

Devotional Commentary on St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

Introduction to St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians—April 7, 2008

Luther begins his *Preface to the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, “In this epistle St. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to be one in faith and love, and to see to it that they learn well the chief thing, namely, that Christ is our salvation, the thing over which all reason and wisdom stumbles.”

He continues, “In short, things got so wild and disorderly that everyone wanted to be the expert and do the teaching and make what he pleased of the gospel, the sacrament, and faith. Meanwhile they let the main thing drop—namely, that Christ is our salvation, righteousness, and redemption—as if they had long since outgrown it. This truth can never remain intact when people begin to imagine they are wise and know it all” (LW 35, 380).

Sound familiar? How much of the churches of today could be described in such a way, and how tempted aren't we at times to add ours to their number? It's easy to lose sight of Christ and to lose ourselves in busyness or squabbling or anything but the chief thing, namely, Christ.

It is natural to seek glory now, both for ourselves and the church, and quite unnatural to take a seat at the foot of the cross, to be a disciple of the Crucified Victor, to accept what the Lord gives and covet nothing more. Our nature is no different from the Corinthians, from the people of the church down the road, from the people of the church at Luther's time. Yet St. Paul calls us to the cross, nonetheless. And he speaks not to fallen reason, or to selfish desire, but to the faith the gospel has worked in us, and for good reason, for faith alone boasts in the cross, even and often against the very pronounced protestations of our old Adam.

St. Paul begins the First Letter to the Corinthians by grounding them in the cross. The wisdom of the world is foolishness. The cross is true wisdom. But that is not easy to accept—in fact it is impossible to accept by human decision; we must be born again, not of the will of man, but of God—for it runs counter to our every instinct and to fallen reason. The cross is paradox, the fruit of the inscrutable mind of God alone, and every shall be. It works death but gives life. It groans like defeat but indeed declares victory. It seems to be the end but in truth is the beginning. And so also with our crosses, which we bear in our life under the cross. They feel heavy, even oppressive, but are indeed light in the light of eternity, and in truth set us free from all that would entangle us, whether of world, flesh, or devil. We could swear they are wearing us down but in truth they are making us stronger. We wonder if they are breaking our faith but surely they are refining it. *“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Corinth was a sophisticated city, with extensive exposure to the goods, thoughts, and practices of the world abroad, with resources to stimulate and entertain the body and the mind beyond that possible for most. It is thus a kindred spirit to our own peculiar state of affairs in the realm of the world, as technology increases our exposure to the world at large, for good and ill, and as wealth has increased to a point perhaps unknown before in human

history. We listen to music only kings heard in the past, watch entertainment excelling that which only nobles enjoyed in bygone days, eat delicacies reserved for only the finest occasion for the most prominent dignitaries for most of the span of the sun's shining upon this orb. So St. Paul's words are timely and apt, as relevant and imperative now as in his own day.

St. Paul had served for a long time in Corinth. He knew the people well. He'd send them come to faith, had carefully catechized them, and had shepherded them through the familiar ebb and flow of the Christian life. And so he writes to them as their pastor. At times, you can picture him pacing back and forth, dictating the letter, as if they were sitting right in front of him, their faces as fresh in his mind as they were the day he left them. This makes this a particularly fun epistle to study as pastor and people, as the flock of God, as we can see ourselves in these words and reflections, and we do well to learn from and mirror them.

We pray: Heavenly Father, richly bless the edifying endeavor before us. Send Your Holy Spirit to open our eyes, ears, and hearts to Your message. Draw us closer to Your Son and let us delight in His cross and resurrection. Conform us in Your image and guide us by His example. Renew us in Your grace and increase our faith, that we might rejoice in life under the cross, that we might gladly be found where you have promised to be. Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:1-3—April 8, 2008

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

St. Paul begins his greeting by asserting his office, that is, his God-given position within the church, assigned to him not according to his worthiness or even desire, but “by God's will” and grace. God's call alone made St. Paul a Christian. God's call alone made St. Paul an apostle. This assertion of his apostleship is important. He is explaining why he is justified in writing to them—and notice, as with all good justification, it is from God—even as factions had developed, some claiming they followed this apostle or teacher, and others that one. As a pastor has authority in his individual congregation, an apostle, holding an office unique to this time and discontinued after it, had authority in all the churches, having been an eyewitness of Christ's work and teaching.

St. Paul, called to be an apostle, writes to those in Corinth, called to be the church. They too were called by “the will of God” and His grace. They were “sanctified,” a passive verb, meaning it was something done, not by them, but to them. This call and sanctifying made them saints in God's sight and members of the holy Christian Church. How did this sanctification happen? In Christ Jesus.

And what does St. Paul bid them? “Grace and peace.” From whom? “From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Sound familiar? You hear it often before my sermons. Grace is God's undeserved love for you in Christ. Peace is the forgiveness of sins you have

through Christ. Neither can be taken from you, unless you yourself reject them, because they are rooted in God Himself, the Blessed Trinity, whose mind and will is unchanging, and, might I add, in your case most gracious.

It is interesting that St. Paul sends greetings from Sosthenes. It is most likely that this Sosthenes is the same Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18:17, the synagogue ruler in Corinth. He was interested in St. Paul's preaching, even inclined to it, which earned him a severe beating from his fellow Jews in Gallio's court. Welcome to the Church, Sosthenes! I bet that made the WELS Connection.

Understandably, Sosthenes would have been a bit of a celebrity in the Corinthian church, and deservedly so. He was a surprising convert, having been the head of the synagogue, a big catch, so to speak, for St. Paul. In addition to that, he was a confessor, that is, he had suffered injury for the Faith.

Once again we are reminded of not only by whom we are called, but to what we are called. At confirmation, we pledge ourselves to the Faith even unto death. Most will never taste such a bitter price for their confession of Christ—missing out, by the way, of the sweet savor of having been counted worthy of suffering for Christ's name (Acts 5:41)—but we ought not take such an oath lightly nonetheless. The Church has long and rightly honored such men and women who have suffered harm or given their life for the Christian confession—remembered and honored them as those blessed to have experienced such love from God (ironic, isn't it, kind of like a certain Friday being called good?). We do well to commemorate and honor them as well, to remind ourselves that we could be called to do the same, to remind ourselves that the same Christ who strengthened them in that hour by His Spirit has promised to do the same for us.

Pray God for such strength, not only to stand up for your faith, but also to live it. Remember, you were sanctified, set aside by God for holy service as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). You did not and do not sanctify yourself. You were called. You did not call yourself. Our power comes from God. Always has, always will. And there is comfort in that. Trying to pull up your spiritual bootstraps or to spiritually suck it up and walk it off will only leave you with ill-fitting boots, out of breath, and even farther down the wrong path. No, we turn to Christ, again and again, more and more. The harder you try, the more you will realize why that is.

So let me say goodbye with St. Paul's greeting: "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:4-9—April 9, 2008

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

St. Paul doesn't right away launch into his complaint, into the fire and brimstone, although he will get to it. No, he gives thanks. These were his people. He was their pastor, their spiritual father. And he loved them. And he gave thanks for them, even when they caused him untold grief. Why? Because God was working in them. Yeah, that's right. He was working in them. He had been and still was. Yet they were and would remain for the time being works in progress.

A pastor must always remember that. When he forgets that he has a flock full of sinners, sinners *just like him*, he can grow unduly frustrated when he ought to patiently admonish, get angry when he ought to get busy in prayer. After all, that is what Christ does for him, that is, for the pastor, when he daily and amply proves his own need for polishing and repair as he travels the road of sanctification. And as a pastor must remember that, the flock must remember that with regard to one another. The ship that is the church can be tight quarters sometimes, and tight quarters filled with works in progress can sometimes get messy, and grumbling never mopped anything up.

God had richly blessed the Corinthians with spiritual gifts. Yet they had abused them. They had taken pride in what was not their own, but was on loan to them. They had used their gifts to fuel their desire for other's praise instead of using their gifts to offer praise to Him who gave them. They had started to live for the day, instead of the Day, that is, with one eye on their neighbor and one eye on their coming Lord. We are the church of the end times. We are waiting for Christ's return. We use our gifts in that light. How will Jesus find us when He returns? Our prayer is that He will find us practicing for eternity: serving Him and one another, not begrudgingly, but willingly and with joy.

But sometimes that's not so easy, is it? Sometimes it seems a bit much. Sometimes we wonder how we're going to manage, how we're going to get through the days before the Day, and our gifts seem a burden. We want to keep them in our pocket, in the holster, because taking them out and putting them to good use is often a thankless and seemingly endless task.

"*God is faithful,*" St. Paul reminds us. He who will declare us innocent of all charges for the sake of His Son's punishment for our guilt will not give up on us, even when we are tempted to throw in the towel ourselves. He who called us into the fellowship of His Son didn't build an exit easy to find in this fellowship hall. He brought us there to keep us there, to keep us there until the end, when we won't need any more reminders that "*God is faithful,*" because the proof will be before us, face to face, as we see Him who always has His eyes on us.

You have what you need as you wait. God has been generous. And God is faithful. Yes, you have misused His gifts. Yes, you have taken your eyes off the prize. Yes, you have questioned His judgment. We all have. But He doesn't make mistakes. He called you. He gifted you. He will uphold you. And He will bring you to the end.

Jesus is coming, and not a moment too soon. And in the meanwhile, I have reason to be grateful, for God is working in you, as He is working in me. Step back and remember that today. You are a work in progress, and God is doing the work. How awesome is that! Don't dwell only on the hiccups, though we do well to address them. But as you do so, remember

whose hands are shaping you, like jars of clay, and know that He is a master of His trade, able to work out even the most stubborn lumps. *“God is faithful.”* Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:10-17—April 10, 2008

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

The Church is built upon Christ, and draws life from Christ, and is the Body of Christ, made up of His members, of which He is the Head. And what is true of the Holy Christian Church is true of faithful churches as well. Christ is *“all in all”* (Colossians 3:11).

It is tempting to lose sight of that. We see other faces in the pulpit, at the altar, behind the organ, in the aisle, behind the desk, in the pews, etc. And it is easy to focus on those faces, especially when there is something to draw us to them, whether eloquence or charm or beauty. We by nature want someone to follow, someone here, someone now, to be part of a team.

That was the case in the Corinthian congregation. Each had his or her favorite preacher or pastor, teacher or leader. It is always dangerous to build a church around a preacher or pastor, teacher or leader—in other words, around a personality—and that is just what the Corinthians were doing. Problem is, Paul or Apollos, Cephas, Crispus, or Gaius: none could save them from their sins, none could lead them to the heavenly fatherland, none could offer more than a well-turned phrase or temporary contentment apart from the Christ they preached and promised, taught and delivered.

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” St. Paul's plea is urgent and heartfelt, and its basis is clear: *“by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* The gospel makes one: *“one faith, one Baptism, one Baptism, one God and Father of all”* (Ephesians 4:5).

“Speak the same things,” St. Paul says. In other words, to speak in a way inconsistent with *“the Faith once for all entrusted to the saints”* (Jude 1:3) is to do harm to the gospel, and to do harm to the gospel is to tear apart the church, to cause divisions. Those speaking consistently with Scripture and upholding the truth are not guilty of division. Those who refuse to stay within the bounds of the Word do the dividing. The truth cannot be mixed with falsehood. *“What concord can Christ have with Belial,”* the Apostle asks in his second letter

(2 Corinthians 6:15). For unity to be restored, there must be a return to Christ, to His Word, to His way of speaking, to His gospel that works real unity, that is, unity in faith.

Let us rejoice in the unity of faith we share, with each other, and with the other churches within our fellowship. And when that unity is challenged, let us work to restore it in the only way it can be mended, in the gospel, clearly confessed as revealed by Christ, not with eloquence of loose language, but with humble adherence to the cross of Christ and all that was won for us there; for any unity built on anyone or anything is no real unity, but factitiousness. We are brothers and sisters in Christ—in Christ!—and may that always remain the case. May His face be the face we long to see, and His gifts the gifts we seek and follow. All the other faces are icing on the cake. Those who serve are surely wonderful blessings from heaven, and we do well to appreciate them and be grateful for all they do, but if you only ever look at the icing, you miss the best part, if you only ever eat icing, you're bound to get sick. Christ must remain the sum and substance, the heart and core, for it is the message of His cross that is the power, the dynamite of God, breaking open our hardened hearts to fill them with grace, shattering the divisions of selfish pride and falsehood and mending them with love.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25—April 11, 2008

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

When I was little, I remember there was a time when I had to take these big pills once a day. I hated taking pills. I downright refused to take them. I was a stubborn little tyke. So my mother broke the pills open, sprinkled the medicine inside into applesauce, and I took the medicine that way. I needed the medicine. But I had no use for the medicine; I wanted nothing to do with it. So Mom tried to make it more palatable, less offensive to me. It worked. Not so with the gospel.

