that indeed God has made us one family and no one, no one, no one gets to be "disappeared."

Each year we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday not out of some sense of, to use a term I hate, "political correctness," but because Dr. King helped us all as a church and as a people better truly realize that God has made us one family. We sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" because it is important, it is respectful, it is honoring of a portion of God's family for whom that song is a heartfelt and true expression and which has much to teach us. We listen to our choir so powerfully sing U2's words "may your dreams be realized" so that we might better let our dreams drive us rather than our nightmares entrapping us. And knowing, indeed, that we are called to be saints together, let me close this day with words with a prayer, originally written and prayed by Dr. King, that calls on God to help us ever-more-realize God's dreams for us. Shall we

pray?

...Eternal God... we humbly confess that we have not loved thee with our hearts, souls and minds, and we have not loved our neighbors as Christ loved us....

Forgive us for what we could have been but failed to be. Give us the intelligence to know your will [and] the courage to do your will.... Grant that we will follow you and become so committed to your way and your kingdom that we will be able to establish in our lives and in this world a brother and sisterhood, that we will be able to establish here a kingdom of understanding, where men and women will live together as brothers and sisters and respect the dignity and worth of every human being.... We thank you for your church, founded upon your Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon you.... Help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children -- Black, White, Red, Brown and Yellow -- will rejoice in one common band of humanity in the reign of our Lord and of our God, we pray.³

Amen. May it be so.

³<https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/prayers-martin-luther-king-jr> I have combined three of Dr. King's prayers here.