By nature each of us has no use for the gospel; we want nothing to do with it. We need the medicine. We desperately need it. But no matter what the preacher, the teacher, or the individual Christian may do, nothing can make it more palatable, less offensive. Why? Because that is what the gospel is by nature. It is scandal. It is stumbling block. It is folly. It is the opposite of what we'd have come up with, because we have no part in this play, no part but listening and clapping our thanks and praise.

The Corinthians thought that if they could just find the right preacher, just adopt the right method, just find the perfect packaging gospel would be easier to sell. Problem is, the gospel's not for sale, and it's certainly not bought—don't forget that whole Reformation thing. No, it is a free gift, the free gift of what Christ bought for us with His own precious and life-saving Body and Blood on the cross, given us in the Supper, which, like the preached message of the cross, is silliness and a trifle to our fallen nature and the world at large.

But seriously, here we are trying to be saved, trying to encounter the divine, and there's no light show, no fireworks, no rock concert, no nothing: just some bread and wine and this foolishness about a crucified God who did everything for me. That's the best God could come up with? I mean, come on?

St. Paul steps into the ring here in chapter one even as he will again in chapter fifteen, and he talks trash as well as any pro athlete, puts our haughty thoughts in place. "What's up now, death!" he will taunt in chapter fifteen. "Where's your wisdom now, world!" he spouts off here in chapter one. "What you got, wise man? Where you at, scribe?" And why can he boast such? "*But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*" (Galatians 6:14). St. Paul is not the star player. In fact, he rides the pine. But that doesn't stop him from running his mouth, because His Jesus can back it up, because His Jesus has shut the mouth of the world's wisdom even as He's shut the mouth of death, devil, and hell.

The gospel is a stumbling block, but when we stumble over it, let us not do what Churchill said most do when they stumble upon the truth: get up, dust themselves off, and move on. No, stubbed toes are the Christian's best friend, because they remind us where to look, especially when we get so full of ourselves that we can't see our feet anymore. Stubbed toes point us to the cross, and the cross is real wisdom, and it is through the preaching of that cross that God would have us saved.

Our will is stubborn. It's like the little guy determined to drive the lane, even when he gets blocked every time. Sometimes such determination is a good thing. Here it is not. "Remember what happened last time," St. Paul shouts from the bench, as Jesus' outstretched arms stand before us. We have to go through Him to score salvation. He will swat down every shot at doing it ourselves. No, we have to take a seat on the bench and watch Him win the game for the team. And yes, even the benchwarmers get the ring. That is what the gospel does. It blocks our selfish, sinful will, sets us on the bench to watch and win, and then slowly teaches us to play God's way, to live in the victory He's won.

Wise up, eh. "*The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*" Remember that. And don't just remember it; believe it. And don't just believe it; live it. There's muscle in that message. There's strong medicine in that pill. And while it may not go down easy, it's just what the Doctor ordered.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31—April 14, 2008

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the

strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

By all accounts, if anyone takes a good look at the church, he is bound to marvel, "How in the world has it continued this long?" Each generation looks like a shipwreck. Each congregation has enough fodder for doubt. The Holy Christian Church is one bedraggled and beaten-up ark, yet somehow it keeps floating along.

St. Paul tells the Corinthians to look around them and look back. What are they and what were they that they should be church, that God should call and indeed use them. They were proof of His power. They were reminders that the gospel, the fuel of the church and the foundation of its continued existence, is the power and wisdom of God—yes, the possession of men and women in the church, but not the power and wisdom of men and women.

One of the great things about church is that it is not a club, or at least it's not supposed to be. Membership is contingent upon unworthiness, not upon status, merit, or payment. No, only those with no standing before God, no merit by which to be saved, no payment they can proffer are welcome within the bowed wood of the ark. We are anything but elitists. *"And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"*

God gives us His wisdom. It is not our wisdom. Our wisdom is foolishness. No, God returns our minds to the mold, bringing us back into His own mind, renewing us in His image. God gives us His righteousness. He declares us "not guilty" of our sins because Christ has been condemned for them, so that we are now dressed in His innocence. God works out our sanctification, growing us in holiness of life and obedience to His will. God hands us redemption, free and forever, as faith—the gift of God—latches on to Christ, as a drowning man to a life preserver. The ark stays afloat, because God is in the water, washing her through Baptism, propelling her to her heavenly home.

"How in the world has it continued this long?" The answer isn't in the world, at least not as He was during His earthly ministry. The answer is at the right hand of God in heaven, working all things to bring us there as well. He is our power. He is our present hope and our future glory. There's plenty of boasting to do, but it is boasting in Him, our Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption. And that is why we can move forward with resolve, for if it were situated anywhere else, it would be uncertain; but nothing can move this Rock that is our Anchor, our Captain, and our Port.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5—April 8, 2008

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my

speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

St. Paul was not necessarily a bad speaker. In fact, we see him deliver quite a skilled oration in Athens among the philosophers in Acts 17. His letters reveal a way with words and stylistic sensibilities. Yet St. Paul did not rely on the power of the speaker. No, he relied on the power of the message, and it is to the message he points the Corinthians as they had become distracted by the outward trappings of the messengers among them. As others claimed St. Paul was bold in letters but timid in person, St. Paul concedes that his opponents may indeed be more eloquent and bold, but an eloquent and bold heretic is an eloquent and bold heretic, and even an eloquent and bold confessional preacher who detracts from the message by his flowery rhetoric is still an eloquent and bold confessional preacher who detracts from the message by his flower rhetoric.

St. Paul hits preachers where it hurts today. It's good and right that we pull out all the stops when it comes to our sermons, that we prepare and present them as best we are able, but we must let the message define, shape, and shine through that preparation and presentation, and we must trust in that message and not in all the stops we've pulled. But my belly-button is much nearer than God's inscrutable plan, and so the preacher's eyes are constantly drawn back to himself, or to the immediate response, to statistics or "Good sermon"s. Yet the congregation is not a focus group. It is a pottery barn full of unfinished product being shaped by no other hand than God's, and often only the potter can see where things are going, only the potter knows how things will shape up. The sermon is an offering to God, not a spectacle for men. The sermon is a proclamation of the King's message, not the pumping up of a hype man. The preacher preaches—a good speak does not necessarily make a good preacher, and vice versa. God takes it from there.

So does that mean you should want the worst preacher in town, just to show that the gospel is powerful? No, but if you begin to trust in the preacher instead of the One preached, start to focus on the preacher more than the preachment, you'd do well to have a worse preacher from a rhetorical standpoint, and God in His mercy may just send you one, to remind you what matters and what makes it matter. That's what Call Day at the Seminary is for (☺): God making such points.

"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."
The Corinthians had every reason to be wowed every Sunday while St. Paul was among them. They had every right to have high hopes when they walked into church, or whatever house was the church that week. Why? They were about to meet, to hear, to receive Jesus Christ and Him crucified again. And why else would they have come? And what else could they possibly need more? And how else would they be saved?

I'll tell you what: I'll try to write some nice sermons for you for so long as God grants me air to fill these asthmatic lungs in your pulpit. I will pull out the stops as best I can, maybe even use the pedals. I will prepare. I will practice my presentation. I will seek to meet you where you're at and address you in ways you understand. But you have to promise me

something in return: your hand on the back of my head, your foot in my backside, should you walk out of the sanctuary and not have heard Christ and Him crucified, should you remember a joke or a cute story or a witty line, but not the word from the Lord, the wisdom of God. Otherwise, we're both just killing time, treading water, spinning our wheels, on a way to sorrow with no joy, to guilt with no release, to despair with no hope, to storms with no anchor, to death with no life. All that comes from Christ.

May these words always ring true of our pastors, whoever he should be, because there's no pastor where there aren't these words: *"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."*

1 Corinthians 2:6-9—April 16, 2008

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him."

"For if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." All right. Stop right here for a moment and think about that: *"crucified the Lord of glory."* No, don't start reading again yet. Really think about it: *"crucified the Lord of glory."* Come on, I'm not asking you to walk on water here. Just think some more: *"crucified the Lord of glory."*

If that is what they did to the Lord of glory, what should we, the servants of depravity, expect? If that is what He with no sin got, what should we with all sin receive? If that is what He who was so humble won, what will be the prize for us who are so prideful? He is Lord. We are anything but, whatever we convince ourselves at times. What good is earthly wisdom now, as it passes away with the world's rulers? *"For if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."*

St. Paul speaks to *"the mature."* This is the meat of the Bible. No more milk. This is the sorry truth that we dare not apologize for: in Christ is all the Wisdom of God, and those in Christ are to be made like Christ, even when it hurts. So yes, there are thorns and crosses waiting. Why? To deflate our pride, to teach us discipline, to give us opportunities to show love when love is not shown to us. Those who claimed they were mature in Corinth, those puffed up with themselves and their so-called wisdom, wanted nothing to do with life under the cross. They wanted glory. We all secretly, or not so secretly perhaps, lust after the same.

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him." And so they *"crucified the Lord of glory,"* and thank God for that. God *"prepared"* this *"for those who love him,"* and in His cross is His greatest love, love that saves the unloving. And, hate to say it, but He has prepared other things that will

turn our wisdom on its head. He will love us beyond anything we can imagine, so that sometimes we call out as we are bathed in that love and ask, "Where are you, God? Why have you abandoned me?" And He will be right there, under our crosses, in the heart of our suffering, teaching us in the school of the crucified Lord of Glory, refining us in the fire, shaping us in His image, making us like Christ in His love. And in that we will be the sons of glory. In that we will rejoice for all eternity, as we see ourselves die to sin and rise to life, cast off folly and put on the Wisdom of God.

Friends, God loves you. He loves you in, through, and yes, under the cross. Sometimes you're going to have enough of His love, and that's when you'll grow so you can have more. Sometimes you're going to think you've lost Him, that He is far away in His love, and that's when you'll find Him nearer than ever before. The Wisdom of God is bread and wine, water and words: abject foolishness to the flesh. God has to open our eyes to see Body and Blood, resurrection and new creation. No one likes a thumb in the eye, but what a joy it is when He's pried them open! Perhaps He's prying right now. Don't fight it. Surrender yourself to His will, as He surrendered your will to Himself when He first brought you to faith. *"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him."* He's still in control. And yes, He still loves you. No worries.

1 Corinthians 2:10-16

These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

You've had some radical brain surgery, and it's not over: it will continue until the casket calls or Christ comes. Yet you need not fear. Your surgeon has steady hands and a loving heart. His knife, the Holy Word of God, cuts cleanly.

Just as no one can truly know the thoughts of another person except for that person's spirit, so also the Spirit of God alone is able to truly know God, and that is the Spirit Christ has sent into the world to the Church, and not only into the world to the Church, but into our hearts and minds through faith.

Unfortunately, the Spirit has company. The old Adam, our sinful nature, doesn't like to share, and doesn't want to surrender an inch. And so there is a wrestling match of sorts taking place, as evidenced every day by our conflicted thoughts or motivations. We value the Word of God, but sometimes are slow to hear it. We know the Shepherd's voice, but

sometimes follow at a distance. But that is why God is God and we are us, and in those times we dare not instruct Him, but rather need precisely His instruction.

"We have the mind of Christ." The Spirit within us makes God's own thoughts and perspectives and will our own. But only over the old Adam's dead body. We must drown that sinful nature every day, therefore, by returning to our Baptism, that is, by confessing our sins to God and receiving His forgiveness, that every day we might look less like the unspiritual and more like the spiritual men and women God has made us, and continues to make us.

No one with a lick of sense who has received heart surgery would take that life-saving heart for granted, would ply it with artery-clogging garbage. So also, when we value the mind of Christ, we will use our God-opened ears wisely, and will seek to avoid the garbage that would fuzzy our mind's thinking. We are privileged people. God has moved in, and the neighborhood's value has gone through the roof. We who gather in the house of the Lord are the houses of the Lord. In spite of our unspiritual nature, the Spirit has entered in, and He is not content to leave the place a dump. No, He continues to work in us to work through us. Rejoice in that truth and know that the same wood that built this temple that you are, the wood of the cross, is the foundation of the renovation.

1 Corinthians 3:1-4—April 18, 2008

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

It often happens that we want to run ahead in our walk with the Lord. The seminarian wants to dive deep into the deepest systematics before he really has digested the Catechisms. The new Christian wants all the lofty questions answered before taking the simple ones to heart. We want to hack into the mind of God, instead of putting on the mind of Christ, one piece at a time.

St. Paul was forced to address the Corinthians as infants. They thought they knew so much that they forget they no longer knew anything. There had been little room left in their heads for the most basic truths of the faith as they'd become puffed up with pride and false knowledge. The symptoms were clear: *"For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?"*

Part of the weakness of our system for confirmation is the impression we give that there is a time where we've finished instruction, when we've learned enough, when we're ready to move on to bigger and better things. But there are no fish to fry. There's no reason to race. Milk before meat, head before feet. One step at a time we walk in the Christian life, knowing that we will often relearn what we've learned and forgotten, knowing that no time is better spent that time plodding patiently through God's revealed message in His Word. Shallow waters first, and then gradually deeper. Best learn to swim with the children before you drown with the adults.

The answer to almost every problem a church may face is catechization, that is, instruction in the foundational teachings of Scripture. I think “Back to the Small Catechism” is about as good a motto as a church can adopt, for back to the Catechism is nothing but back to the Bible. What a treasure we have in it. Even Luther’s opponents couldn’t help but praise the straightforward and succinct nature of the work—laying out God’s Word in a way even the most untrained could follow—even as those same men damned it as one of the biggest threats to their views. Again and again theologians on both sides of Lutheranism, the Reformed and the Roman Catholic, tried to copy what he had accomplished. He mined the jewels of the Faith and put them into the hands, hearts, and minds of pastors and laity alike. And this is our inheritance!

Real growth starts in diapers. The child of God who despises milk will starve before he ever swallows a piece of filet mignon. And once we grow out of our diapers we dare not despise the time we spent in them, and we dare not forget what we learned. I would wager that what we learn in the first years of life is surely the most crucial for all that follows. And when we find ourselves acting more like infants than men, children than adults, perhaps the best thing we can do is review the stuff that taught us out of our diapers in the first place. And that is never an empty or fruitless task. No, it is a rewarding and bountiful venture. Try it. I know I still am, and I probably always will be.

There’s Christ in them there Catechisms. There’s forgiveness, life, salvation. There’s guidance and direction. There’s joy and hope. Aren’t those the things everyone’s always saying they’re looking for? How special you are that you’ve found it—and if you haven’t, there are plenty of copies on the information table, and I love nothing more than meeting with those interested in going through it again with me.

1 Corinthians 3:5-9—April 21, 2008

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

St. Paul doesn’t ask “who” he is, but “what,” and not “who” Apollos is, but “what.” Once again, he draws attention away from the person and all that surrounds that, and to the Office of the Holy Ministry, and all that entails. What are Paul and Apollos? Ministers, fellow workers according to God’s gracious call. Ministers of the Word are instruments, and the best are those that take that to heart. They hand you God’s Body and Blood. They preach to you God’s Word. They administer God’s adoption. Hands and mouths—that is what they are to be. And as a reminder, St. Paul reminds the Corinthians, “*So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.*”

And what a comfort that is, both for pastor and for people, for St. Paul and Apollos as well as for the Corinthian flock they served. God grants the growth, and in His own due time, and in His own due measure, and through His own due Means. No pressure. No worries. Just

a promise best met with faithfulness to the call to which it is attached. Any other growth, any other timeline, any other measure, any other means, all those are manufactured matters incapable of yielding an eternal harvest, unable to please the Lord, though they may indeed please those who minister them and those to whom they minister.

Farmers, how many of you are going to make the seed grow this year? You will plant it. You will water it. You will do your best to ensure that it is placed in good soil. But digging it up all the time to put the ruler to it, that will only kill it. The growth, well, that hasn't changed for all the technology in the world, has it? While we pat ourselves on our back for a big harvest, we still tend to turn to the same thing when the harvest looks scant, don't we? We fold our hands and hit our knees, "We planted. We watered. Lord, please grow."

Sometimes we might lament the instruments and Means that God has given us. Why preach through men and not angels? Why bread and wine and not shock and awe? The answer is simple. This is how God has chosen to work, and He hasn't promised to work in any other way. So we do best to treasure this gift to us and make full use of it. And not only that, but He has even promised to reward those who work in His field—to reward them for the very thing He gives and does! What a joy to serve such a Lord. What a privilege to receive from Him.

You are God's field, God's building. God is working on and in you through His Word and Sacraments, administered by a Minister of the Word, but given and powered by none other than Himself. He is the engine in this rig, and that engine has run just fine for centuries, millennia even, and it ain't giving up any time soon. So take a seat and enjoy the ride. You're in good hands, even when it looks like someone else is at the wheel. Don't worry, that guy is nothing: just the planter, the water boy. God is the one that grows. See His hands on the wheel.

1 Corinthians 3:10-17—April 22, 2008

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

St. Paul writes to the Romans, "And thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation" (15:20). As an Apostle, St. Paul planted churches throughout the known world of his time. He introduced peoples to Christ, catechized them, saw that they were baptized, stayed for a

while, and then moved on, occasionally checking in with a letter or brief visit. And the foundation he laid was everywhere the same: Jesus Christ. That is what was turned over to the local pastors elected by the people or appointed by St. Paul or his associates: a foundation on which to build. They were not to tear up what had been put down, frequently at great expense. No, they were to build up (to edify), continuing to catechize, correcting, rebuking, and encouraging, with great patience and careful instruction (1 Timothy 4:2).

Perhaps you've gone to Home Depot before. For some, it's a glimpse into paradise. Not so for me. No, King's Used Bookstore down in Detroit would be more my equivalent. But why do you go to Home Depot? You're working on something, laying a foundation, building upon it, or repairing the rough edges. It can be a bit intimidating as you walk the aisles. There are all kinds of products, all neatly packaged, each with alluring guarantees and promises. But will they work? That's the question. Will you spend too much for something that won't really do a better job? Will you spend too little for something that will break halfway through? That's why we have Trustees here at Christ Lutheran, so I can call someone who knows the differences, who has done the job before and learned by experience, and often also from a father or uncle or friend who kindly passed on his knowledge of such things.

The world is like Home Depot. It offers many products, all neatly packaged, each with alluring guarantees and promises. But will they work? Will they stand the fire? Because if they won't, they are no good to us; in fact, they are detrimental. The works built upon the right foundation will be rewarded. All others will bring "loss," and the word here is a business term for a loss on an investment, and not just a little loss that you get over, but a devastating loss, a 1929 loss that puts the business under and lands the proprietor in debtor's prison.

We realize in American politics that the foundation is crucial. We return to the Constitution when controversies arise. It guides the teaching and practice of our nation, at least when our nation is at its best. To try to lay another foundation, or to try to tear up parts of the foundation, would be disastrous to the house as a whole. Both sides of the political spectrum get that. The same is true in theology, at least in Christian theology.

Will our church stand the fire? Will we? We will if we have built upon "*Jesus Christ and Him crucified*" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Otherwise we will crumble like the Hudson Building in Detroit, like even the World Trade Center, in a mess of dust and smoke and fire.

You are the building, the temple. In your Baptism, Christ was laid as your foundation, and the Spirit began building up from there through the ministry of the gospel. You do best to build and repair accordingly. You do best to use the right tools, the ones God Himself has given. You do best not to get sidetracked in the vast aisles of the world's religious Home Depot. Just as pastors are accountable for the materials they use to build their people up, their people are accountable for the work they allow to be done to them, for the materials they allow to be used. You're not some shack on the wrong side of the tracks after all. You're God's temple, and God's temple deserve nothing but the best.

Is anything more sorry-looking than a dilapidated church? We've all seen them as we drive through Saginaw. Yes, a dilapidated temple, a crumbling Christian is much more

depressing a sight. But we're not going to let that be us, are we? No, today we get back to the basics, back to the foundation which God Himself laid through His ministers. And when the foundation is solid, everything else falls into place and stands for the ages. It's work day every day for the Christian. Good news is God wants to do the work. We are the buildings. Keep the door opened in your Baptism opened to Him as He does so.

1 Corinthians 3:18-23—April 23, 2008

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

There are lots of ways to see yourself. There are many ways to identify yourself. There are various ways to define yourself. Where do you work? Where do you live? What do you have? What do you make? What do you do? All of these and other such questions are ways in which people mark their identity, understand who they are. So you are you?

None of these questions will give you the best answer. No, only one question will do that: whose are you? St. Paul says "*you are Christ's.*" He claimed you in Baptism, called dibs on all you are and do and have and will be and will do and will have. "*You are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*"

Let me warn you, though. That changes everything. When we see who we are and what we do and where we live and what we make and where we work through the prism of our belonging to Christ, the reason we are and live and make and work is turned on its head. We do those things, not to define ourselves, but because we have been defined. We do those things, not to find an identity, but because we have been identified. And so we can be and live and work and make and do not only for ourselves, but for Christ, and what is for Christ is best for our neighbor.

"Let no one boast in men." Men haven't set you free to live and work and make and be and do and have without strings attached, without the vain hope of fulfillment in what cannot give it. No, Christ has done that. Christ has given even the most mundane moments of your life infinite value. Christ has changed changing diapers or sitting at the dinner table, or working the line, or answering the phone or grading tests into a wonderful work of faith done as a creature of God and for your neighbor. Christ has turned your life into a symphony of praise, even when some of the notes may seem a little bland or monotonous.

So what do you have? "*All things are yours*" in Him. And who are you? You are His, and He is God's. Everything falls into place. Everything takes on new significance. Nothing is taken for granted. That's life as Christ's, when who you are isn't a question, but a given, and the lens through which you see the world.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5—April 24, 2008

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

St. Paul and his fellow workers were stewards of the mysteries of God. Stewards are those entrusted with that belonging to another. Mysteries are things impossible to discover or know unless revealed. St. Paul and his fellow workers hadn't thought any of this up. They hadn't even had some breakthrough insight—there sure are a lot of pastors having those these days, aren't there? No, they had received revelation from God Himself. How? With the rare exception in St. Paul's case (since the Lord Jesus had appeared to Him in person), through the clear Word of God, whether recorded in the Old Testament, or preached by the Apostles as it would be recorded in the New Testament.

A steward often possess costly goods. He is not free, however, to use them as he pleases. He is simply holding on to them, administering them as his master sees fit. So also, St. Paul and his fellow workers were not free to do as they'd like with the offices and mysteries entrusted to them, but were to exercise their offices and administer the mysteries as the Master saw fit, and Jesus left little doubt about how He saw fit.

At Christ's return, every pastor's administration of those mysteries of which he was a steward will be examined, and he will be judged accordingly. Did he follow the Master's orders, or did he use what was entrusted to him for his own benefit or contrary to the Lord's intentions? That is a frightening prospect, and it is supposed to be. The pastor must always fear God's judgment more than his flock's, for the called worker who fears his flock more than his God becomes precisely the kind of shepherd St. Paul warns about in his second letter to Timothy, *"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions."* When such happens, everyone on both sides of the pulpit loses.

God's expectations for St. Paul and his fellow workers were simple. And His expectations for called servants still today remain the same. What are they? *"That they be found trustworthy."* God wants faithfulness. And faithfulness is not laziness, as you hear some speak, as if God wants nothing more than that a pastor put his robe on Sunday morning, mention Jesus at some point in the service, and stick some bread in your mouth. No, faithfulness is rooted in the Faith. Faithfulness is stewardship. It is not mentioning Jesus, but giving Him to your people as Christ would have you do; not sticking bread in someone's mouth, but feeding them the very Body of Christ given for them to begin with and given to them unto the end. It is doing so even when that is the last thing the people want, when you are judged repetitive and bland for so doing, when you are even yourself tempted to get a little bored with the whole thing. Faithfulness feeds and flows from faith, and faith doesn't give a hoot about how anyone feels. Faith is all about Jesus: about receiving Him,

about living in Him. You may get bored with breathing, find it repetitive and bland, but try stopping for a while and see what happens. Perhaps blue in the face, breath will seem a little more exciting.

“That they be found trustworthy,” St. Paul says. And this is crucial. They are to be trustworthy with the mysteries of God, and they are to deserve the trust of their people for just that reason. And we all need that pastor at some point, the one we’ve grumbled about for his stodgy faithfulness. Why? Because that is the one we know will give us what we need when we finally realize just how much we’ve needed it all along: Jesus. A stage and a sound team and a pep talk and a big screen are great when things are going well, but they don’t all fit into a hospital room, do they?

“Then each one will receive his commendation from God.” “What have you spoken?” God will ask pastors. “To what have you listened,” God will ask laypeople. “What have you given my flock,” God will ask pastors. “What have you received,” God will ask laypeople. May the answer for both of us be “Your Word” and “Your mysteries.” A pastor who cannot answer such is no pastor at all, and should be removed from office, like him or not. A people who cannot answer such need such a pastor who can, like him or not. Praise be to Christ that He raises up both still in the world today: faithful preachers and faithful hearers, faithful shepherds and faithful flocks!

1 Corinthians 4:6-7—April 25, 2008

I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

St. Paul swings straight and hits hard here. Why is he writing all this? *“That you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written.”* And isn’t that often one of the greatest temptations churches and individuals face? We sheep don’t like the fences. We don’t want to operate within our God-given boundaries. We struggle with both the freedom and the responsibility that the teaching of Scripture alone brings with it. We want canon law when a disagreement arises or we must wrestle with principles. We want a loophole when Scripture lays down a clear law where we would like some room for fudging things a bit. Scripture forces our focus always back toward Christ. Our flesh tugs it always back toward ourselves. This is a hard lesson to learn, one never mastered in this life, but necessary nonetheless, and so St. Paul writes *“that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written.”*

It is pride that blurs the words of Scripture, or slips a few extra in when convenient. It is a desire to be right, to win the day, to assert one’s will, to get one’s way. How? At the expense of another. But Scripture is not a club. Scripture is a two-edged sword, one that cuts both ways, and such reckless handling of it is likely to hurt all parties involved. So St. Paul urges *“that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.”*

We go to Scripture like we go to the well. We need the Word like we need water: for survival. We go there to draw life from God. When you find yourself going to Scripture only

for selfish and peripheral reasons (to get your way, win the argument, to win at Bible trivia etc.), and not because without it you will grow thirsty and ill, you must take a hard look in the mirror. Are you puffed up? *“For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”*

The depths of the depravity of fallen human nature is put on full display when gifts are given. Think Christmas with the kids. They are happy at first, but then they compare presents, and inevitably disagreements and contentions arise. They try to find self-value in the gifts. You have to remind them to say, “Thank you.” You don’t have to remind them to tear off the wrapping and tell their friends what they got. And we don’t grow out of that. Still today, when God gifts us with talents, and treasures, and everything else in between that we may have or be, our temptation is to start comparing, to find our self-value in the gifts. We are slow to say, “Thank you,” and quicker to seek the favor and accolades of friends for what we did not create or deserve to begin with, but were freely given by God. When our heart should swell with thanks, how easy isn’t it for our head to swell instead, and for our chest to puff with pride?

Gifts should breed humility, not pride. Someone loved me enough to give this to me, to do this for me, to sacrifice some of their own or of themselves for me! And when we remember who is the Giver of our greatest Gift, unwrapped for all to see and nailed to a tree, and given to us in the Gifts of Word and Sacrament, how can we not be moved to even more deep-seated and consecrated humility? No, there is no room for boasting for the Christian but in one place and in one Person, and that is not one’s own. *“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”* And unlike all our puffed up self-delusions and self-serving interpretations of our gifts, that is something worth boasting about, because you are His, and He is God’s, and in Him you have salvation, and not only salvation in the world to come, but rescue from the world and the flesh here and now, as you return to your Baptism by confessing your pride and receiving the fruit of His humility in His forgiveness. That is part and parcel of what is written, and who would ever want to move beyond that?

1 Corinthians 4:8-13—April 28, 2008

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

Anyone who ever tells you that the apostles came up with the Christian Faith in order to become famous, to get rich, or to feel important, well, they just haven’t read the New

Testament, or church history, or they at least haven't read it very attentively. The gospel brought the apostles, as Christ Himself, little in the way of the world, that is, besides the peace that quieted their hearts and minds in the seemingly perpetual tempests that were stirred up by its preaching. And little has changed. Those ages in which the church was exhibited first are almost without exception those ages when the gospel was preached least, almost completely lost. And when the preaching of the gospel exploded again, each time it ushered in an age of persecution, poverty, or at least impolite indifference.

And think about it. Little has changed. Read one of the glossy ads I get mailed to me all the time. The thinking is still the same. Tone down the gospel to grow the church, clean up Christ to impress the lost. And what happens in the end? Christ becomes a little hard to recognize anymore.

The Corinthians were full—we might say full of it. They thought they had the Christian thing down. Jesus taught, *"A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master."* Not so among the Corinthians. They had been confirmed. They had their certificate and all that jazz. They were ready to out-apostle St. Paul. And, conveniently, they were ready to do so without all the suffering and wrestling with God and sacrifice and persecution. Good deal, huh? St. Paul and his cohorts had only managed a spot at the end of the parade, where captive prisoners were marched before being executed. The Corinthians were going to glitz the Faith up, move it forward, wow the spectators. Sure, the Faith might have to be pared down a bit—in fact, it might be turned into nothing worth believing—but sometimes you have to make sacrifices to make a difference, right St. Paul?

Wouldn't it be nice to have heaven now? Man, I sure would like that. Too bad it's never gonna happen. Never. Nope. Don't even think about it. Christ promised a heaven on the other side of a cross, and remove the cross and you lose the heaven. A full bank account, a tranquil home life, peaceful borders, swank clothes, cutting edge entertainment, your way right away every day whatever you say, forget about it. All of it is meaningless if it is the end of your hopes. None of it is heaven, anymore than the ostentatious and gaudy crucifix bling you see some wearing these days is a confession of the Christian Faith.

The Christian life is struggle. And the peace Christ gives us in this life is a peace designed precisely for that struggle. And to flee the struggle, to give up on prayer, to hide your faith, to stick your head in the sand when God calls you to bear a cross for Him, to hate your enemies instead of loving them, to curse those who curse you instead of blessing them, to try to run through the more strenuous portions of the Christian walk: all of this is to slowly lose not only the "Christian" but also the eternal life to come.

You follow Jesus Christ. Retrace His steps. His was no walk through the garden. No, even in the garden He fell in desperate, exhausted, and heartrending prayer. He had His Easter Sunday, but not without the flight to Egypt, the constant opposition of the rulers, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and so forth. And He is serious when He speaks the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. And He is clear when He closes them with the promise, *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

So what am I saying? Should you run out and look for trouble, search for persecution. No, Christ says to do no such thing. St. Paul did no such thing. But what I am saying is that you dare not think that when such things come, that when it is your hour to wrestle with God, that you are not at such times living the Christian life to the fullest. Rather, you should give thanks that precisely at that moment your cup runs over, that you can take refuge in that precious peace our Savior gives us, the peace St. Paul has in mind when he writes to the Romans, *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”*

Jesus loves you. Beware. But also be glad. Being last in the parade might seem like a lousy spot, but I remember a certain God saying something about the first being last and the last first, and, unless I am mistaken, those marching last are later seen wearing crowns and sitting on thrones in St. John’s Revelation. Funny thing, the One they worship seems to have taken the same route. Who are we, then, to despise our place in the parade? No, let the marching band play, and let the world bring what it may. We’re on our way to glory, even as we walk under the cross. The school of the Savior doesn’t end with a certificate, but with a coffin. Fortunately, graduation is a party that is going to blow your mind.

1 Corinthians 4:14-17—April 29, 2008

I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

By now the Corinthians, or at least some among them, may well have been feeling a bit ashamed of themselves. St. Paul had taken them to task. He had taken them to task as they’d probably not been taken to task before since coming to the Faith. And so St. Paul is sure to clear up any confusion, like a father asking his child, “Do you think I like punishing you?” St. Paul tells them, “Children, I do not like speaking this way. I do not want to have to write you such words. But understand, my dear ones, I do it because I love you, and for your own good. I am your father in Christ Jesus, and do not want you to fall away from Him, or to do harm to yourselves and your brothers and sisters in the congregation. I love you, and so I correct you.”

How did you learn to speak? To walk? To ride a bike? To take responsibility for your actions? To take care of those entrusted to your care? Many of you learned from your father. And, hopefully, for many of you your father was a Christian doing his best to imitate Christ. And you saw him fail at times. And perhaps it shocked you at first. But you learned in those

times as well. And, I pray, you also saw him strive not to fail again, to do better, to love more faithfully and serve more manfully. We learn important things from fathers, at least many of us had that opportunity, and those who didn't will surely have the chance to be the father they didn't have should God give them little ones. Fathers can speak a certain way to their children. They have a special relationship. They have a vested interest and an eternal hope. In many ways, there is almost nothing more important than the time a father spends with his children—there is no price tag on that, and, I would dare to assert that few who have given that time have wanted to take it back on their deathbed.

And St. Paul was their father. He had brought the gospel to them. He had given them Christ. His preaching had begotten them, as the Spirit worked through the Word he shared to create in them the faith which St. Paul works so desperately here to keep from a slow and perhaps indiscernible death among them. *"I urge you, then, be imitators of me."* In other words, "I imitate Christ. Imitate me imitating Christ. As I have turned to Him for forgiveness, turn to Him. As I have sacrificed much for Him and His message, be willing to sacrifice. As I find in Him my greatest joy and my singular hope, find the same in Him."

To help the Corinthians on their way to recovery, to remind them of his love for them, St. Paul sends his children another of his children, Timothy. St. Paul begins his letter to St. Timothy, *"To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."* St. Timothy also had been brought to faith as a result of St. Paul's ministry; and he was a PK of sorts. St. Paul's spiritual son had become a pastor himself. St. Timothy was not to start from scratch, but he was to start a thorough review. He was to walk the Corinthians again through the Catechism, the basics of the faith that St. Paul taught in every church, and to model in person what he had learned through St. Paul, now with them only in this letter. St. Paul dearly loved this son, even as he dearly loved these children, and both parties no doubt remained constantly in his thoughts and especially his prayers as they undertook this congregational renewal and reformation.

You are St. Paul's children as well. We have all been born of his preaching, as through his missionary work and his bold and costly defense of the gospel this jewel from God's own pierced hands has been passed down to us as well. But you have also had your more immediate fathers, as have I. I think of Pastor Karl Vertz, who taught me the Lutheran faith, guided me through my college and seminary formation, married me and ordained me. He is my father. I am his child. And you have had those pastors as well, who baptized you, who catechized you, who married you, who guided you through your continuing formation as a Christian. And, if you haven't, you will, should you place yourself into the care of a faithful shepherd. Treasure them. Imitate them. Kneel with them in confession. Sing with them in absolved joy. And should the opportunity present itself, be ready to reproduce yourself, sharing the Word of promise with those with whom you have the opportunity, bringing them to Christ, even as you invite them into the care of your pastor.

"I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children." Remember that when the law is preached to you in the public services of the congregation or spoken to you in private, God is not trying to embarrass you. No, God wants His children safe, and through the law He calls them back from danger and drives

them to the Good Shepherd and Chief Bishop of their souls, Jesus Christ. As Jesus sent St. Paul, St. Paul sent St. Timothy, and so on and so forth all the way to today, Jesus still speaks through His servants, called by Him Himself, though sent by pastors or church bodies, to keep His children safe and drive them to His mercy, as a cowboy driving his herd to safe pastures. This too is God's love for you, even when it stings. This too is God's care for you, even when it seems uncaring. Think back to your time with your father. Some of the moments you are most grateful for are those in which he corrected and taught you life lessons you wouldn't trade for all the world. Your heavenly Father is no different, and heaven will grant you the same perspective.

1 Corinthians 4:18-21—April 30, 2008

Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

With these words St. Paul brings this section of the letter to an end. No, he's not done correcting; there are other problems in the congregation. He will, however, begin to deal with issues other than the authority of the apostles and pastors, their unity in the Holy Office of the Ministry, and the humility that comes with life under the cross.

Apparently, those stirring up the congregation in Corinth were claiming that St. Paul would not return. This probably served several purposes. First, it gave the impression he did not care enough to come back to them in person. Second, it bolstered their disobedience, like a child who knows his parents are out of town. Third, it diminished his authority. The false teachers were there in person. St. Paul was not. Whom were they going to listen to and follow?

St. Paul was planning to return, should the Lord will it. What a wonderful phrase that is: "Lord willing"! It used to pepper Christian speech and writing. Now it makes the rare appearance. But it is a powerful confession of the Lord's providence and also of His return. Who knows what tomorrow brings? It might well bring Him. Oh, that He might come! But as we've begun to rely more on ourselves and less on God, as we've let the power of man's advancements overshadow the eternal and immeasurable power of God, we've lost a little bit of the perspective so common among our father's. No matter how many channels we have on the TV, how many toys the doctors have, and how many miles per hour we can travel, that "Lord willing" still stands.

James writes in the fourth chapter of his epistle, "*Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.*"

Bad things happen when the driver at the wheel gets too confident, becomes too comfortable, assumes that nothing can go wrong. That's how accidents happen. So in life. When we forget who is in control, when we become too confident, too comfortable, assume nothing can go wrong, then we fall into pride and arrogance, and are perched for a fall. That "Lord willing" is more than a phrase, it is a worldview.

St. Paul wanted to come to them, and he wanted to come to them, not with a rod, but in a spirit of gentleness. He wanted this letter to wake them up, to call them back, to wise them up, to bring them to their senses. Then, when he came, he could rejoice with them in God's mercy and grace, rather than having to hammer them with the law—and the law is a hammer.

The longer you linger in sin, the less time you get to truly celebrate, to rejoice in God's mercy and grace. The great thing about being woken up, being called back, being wised up, being brought to our senses is that the "Lord willing" reappears and we have peace, knowing that God is in control and we are free to live in the gospel, to live in Christ and for our neighbor, knowing that He who forgives us our sins is He who gives our daily bread, is He who prepares good works for us to walk in, is He who will deliver us from evil and keep us in His kingdom. Talk is great and all, but power never hurt anyone, that is, not when it is God's power, at work through the gospel, standing behind all human history, and overseeing the course of our walk through life. And that power is a "Lord willing" worth speaking and writing, singing and praying, for what the Lord wills is always good, and we are the Lord's, and He has willed to us salvation, sealed with His Body and Blood in the Supper, signed with the finger of the Spirit on the pages of Holy Writ.

Tomorrow we will continue with the next chapter—"Lord willing," that is. Perhaps heaven might get in our way, and that's all right with me.

1 Corinthians 5:1-5—May 2, 2008

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

The famous Greek orator Demosthenes wrote, "Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children" (Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians, p. 165). That attitude had not died out by the time of St. Paul. If anything, it was more prevalent, especially in important cities like Corinth. Sexual immorality was rampant outside the church doors, and, I know it is hard to imagine, but sometimes it even made its way inside.

The Jews had strict laws about these things and deeply ingrained cultural attitudes that helped to keep much of such behavior at bay. In a Jewish congregation, one made up of many raised in the synagogue and catechized in the Old Testament law, the pastor would not have to spend as much time addressing sexual immorality, although the Jews too were surely not immune to such things (read the Old Testament historical books again). But in Gentile congregations this was a constant battle. The church has always been susceptible to the society in which it is situated—can you say stadium seating, coffee shops, and rock bands—and there are no vaccines for society's ills. So long as the church militant, the church on earth, is made up of sinner/saints, men and women who at the same time are enticed by the flesh and desire to do God's will, there will ample motivation for fervent prayer and regular need for Christian admonition and discipline.

The worst thing a church can become in such dire straits as those in which it finds itself in the seemingly overwhelming cultural deluge that surrounds us is arrogant. Temptation requires humility. But the Corinthians were puffed up in this regard as well. They boasted in their Christian freedom, and turned the gospel and the free forgiveness it proclaims into a license to sin. "We're forgiven," they thought, "so we might as well put it to good use. Better to be forgiven a lot than a little." In fact, they even thought they were bringing honor to God by their sin, giving Him more to forgive, more opportunity to show how good and merciful He was. But God's wrath was all they were increasing, and they were bringing shame to the gospel and to His name, the name in which they were baptized and the name in which St. Paul had preached to them.

We Lutherans are especially susceptible to such thinking. Where the gospel is proclaimed most purely, there the devil works most feverishly. Just as at St. Paul's time, so at Luther's time men heard the gospel preached in all its unadulterated and unconditional splendor and twisted absolution into an excuse, "I'm set free from sin" into "I'm set free to sin." Some even claimed that the law should not be preached to the Christian anymore. He or she was free from the law. He or she was under grace. Of course, Luther opposed this false teaching as vigorously as he opposed the work-righteousness of Rome, but it did a good deal of damage.

And so also today. We've all been tempted to give into that kind of thinking at times. "I'll repent in the morning, or on Sunday. I still believe in Christ. In fact, I know He died for my sins. That's why I know He'll forgive me." It's a little more subtle than the Corinthian's error, but it's destructive all the same. It kills faith, harms the body and soul, blasphemes the saving work of our Lord Jesus, and corrupts the gospel. No big deal? It may seem that way at the time—how innocent doesn't that sin seem as we rationalize it—but it is as big a deal as any other nail in Christ's hands or thorn in His brow.

Christian admonishment and discipline is an act of love. It is a wake-up call to those spiritually slumbering at the wheel, CPR on dying faith. St. Paul tells the Corinthians to put this man out of the congregation, not simply to shame or embarrass him, not because they themselves had no sin, but so that public sin would be publicly declared sinful, publicly condemned as wrong, and so that the offending member might be moved to see his sin, sorrow over it, and seek the forgiveness of Christ, being restored again to the congregation,

kneeling with them at the rail to receive the Sacrament that unites the penitent in grace. *“Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”*

It is not too hard to speculate on what it was like to live in Corinth, is it? Everyday Demosthenes would feel more at home in the America we've been slowly becoming. Sure, we might not be exposed to as much blatant immorality in person, face to face, although there is plenty of that, but television, movies, internet, radio even things we have no decision in coming in contact with, like billboards, newspapers or magazines on display, ads in stores, can throw temptation into our face, and not only that, but even advocate it as good and right and healthy and beneficial. And all of that outside the church will at times make its way inside. Sometimes you will bring it with you. Sometimes I might. No one is immune. There is no vaccine. The question, then, is what do we do when that happens? My prayer is that we will be a church that admonishes, that disciplines, not in Pharisaical condescension, but rather in Christian love, not simply to shame or embarrass each other, but to call sin sin and to call sinners from it, to bring each other back into God's grace, to make sure each other is saved in the day of the Lord. And yes, it may seem awkward at times, but will it seem nearly as awkward as seeing that brother or sister on the wrong side of God's judgment, having avoided a temporary time of discipline at the expense of an eternity of punishment?

God is good. He wants all saved. Let us want the same. Let us face temptation with humility. Let us receive and offer admonishment with the same. And all the while, let us rejoice in Christ our Savior, who through His humiliation has set us free from the sin that would entangle us and has given us one to another to walk in that new life and free forgiveness—not as an excuse for old habits, but as an escape into fresh starts—each day of our earthly life.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

This life is a feast. “Amen!” says the flesh. No, not that kind of feast, not a raucous celebration of self and service to the belly. No, it is a Passover feast, the celebration of the historical fact and ever-present reality and approaching realization that in Christ death has passed us over eternally. Our Lamb, without blemish or defect, innocent of every charge, yet silent before His accusers, has been sacrificed on the cross, and His Blood does not merely mark our doorposts, but is poured onto our heads, so to speak, in the water of Holy Baptism, is literally poured into our mouths in the Lord's Supper.

Are you feasting? Are you greedily consuming every divine morsel you can scavenge in the Word, hungrily devouring the medicine of immortality, the Holy Supper. This is the pilgrim's meal. We are a people on the move, ready to go at the Lord's command, eager to

enter the Promised Land. So we eat on the run, eyes on the heavens, minds focused on things above. This is the feast of unleavened bread. There is no time for yeast. Leave the old leaven behind, the leaven of malice and evil. The unleavened bread of sincerity and truth will be just fine, will serve you splendidly in fact.

A little leaven leavens the whole lump. One bad apple... You know what St. Paul means. You've experienced it. You hang out with certain people enough, listen to certain stuff enough, watch certain stuff enough, and what do you do? You ape it. It becomes part of who you are. Without even thinking about it, you start to walk and talk and think like the influences around you. And to change you need not only to look inside yourself, but outside yourself as well.

"Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened." Unleavened is what you are, not what you might be, or what you should be. You are unleavened. Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed. In Holy Baptism, His sacrifice became yours, and you were made His, and the yeast was drawn out and drowned, and you are unleavened. And so we celebrate the feast. We celebrate it as we feast on unleavened bread that is at the same time His Body. We celebrate it as He comes to life in us so that we live our life in Him for Him. We celebrate it as we turn to Him in prayer, and as we receive His answer, even His "no," with the certitude that He who gave Himself for us will never withhold what is good for us from us.

This life is a feast. "Amen!" says the spirit. Enjoy that amen. Cherish this feast. But chew your food. Enjoy each bite as a gift from God. Stamp that amen on all you say, do and think. See the world through it, and find your peace in it. This life is a feast. Death passes us over. We go from life to life. We draw closer every day to the realization of our ever-present reality. This life is a feast. "Amen!"

1 Corinthians 5:9-13—April 12, 2007

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

How in the world are we to avoid sexual immorality? But that's St. Paul's point. It is impossible to avoid it in the world. He is talking about the church. The Corinthians, it would appear, had misunderstood a point he had previously made to them. The world is full of sin. It is unavoidable. But the church ought not surrender to sin because of its abundance outside its hearts and doors. No, it must confront sin, precisely in its hearts and doors, absolving the penitent, those who confess their sin and seek to amend their lives, and excluding the impenitent, those who refuse to acknowledge their sin or amend their lives.

All of us see the list above and cringe a bit, or at least we ought. If we are not to associate with such people who have committed sexual immorality or been greedy or served an idol or slandered others or gotten drunk or swindled another we indeed cannot associate with ourselves. For we have lusted, envied, loved what is not God more than God, gossiped, drunk too much, or gained something by deception. We have committed at least one of these, if not all, in one form or another. What are we to do then?

St. Paul is here speaking about those who have given up the fight, who have given in to such sins, who have thrown up their hands in surrender and lost hope in repentance or no longer seen need for it. These are those persisting in sins. The sins now define them. They have not only committed sexual immorality, but are sexually immoral. They have not only reviled, but are revilers. Their faith is no longer their defining characteristic. Their sin is. They are no longer believers, but unbelievers, having sold what they have no right to sell, that which was bought by Christ's precious blood, back into slavery to sin.

The most pressing sin must always be, not another's, but my own, because this is the sin that would not only inflict me, but own me, just as God warned Cain. The most pressing sin for the church must always be the church's own. We are our brother's keepers. We must love each other as we love ourselves, and so we must speak the truth in love, warning in genuine concern, receiving warning with sincerity. We have not been called to judge those outside our doors, but have indeed been called to judge those inside them, that is, to call sin sin that grace might be proclaimed as grace.

To some that might sound terribly hypocritical, haughty, or judgmental. But not all judgment is judgmental. I do not judge my brother or sister in Christ with a different measure than I judge myself, and I certainly do not do so as one who is not also and at the same time under the same judgment of Almighty God. In fact, it is precisely because I am under the same judgment, and know personally and painfully the dread consequences of sin, that I must judge, must warn and, Lord willing, announce God's grace when the brother or sister repents. Why? Those owned by sin lose their inheritance, and he who got drunk is more likely to become the drunkard if he is not warned, just as I when I swindle am more likely to become the swindler if I am not warned, that is, he and I are more likely to be not only one's who have committed the sin—swindlers and drunkards in the sense of having erred in this way—but one's defined by the sin—swindlers and drunkards in the sense of those taken captive by such error.

You have been bought a price. We will hear St. Paul say it well when he ends the next chapter: *"You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."* You are Christ's. That is too much worth being to trade for anything else. You are believers, Christians. Christ owns you. Faith defines you. Cherish that, both for yourself, and for your brothers and sisters, and in so doing, you will strive remain in that grace in which you stand, and not alone, but with those who now stand with you.

1 Corinthians 6:1-8—May 12, 2008

When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?

And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!

I know it's hard to believe, but sometimes when you gather a bunch of sinners together, you get a bunch of sin. Take a minute to wrap your head around it. It's true. Some congregations have times that they all don't get together so well. Not every parish can be a piece of heaven like our own. I mean, can you imagine people in our parish having it out sometime, or not liking each other a whole lot in certain situations, or disagreeing on things once in a while? Yeah, me neither (this is where I'd put one of those smiley face icons if I knew how to make them).

Thankfully, we do have a parish that gets along pretty well, where being on the outs isn't in vogue, but we all know what it's like to work together as a bunch of sinners with individual opinions, preferences, and customs. So the question becomes: what do you do when such quarrels arise? The simple answer: the opposite of what the Corinthians did.

We've already seen there were factions in the congregation, now we see that there were even lawsuits. These Christians who were adopted the world's attitudes about sexual immorality were also turning to the world to settle their disputes. And, in so doing, what was the gospel becoming to their neighbors and fellow citizens but a laughingstock, a punch line, a lot of fancy talk without real consequences. The Corinthian congregation wasn't merely mimicking the world, it would appear they were bordering on out-worlding the world, drinking deeply the culture around them and spewing it back up.

What was the root of the problem? No one was willing to suffer wrong. Why should they be willing? That is the nature of the gospel. It changes us, it turns our priorities inside out. The gospel rests upon the truth that Christ suffered wrong for us, our wrong, a wrong which He in no way deserved to suffer. And the faith that grasps that gospel is the same faith that moves the Christian to suffer wrong for another, to turn the other cheek, to love enemies, yes, to accept loss without seeking revenge.

At St. Paul's time, most of the cases brought to court were cases where the wealthy were seeking something from the less fortunate, bleeding turnips. Unwilling to endure the loss of even a penny of their riches, they sought what Christian love would urge them to surrender, but what Roman law entitled them to seize.

It's not always a sin for a Christian to go to court, but there are most certainly cases where it is, where a Christian should think twice about doing so, especially when both parties involved are brothers and sisters in Christian fellowship. We live in a litigious society, one quick to assert individual rights and to grab for what one can get out of each situation. Not so among us, Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount and St. Paul says in this text. We

ask first not how I can bilk my neighbor (even by legal means), but how I can serve and benefit him or her. Such disputes, one would hope, should be able to be resolved through sanctified reason and forgiven charity. We are God's children, aren't we? We are heirs of heaven, aren't we? We are a royal priesthood, a chosen people, aren't we? Then how we deal with each other should be evidence of such. Then we should as Christians bear a resemblance to our Christ, the Lamb without spot or blemish who suffered injustice rather than allow suffering to come to His brothers and sisters through faith.

The gospel takes our eyes off ourselves and sets them squarely on Christ, and in Christ, on our neighbor. In the Judgment, Christ will ask not what we've done for our neighbor, but what we've done for Him, yet what we've done for Him will be what we've done for our neighbor. God does not need our charity, that is, our Christian love. Our neighbor, however, does, and he or she is the one to whom our God directs it in the last seven commandments.

Your Jesus has been wronged for you. Your Jesus has been defrauded for you. And not by compulsion, but willingly. He chose to love. He chose to suffer loss to bring you gain, to give up His rights so you could take hold of mercy. What love the Father has lavished upon us in Him! And this love is no idle thing, but is active through the faith that receives it. Like light, it bounces off mirrors, and we are those mirrors, reflecting the love of Christ to Christ in the person of our neighbors, and especially of our brothers and sisters in Christian fellowship. Things are different among us, at least they ought to be. Our prayer as a congregation and as a Christian people is always that they are, and when they aren't, that they will be as we return to the One who has so loved us.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11—May 15, 2008

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Uh oh! Or am I the only one who thinks that when they read the first part of this text? Once again, I fit the bill. Sure, I could take consolation in the fact that I am not tempted by some of the sins listed, or, if tempted, have not openly committed them, or at least not often, but that doesn't change the fact that there are plenty of checks on my list. What about you?

Not a one of us can stand before God and deny it. We've sinned. We've sinned in some of these ways, and many others as well. We do not deserve to inherit the kingdom of God. No, we've worked hard for another inheritance, one we've never wanted but we've nonetheless earned.

But what does St. Paul say? *“And such were some of you.”* You catch that? *“Were”*—past tense. Used to be, not anymore. You can’t deny you’ve sinned, but God has declared you are no sinner, not in his sight, not in His Son.

“But you were washed,” He insists, *“you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”* Do you remember that? There’s no hope for you when you forget it. You stand no chance against temptation and have no standing in the kingdom of God when you let go of that truth. *“You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”* You didn’t do it; *“you were.”* You aren’t anymore; *“you were.”* You are not yourself; you are your new self.

“We just don’t do that.” That is what the child of God reminds himself when confronted with sin. *“We just don’t do that.”* That is what the family of God is raised to know. Those are the old ways. We are not the old men. We are new. We are different. We’ve been given a bath, set aside for a holy purpose, and declared righteous in God’s sight. That is not what we are to be. That is what we are.

Remember that. And know what was done in the past did not stay in the past, but is still just as true today. You were washed, and you are clean. You were sanctified, and you are holy. You were justified, and you are righteous. Return to that truth in your guilt. Be renewed in that truth in your weariness.

The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. Thank God that is not what you are. You are justified. The unholy have no place in God’s family. Thank God that is not what you are. You are holy. The filthy cannot stand in God’s presence. Thank God that is not what you are. You are washed. Be what you are. Remain what you are. And do so the same way you became it: in Christ and by the Spirit. There is no other way.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20—May 16, 2008

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be enslaved by anything. “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Did you hear it, the loud crashing noise? That was Christian freedom and Christian love, forgiveness through faith and the obedience of faith colliding.

You are set free from sin. You are not set free to sin. You are made alive through faith. Faith without works is dead. God has made all things good. Nothing is good in the service of the sinful flesh. Following?

The Corinthians had mistaken the gospel as a license to sin. But Jesus didn't die for our sins for us to gorge ourselves on its wages, that is, death. No, Jesus died for us to live, and we live by grace and through faith, and where there is grace there is gratefulness, and where there is faith there is love.

"Or do you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." You are not the devil's housing projects. You are the Spirit's temples. To sin against your body is to sin against the Spirit, and to grieve the Spirit is to slowly drive Him away, and to be without the Spirit is to be back in the mire from which you were pulled and of which you were washed.

Sexual immorality forgets this. It falls back into the popular notion that has for millennia plagued mankind's thinking, the idea that matter is inconsequential—even evil, as opposed to the spirit. Sex is a bodily thing, such delusional thinking asserts (thus, "friends with benefits," or having "just sex," or "It's my body"); it's no big deal. God, however, objects. Sex is a bodily thing; it is a big deal. It's His body after all.

Do you realize how special your bodies are, how sacred, how precious in God's sight? Christ became flesh and blood. Christ offered flesh and blood. Christ rose flesh and blood. Christ gives flesh and blood. Christianity is not spirituality. Christianity is life—body and soul life, the only kind there is.

The resurrection of the dead is the heart and core of the Christian faith, and our bodies are the central focus of the resurrection of the dead, as they are reunited with our souls to live forever in God's presence. Why drag them, why drag the Spirit into sin? How could the Corinthians do such a thing, especially in such a flippant and casual manner? How could we?

God loves you with real love, body and soul love. He redeemed you with His own Son's Body and Blood, with which He now sustains you in the Sacrament. He speaks not only to your soul, but into your ears. He washes you not only inside, but out, as water is poured not only onto your minds but onto your heads. You have been forgiven, adopted, set free. So with heartfelt commitment and the humility of faith let St. Paul's words be your own: *"All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be enslaved by anything."*

1 Corinthians 7:1-7—May 19, 2008

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

And this is about where they start blushing. This is where pre-marital classes get awkward. Why? Because the last person in the world people tend to want to hear about their sex life from is their pastor. But how do you get around it. Shall we take 1 Corinthians 7 out of the Bible? Might make for less blushing, but for less blessing as well.

Two become one flesh in marriage. It is a union. And for each person involved the other becomes the most important, because to love the other is to love his own body, her own body. Neither belongs to himself or herself any longer. As their bodies have belonged to the Lord since Baptism, when they became the Spirit's temple, so also their bodies now also belong to their spouse, and in serving the needs of their spouse—yes, even the sexual needs—they are serving the Lord. Sounds weird, perhaps, ut it's true nonetheless.

Not all have the gift of St. Paul. In fact, very few have the gift of St. Paul. Very few are built for celibacy. That is why St. Paul uses imperatives in verse 2: "each should have." The normal practice is marriage, because it is better to marry than to burn, as we will hear him say in verse 9. Notice that I didn't say chastity above—no one is more chaste than a married couple enjoying God's gift of sex within marriage and out of love for one another—but celibacy. Celibacy is abstention from sex. Chastity is the pure use of it. Not many have the gift of St. Paul, and the best thing for those that don't is God's gift of marriage. Single or married, both are equal in God's sight. The single individual has more time for prayer and study. The married individual has a unique opportunity to serve his or her neighbor in the person of his or her spouse and, should God grant them, in his or her children, in the rearing of which he or she also serves society as a whole. Both are blessings. Both are outlets for the love of Christ abounding toward us and then even through us.

Unfortunately for the Christian Church, and to its detriment, the view of sex among its members has not always been the biblical view. From rather early on in its history, and in a large part due to philosophical systems brought into the church by those seeking to defend it against the attacks of secular scholars and protagonists, a sad asceticism arose within its ranks. Many viewed sex as a necessary evil, as something performed on account of the command to be fruitful and multiply, but something certainly not to be enjoyed. It was a bodily act and therefore unspiritual and carnal. The Roman Church even legislated specific guidelines for sexual intimacy, from the how to the when to the why. The laity were left in constant fear of sin as they carried out the duties of the wedded state. But nothing could be further from the truth than the notion that the conjugal intimacy of husband and wife is something of which to be ashamed—although there is definitely another ditch to watch out for on the other side of the road, one in which sex is turned into an idol or a means of grace, which is equally if not more pernicious.

As in every area of the Christian life, the question here is how can I serve God and my neighbor with this gift of God. The answer is not all that difficult. I can serve God and my neighbor by using this gift in accordance with God's will and for my spouse's benefit, that is, for children, for companionship, and for chastity. I use this gift not only to serve myself, and

not only when I am moved by my own desire, but for my neighbor in the person of my spouse. I am to help my spouse avoid the pitfalls of lust by not denying him or her except for times of prayer and fasting. I am to cultivate closeness and confidence between with my spouse and myself by giving myself to him or her in this most intimate way. I am to fulfill God's command to be fruitful and multiply so long as I am physically and mentally able. And in doing all this, I am not only serving my spouse, but I am also honoring God, who has willed that such take place, who instituted marriage and sex before the fall into sin and not after it.

So, you understand the blushing now? Any of your coworkers ask you why your face is red yet? No worries. We need not blush. It's nothing to be embarrassed by, and it's only something to be ashamed of when we've been misusing the gift, using it outside of God's intended boundaries intended to safeguard both this gift and those to whom He desires to give it. We have a loving God. He loves to prepare in advance for us opportunities to love. This, for husband and wife, is one of those opportunities. Enjoy it, and use it for the good of each other.

1 Corinthians 7:8,9—May 20, 2008

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

There is a good chance that, while St. Paul was not married as he wrote this letter, he had been married at some time, and that his wife had died or left him because of his conversion. He writes here, best translated, "*to the widowers and the widows,*" or, as our translation renders it, "*to the unmarried.*" For those who had lost a spouse, it was good for them to remain single, to devote their time to prayer and service to the church. It was good, but it was by no means necessary or commanded by God. In fact, marriage would indeed be God-pleasing should they desire it, and they would lose no status before God by entering into it. Rather, if they were tempted by the lusts of the flesh, or if they found themselves unfit for such a life in some other way, it was good and right for them to marry again, and to do so without guilt.

We are servants of God as believers in Christ, and God's will for the believer is the avenue that best allows him or her to serve, whether single or married life. Singles, even those with every intention of marrying someday, are gifted with additional time for prayer and fasting and study and service at that point in their life. Married individuals are gifted with a special opportunity to serve their neighbor in the person of their spouse and children, and society as a whole as they faithfully carry out the duties of this bedrock estate upon which communities' present and future viability depends.

In all of this, God desires chastity. Those burning with sexual passion are to acknowledge that they lack the gift of celibacy and seek marriage. Those free from such temptations, or able to overcome them when they sporadically arise through the grace of God, are to rejoice in their gift. Neither is to boast in his or her gift, but rather to praise God

for it. Neither is to exalt himself or herself over the other. Rather, each is to pray for the chastity of the other.

Those of you unmarried who nonetheless feel the desire for the gift of marriage, make use of the time you have as a single through the opportunities God provides you for piety and devotion, and pray for a godly husband or wife if and when God should desire to grant you one. Those of you married, see in your husband or wife your partner in God's service, in chastity, in service to your neighbor and society as a whole. Take advantage of the opportunities God provides you through married life to reflect the love of Christ and train in the Word of God. For those with children, take to heart the wonderful words of Luther, "Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priest to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel" (*Estate of Marriage*, p. 46, LW 45).

All, married and unmarried, are provided with marvelous opportunities and avenues for exercising the Christian life through the grace of God. Only let them be sure to exercise self-control as they seek to do so. If the single person finds himself or herself lacking that control, let that person seek marriage. If the married person finds himself or herself lacking that control, let that person seek the help of his or her spouse. God is good, and He desires your wholeness and chastity. Turn to Him for such, and know that He who has given you His only Son will surely not withhold from you what is necessary to serve Him in that same Son.

Tangentially, I wanted to include some beautiful words from Luther concerning the estate of marriage, written in defense of marriage against the Roman notion that married life was something less in God's eyes than the life of priests and monks and nuns, and describing how one is to find meaning and joy in his or her marriage, even in the hard times, and this seems an appropriate place to do so:

Now the ones who recognize the estate of marriage are those who firmly believe that God Himself instituted it, brought husband and wife together, and ordained that they should beget children and care for them. For this they have God's word, Genesis 1, and they can be certain that he does not lie. They can therefore also be certain that the estate of marriage and everything that goes with it in the way of conduct, works, and suffering is pleasing to God. Now tell me, how can the heart have greater good, joy, and delight than in God, when one is certain that his estate, conduct, and work is pleasing to God?

That is what it means to find a wife. Many *have* wives, but few *find* wives. Why? They are blind; they fail to see that their life and conduct with their wives is the work of God and pleasing in his sight. Could they but find that, then no wife would be so hateful, so ill-tempered, so ill-mannered, so poor, so sick that they would fail to find in her their heart's delight and would always be reproaching God for his work, creation, and will. And because they see that it is the good pleasure of their beloved Lord, they would be able to have peace in grief, joy in the midst of bitterness, happiness in the midst of tribulations, as the martyrs have in suffering.

We err in that we judge the work of God according to our own feelings, and regard not his will but our own desire. This is why we are unable to recognize his works and persist in making evil that which is good, and regarding as bitter that which is pleasant. Nothing is so bad, not even death itself, but what it becomes sweet and tolerable if only I know and am certain that it is pleasing to God. Then there follows immediately that of which Solomon speaks, "He obtains favor from the Lord." (*Estate of Marriage*, pgs. 38-39, LW 45)

1 Corinthians 7:10-16—May 22, 2008

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

St. Paul has spoken about why Christians should marry, and what the benefits of marriage are for such. Now he turns to the sad question of divorce: sad because it is never God's will, and sad because of what it does to those involved.

St. Paul first deals with divorce among Christians. He pulls no punches: there shouldn't be any. If a believer leaves a believing spouse, he or she has two options: be reconciled or remain unmarried. St. Paul does not say here, as he has elsewhere, that he prefers this, or that it is better, but rather "*should not.*"

These are hard words in our contemporary context. We know that the church hardly reflects them. In fact, some studies indicate that Christians have done little better than non-Christians in this regard. Husbands and wives have left each other for the most trifling circumstances in some cases, and sometimes churches have even not only condoned it, but blessed it.

So what do we do? We uphold Scripture's teaching. We seek in our marriages (whether married before or not), to take these words seriously, to work at the union into which we've now been joined with all our might. We can't change the past. These words, however, can shape and define our present view and commitment.

Marriages break up. It happens. It can't be denied. Does God will it? Of course not. Are there sometimes biblical grounds? Yes, we know that adultery and desertion breaks a marriage bond. Is that any less tragic? No, it tears people apart, shatters or numbs hearts. But there is forgiveness. There is mercy. There is tomorrow. And for that we hold all the more unswervingly to Christ, the tie that binds.

In the second part, St. Paul deals with the marriage of a believer with an unbeliever (note: this is by all accounts most likely a marriage contracted *before* one individual became a Christian, *not* a marriage knowingly contracted by an unbeliever with an unbeliever; in such cases, the Christian ought not use these words to justify leaving the marriage the contracted knowing the challenges ahead). In such cases, if the unbelieving spouse decides to leave, there is little the Christian can do. The unbelieving spouse is not subject to church discipline and is unconcerned with God's will and judgment. It is still unfortunate, and does harm to both parties involved, but the Christian is free to marry again. The Christian,

however, will not leave the marriage so long as the unbelieving spouse is willing to be married. He or she will remain committed to his or her spouse then.

In such marriages, the husband has been sanctified by the believing wife, and the wife by the believing husband, that is, they are in the sphere of influence of the Christian and they are part of the Christian life of the Christian, as he or she loves, serves and fulfills his or her marital duties with and through the unbelieving spouse. This does not necessarily mean that the unbeliever will be saved, but, through the Christian's influence, this is something most certainly for which to be hoped and prayed. In such a marriage, the Christian spouse also has a most wonderful opportunity to bring the children up as Christians, having them baptized and instructing them in the faith. In such a way, even through an unbelieving spouse, the number of saints is increased.

Marriage, as we have noted, is a gift from God. He or she who recognizes that will treasure the gift—even when it seems a burdensome one—and work hard to preserve it. God's will is always that marriages endure. He never wills divorce. Yet we live in a fallen world, one where not only others but we ourselves often fall short of that will, or even in stubborn pride directly oppose it. And there are consequences to sin. And so we see divorce all around us, and so some of us have even experienced its sharp sting.

God is love. In such cases, especially where there is no chance of reconciling, we do what Christians do. We return to the cross, laying our sins on Christ, receiving His grace through the promise of His Word and the bread and wine of the Supper. We rejoice in whatever new opportunities he's given us and apply what we've learned in our own lives and for the benefit of others. God can turn even bitter waters sweet. So let the married cherish what they have, and let the unmarried respect the institution.

1 Corinthians 7:17-24—May 27, 2008

Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

We often get the silly notion that when one becomes a Christian, or simply is a Christian, radical changes are in the offing. Surely Jesus must have more important things for me to be, for me to do. But, no, that's not always the case. Often, what Jesus wants you to be and do is precisely what you were and were doing before He was in the picture. Were you a foreman? Now you are a Christian foreman. Were you low man on the totem pole?

Now you are the Christian low man on the totem pole. Were you a full-time mother, a teacher, a plumber, a carpenter, a nurse, a secretary, an accountant, and so on and so forth? Now you are a Christian serving in that capacity, and it is in that capacity that a wonderful door opens so that you now not only serve yourself in your vocation, but God and your neighbor, not by a conscious change in what you are doing—the diapers, syllabi, pipes, boards, medicines, appointments, numbers, etc. may not change—but in why and in for whom, as you are privileged to labor for those around you as well, and through them, for God in Christ.

Christ did not come with a sweeping political agenda—in fact, He didn't come with any political agenda. Christ did not come with a grand social makeover—in fact, he said little about formulas for remaking society here and now. No, He spoke to individuals and to churches about serving in the place they had been placed and in the way they had been called for one another and for Him. And in so doing, He did not strive for something less, but something more, turning individual hearts and minds, conscripting individual hands, mouths, eyes, ears, and feet. And make no mistake about it, all hearts and minds, hands, mouths, eyes, ears, and feet are equal in their standing before Him—none is greater or lesser, regardless of station, because all have received their station as a gift from the same God, and all are to use it in thankfulness to the same.

Should God give you the opportunity to change your status or station, so be it; take the opportunity with gladness if you so desire. But should God not provide such a doorway, be not perturbed, deflated, or resentful. He merely wants you where you're at. He sees in you and your situation a chance to carry out His will, to reflect His love to those within your sphere. *"You were bought with a price."* You are the slave of no man. You are the servant of God. But in being God's servant you have indeed become the servant of all, not by compulsion, but willingly, not out of an obligation to men, but out of a debt of gratitude to God, who does not need your works, but rather wills that you offer them to your neighbor, and in that way to Him.

A radical change has taken place, but it may indeed not be what you were looking for, or where you were looking. Your station in life, your standing before men may be the same as when Christ called you, or what it has always been while you've been His, which may well be for as long as you can remember. But the change is not outside of you. No, it has come from outside, from Christ through the gospel, and it has set you free to be the free servant of one another in Him who freely served and gave Himself for you, where you find yourself, on the occasions that arise, in the ways that you're provided. It may not make the papers, and it may not meet some of our naively grandiose expectations, but it is more than we deserve and all that God has asked for. To try to come up with anything less is no more than not enough in God's sight. He will provide, not only our salvation and daily bread, but our means to serve as well, and that means is wonderful in His sight, even when it might seem trifling in ours.

Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.

St. Paul continues now with matters of marriage and celibacy. With what he surely considered to be the quickly approaching end of the world (and this was not a delusion or error; each generation of Christians should expect the Lord's imminent return), and possibly with an eye on the frequent famines taking place in the region at that time, St. Paul says that, should they be able, it might be best for those who are single to remain so, since marriage brings with it responsibilities to provide for and nurture others, which is difficult in apocalyptic and impoverished times.

This, however, is not a command. St. Paul says as much. If you do marry, you have not sinned. Christian freedom remains free. This is Apostolic counsel, take it or leave it—although surely such counsel always deserves due consideration. St. Paul's previous words still stand. If one does not have the gift of celibacy (a life without sex), he or she must seek a life of chastity (a life enjoying sex as God intended it) in marriage. *"It is better to marry than to burn with sinful passions."*

None of this affects our standing before God. Married and single stand equal before Him in Christ our Lord, who body and soul freely offered Himself for us to redeem both our bodies and souls for salvation and for consecrated service to Him and one another. The married may with good conscience carry out the responsibilities of married life, the single those of the single life. And all of us, as we do so, should like St. Paul keep an eye on the heavens, awaiting the coming of our Lord. We live in the end times, just as did St. Paul. Let that shape our perspectives and our paths, for our Jesus is coming. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

1 Corinthians 7:29-40—June 2, 2008

This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

And so St. Paul closes this section on celibacy and marriage. And we see, once again, his concern if for the individuals involved. We live in the end times. Our time of grace, the span of our life, passes quickly. The unmarried have more time, St. Paul says, for spiritual things. But, once again, he insists that those who marry by no means sin. And we know from the whole of Scripture that, indeed, those who marry are provided with plenty of opportunities for spiritual service, especially as they bring up children in the faith, or use their free time wisely when they have an empty nest.

The issue in all of this is conscience. If one knows that in good conscience he or she cannot remain single, that he or she is tempted to sexual sin, that individual should seek marriage, for it is better to marry than to burn with such passions. If, however, one feels no desire for marriage and is not riddled by such temptations, he or she can in good conscience make use of the blessings of a celibate life, not in the least fearing that the route he or she has chosen is somehow less important or God-pleasing than that of the married man or woman. Both, married and unmarried, are provided with unique blessings and opportunities.

St. Paul closes by reminding those that marry that marriage is for life. Only death is to separate the couple according to God's institution. The widow or widower is free to marry, since death has ended the marriage.

This has been a long section. I suspect I have become a bit repetitive. But St. Paul is talking about important things, and such things wear a little repetitiveness well. Married Christians, count your blessings—even as you bear your crosses—and remember the serious commitment you have made to your spouse. Exercise your responsibilities with the steadfastness of faith, knowing that in your spouse and children God has given you special individuals to love with the love of Christ. Unmarried Christians, count your blessings—even as you bear your crosses—and use your time well, for God and neighbor, showing the same love of Christ.

We are living in the end times. Christ is coming soon. And He is coming for the same reason He came on Christmas: to set us free. That is our joy and hope as we carry out our vocations, as we walk in the good works prepared beforehand for us by the Father. Where we stand in life may vary, but we all have one thing in common: we stand in Christ's grace, and in that we stand side by side in God's sight, equally loved, and placed with equal care into the situation in which He wants us.

1 Corinthians 8:1-3—June 4, 2008

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

Knowledge divorced from love is a dangerous thing. Knowledge gained to fuel one's pride and not to better facilitate one's service to God and neighbor is foolishness and vanity. The God who has bought us by the very Blood of His only-begotten has purchased not only our hearts but our minds, and not only our minds but our hearts.

Some in the Corinthian congregation were using their “knowledge” to push the envelope and cause offense by eating food offered to idols, perhaps even in places connected with those idols. Since idols were nothing, why be worried about what has been offered to them or where others might worship them? What is it to the Christian? There is only one God. Why fear an idol or show it the least bit of concern? Such was the thinking of some.

We know the danger of idols, however, empty as they may be. Human hearts are drawn to empty things, and like a vacuum such vanities suck us into their service. And especially when we cease to fear the threat of idolatry, to which the human heart is so easily allured, we become more easily vanquished by it and subject to it. What are some of the things that tempt you? They are certainly nothing, that is, they are not God, and they are empty, unable to give what God alone provides, but they are tempting to the old Adam nonetheless, tempting as that fruit from the tree in the Garden that somehow became greater in Adam's eyes than his very Creator. Our knowledge should serve to make us all the more alert and watchful with respect to such things, knowing how easily we can stumble and fall, and not lead us to underestimate our wily foe and our own sinful nature.

Christian knowledge is a gift from God, not a measuring stick over against our neighbor, as is true of all sanctification and every ability God grants to Christians. Yet some in Corinth were flaunting their knowledge. Rather than a spirit of gratefulness, their knowledge had produced in them a spirit of arrogance, and in so doing, had turned from a blessing of God into a curse of the devil.

Christ Jesus was the most knowledgeable of all, and ever shall be. And yet what did He do with His knowledge? He served. He saved. He warned and protected His flock, leading them to safe pastures. The wisdom of God is found in the cross, and the Wisdom of God hung on it. That wisdom of God, active in love, is our wisdom and our love in Christ. It does not puff up, but bows down. It does not stoke pride, but trains in humility. It does not play around with idols, but clings resiliently to the true God and gives unselfishly to one's neighbor. Why? Because those known by God love, and those who love are known by God.

1 Corinthians 8:4-6—June 5, 2008

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is

one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

There is no God but the true God. All other gods are empty names, hunks of wood, pieces of paper, passing pleasures, and the like. The Corinthians were right in their conviction that all other gods were nothing. They were wrong, however, in thinking that because all other gods were nothing, they were inconsequential, that is, that what they did with regard to them didn't matter.

We, like the Corinthians, live in a world filled with gods. Sometimes we aren't only surrounded by them, but we are tempted to make gods of ourselves, making our desires the ultimate object of our worship and service, or looking to ourselves to provide what God alone can give, especially when it comes to salvation. Gods abound. And, yes, they are nothing. But what we do with regard to them is not inconsequential. As was mentioned yesterday, idolatry is nothing to play around with.

What are some of the gods you are tempted to serve? We all have idols that allure us. Remember when tempted to serve them, whether metal, paper, plastic, or your own flesh and blood, that such things are empty, are nothing, cannot deliver on what they supposedly promise. They are polished rustbuckets, whitewashed rot.

There is one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. And the Father is good, the One from whom are all things, and for whom we exist. And Jesus is good, the One through whom are all things and through whom we exist. As Christians, these persons of the Trinity are part and parcel of all we are worth being and are the source of all we have worth having. They are far from nothing. They are everything, and they are everything *for us*, that is, for us and our salvation. There is much that glimmer and shines, but don't let any of it take your eyes off the real thing, the only thing that matters, the true God, who needs no polishing or whitewashing, who always delivers what He promises. Jesus is living, breathing, crucified, risen, and ascended proof of that.

1 Corinthians 8:7-13—June 16, 2008

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Christian freedom must stand unencumbered. Yet it must ever remain entwined with Christian love. Christian love must stand unencumbered, but it must ever remain entwined

with Christian freedom. One is nothing without the other. Both are nothing if they do not stand alone.

Confused yet? Christian freedom is the freedom we have in Christ—freedom from Old Testament civil and ceremonial law, freedom from man-made laws and hollow work-righteous schemes, and, yes, freedom from sin and the tendrils of the devil. But Christian freedom is not just a freedom from things. Christian freedom is the freedom to things, the ability to do now what one could never do before, that is, to freely serve God and neighbor, not in self-love or for favors, but in selfless love and with the expectation of nothing in return. Christian freedom must stand if Christianity is to remain. It must stand alone, without conditions and contingent on nothing. But it is not truly Christian freedom if it at the same time is not entwined with Christian love. It is but licentiousness and lawlessness in such a case.

Christian love is the love that only Christians can show, flowing from faith, the fruit of the new man created through the gospel in Baptism and in preaching. Christian love is the love of Christ, received by the Christian and then reflected through him or her. Christian love does not seek salvation; it results from salvation. Christian love does not accumulate favors; Christian love flows from the favor of God accumulated in Christ and through faith. Christian love must stand alone, without conditions and contingent on nothing. But it is not truly Christian love if it is not free. It is but patronization and ingratiation in such a case.

We are free to love, and we love freely. Thus, as we exercise our Christian freedom, we do so with an eye not only toward God but also toward our brothers and sisters in the Faith. When we encounter a weaker brother or sister, we dare not offend them. Love seeks to save, not to crush, to build up, not to tear down. If what we have every right to do in Christian freedom will cause our brother or sisters to stumble, it is hardly right for us to do it, not because we are not free to do so, but because doing so would not be to freely love.

When Christian freedom is attacked, Christian love comes to its defense, standing up for the freedom we have in Christ. When Christian love is called for, however, Christian freedom bows its head in service to God and neighbor, freely giving of itself without surrendering what has been given it in Christ. To care for the weak is not to surrender freedom, but to exercise it, and to exercise it in the best way: in Christian love.

1 Corinthians 9:1-18—June 18, 2008

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?

Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

This is a longer portion of the letter than we've been taking at one time, but it is difficult to break up. St. Paul here applies what we discussed in our last devotion. St. Paul had the same Christian freedom as the Corinthians and, even more, St. Paul possessed a unique standing in the Church as an apostle and a unique relationship to the Corinthians as their apostle, as the one who had brought the gospel to them, giving birth to their faith and their congregation.

For his labor, St. Paul had every right to receive remuneration. The other apostles were supported in such a way so that they could care for their wives and families. In fact, God's Word, as St. Paul makes clear, clearly states that the called worker deserves his wages. St. Paul was entitled to pay, yet he refused it. Capable of supporting himself and his meager lifestyle as a single man who'd learned contentment through much suffering, he preferred to labor without compensation, that no one might think that in his preaching of the gospel he sought personal gain—in fact, his preaching often brought him nothing but the opposite—and so that he would have the flexibility to serve when and where the Lord uniquely called him as a missionary of the Word without being tied to a certain congregation or region.

St. Paul was uniquely entitled in the various ways mentioned above—entitled to honor, to authority, to stability, and to an income. Yet, in his Christian freedom, he freely chose to exercise his Christian love in refusing such things for the sake of his ministry, not because he had to as a called worker, and not because the others should do the same, but because for the unique labor to which the Lord had called him and in the unique life circumstances in which the Lord had placed him he was able to do so and was convinced

that it would benefit his ministry of preaching and teaching, removing obstacles, objections, slander, and doubt.

We too find ourselves in unique vocations and in unique circumstances. How do we best exercise our Christian freedom in Christian love in such? We, like St. Paul, wrestle with the Word and with God in prayer to answer that question. In so doing, we are concerned first and foremost not with how we might serve ourselves, but each other. We must protect Christian freedom. St. Paul defends his rights in Christ should he choose to act on them, but also sets those rights aside when he can freely do so out of love for God and neighbor.

It all comes back to God and neighbor, doesn't it? In Christ, that is where our love finds its targets, and in Christ, that is where we find a large part of our identity, in how we relate to our Savior and to the saved, or to those not yet of His flock. Just as Christ focused outside of Himself, so we also do the same, on our family, our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ, and on the lost. We do not lose regard from ourselves—no, we have every right and indeed are expected to provide for our needs and well-being as well—but do not lose ourselves in that regarding. No, we are free in the gospel, freed even from ourselves, from self-absorption and narcissism. We are free to love. We are free even and indeed to serve, free, in short, to truly live under the cross where life was freely given for us, where the Master gave Himself for the servant, where we find constant forgiveness for selfishness and pride and joyful inspiration to mimic what we see there, albeit in our own small way and only in Christ and by His same power that saves us, given us through the Means of Grace.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23—June 23, 2008

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Today we confront perhaps one of the abused and mistreated passages in all of American Christianity. Every new fad, every questionable scheme, every unorthodox (and I mean un-Orthodox, that is, not in line with Scripture) practice, every misleading method—all of it, one would think, was crafted by St. Paul himself, as those responsible wrap themselves in these verses, assuring us they've become all things to all men to save some. The problem is, when we start confusing, obfuscating, impeding, disguising, watering down, corrupting, or outright changing the message, we might well save none, because Christ saves, and He saves through Word and Sacrament (that is, through the gospel), and when we hide Christ and downplay Word and Sacrament people could indeed leave without having come any closer to the kingdom of God.

So what is St. Paul talking about here? He is not talking about Sunday morning. In fact, Sunday morning—or Saturday morning synagogue—would have been an assortment of Jews and Gentiles as we see in the Book of Acts, of weak and strong. He is talking here about his daily life among those to whom he was bringing the message of Christ. And he is building on principles already set forth as he does so. He is showing us how he exercised Christian freedom in Christian love.

St. Paul was Christ's free servant, and labored at his own expense, to be free of obligations, to be free to serve when, where, and how the Lord called, and, at the same time, as he served when, where, and how, he was careful to avoid giving offense. Among the Jews, he observed Jewish laws, that is, unless some claimed he had to do so to be saved, in which case he defended Christian freedom. Among the Gentiles, or "those without law," that is, the Jewish Law of Moses, he did not observe the Jewish laws from which the Church had been freed through Christ's fulfillment of the ceremonial law as the sacrifice once and for all for our sin. Among the weak, he was careful not to burden their conscience and avoided the practices that were troubling them, although never surrendering the freedom of a Christian, making it clear he was showing concern for their weakness and not confirming it as if it were God's law or will. Among the strong, he had no need to avoid the practices that avoided the weak, and so he exercised his Christian freedom in the areas he in love had before restrained from doing so.

St. Paul here is demonstrating the balance he maintained between Christian freedom and Christian love—a balance he had been advocating before this in the letter. Though free as any, and though an Apostle, he in love ministered with fervent concern for those among whom he labored and took care not to cause undo offense or give false impressions, lest the message of the gospel be confused or muffled. Notice, St. Paul *avoided* false impressions. He did not *make use* of them.

So what do we learn? We learn to exercise our Christian freedom in Christian love. "*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*" St. Paul's concern as a missionary—remember, he was laboring among unbelief and not as a parish pastor among confirmed believers—was that as he brought the Good News to new settings he not confound his endeavor by causing offense or confusion. And what did he do it all for? "*For the sake of the gospel.*" Why? Because the gospel alone could save some, and by all means St. Paul wanted that to take place. Let's say it again: "*For the sake of the gospel.*" One more time: "*For the sake of the gospel.*" Not for the budget, to pack the pews, or to bring glory to ourselves, to save the dwindling parish, etc., but to save the lost and "*for the sake of the gospel.*" And so, when we wrestle with methods and practices and whatever else arises, we must ask, what would the gospel have, and what would best serve the gospel. And that may just lead to completely different conclusions than what we've been told those "becoming all things to all men" should reach.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Today is the Commemoration of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession, the day when Lutheran theologians and rulers stood before the Emperor Charles V and confessed the biblical faith held by their churches. They bowed their heads, willing to have them struck off. They knew the risks of their venture. Yet they steadfastly confessed the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

The start of a race is important. It is good that you are dressed and ready, heading down the right track. And the middle of a race is important. It is good that you have made it that far and are still pressing on. But, when it all comes down to it, without the finish line the race is nothing—a failure, a waste of time. As Christians, we run for the finish line.

You are in Christ. Remain in Him. You are saved. Don't trade your salvation for the perishable things of this world, for the tricks and lies of the evil foe. No, discipline your body. Exercise self-control. Keep your eyes on the prize so that you do not run aimlessly. Every morning, every night, every day, remember the goal, set your mind on the finish line, and pray God for the strength to press on. And He will give it, just as He dressed you in Baptism for this race, setting you on the right track, and just as He maintains you along the way with the cold waters of Absolution and the sustenance of the Sacrament, food for pilgrims on the move.

Christ has paid a marvelous price for you. Perhaps, you have at times paid some considerable prices for Him as well. Do not throw in the towel and thus throw out all that has gone into your successful finish, both God's preserving work and your labor in His grace. The wreath that awaits is imperishable, as is the life that is yours in Christ, to be begun in all its fullness when you reach the race's end. Those presenting the Augsburg Confession remembered that, at least at this moment in their lives. Remember that as well, and hold fast to the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

1 Corinthians 10:1-5—July 22, 2008

For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

From Adam on, every believer was a Christian. Their faith looked forward to Christ's coming, as ours looks back to His coming and His fulfillment of the Old Testament. They drank the same water of life, the mercy of the Savior to whom their worship, identity, and pilgrimage pointed them. And, as is true of every age until the Lord's coming, there were, as

we've heard in the Holy Gospel for the past few weeks, weeds among the wheat, bad fish among the good fish.

As members of Christ Lutheran, we all also have the privilege of passing through the same sea through Baptism, and eating the same spiritual food in the Supper, of drinking the water of life of Scripture from the spiritual Rock, Christ. Yet, as God was not pleased with all of the Israelites, or even with most, so also in our day there is a real and great risk that some of our number, if not perhaps even most, might fall, might be overthrown in our faith and lost in the wilderness of the world.

St. Paul will expand upon this warning in our next devotion, and we do well to take it to heart. Yet we also do well to remember what alone will keep us in the fold, keep us pleasing to God, and that is our spiritual Rock, Christ. Be content with Him who is the everything of your salvation. Drink deeply and do not grumble. Eat your full and do not complain. Trust your God's direction and rest assured that He who has brought you through the sea knows also best how to bring you into the Promised Land.

1 Corinthians 10:6-13—July 23, 2008

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

"Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

Overconfidence is a dangerous thing. It's true in the workplace, where big problems can occur when an employee becomes lax out of the unreliable conviction that he or she has reached the point where mistakes are no longer possible. It's true on the sports field, where plays quickly breakdown when one player thinks the game rests in his or her hands alone. And it's true most especially and tragically in our Christian lives, where pride goes before the fall, and the fall is not only a temporal matter, but an eternal one. When we think we've beat sin, sin is about to take our feet out from under us, and our big heads are only going to help us topple all the more devastatingly.

Yet we are not without hope. Overconfidence in ourselves is never fitting, but we can never have too much confidence in our God. *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."* We don't have the strength to maintain in the faith ourselves, but our God does, and He

provides that strength through His unchanging Word and His renewing Supper. We already wobble when our strength is sapped, and so we must draw constant vigor from Him who is faithful and promises a way of escape.

When we face temptation and look to ourselves, we can rightly draw no other conclusion but that we must fall. But not so, St. Paul says, when we look to God, to God in Christ our Savior, who pulled us free from the sinking sand of sin on Good Friday and is desperate in His love not to lose us back into it. In God we have the way of escape, and so we do well not to waste time wallowing in despair or surveying the immensity of the temptation. No, we rather do best to draw courage from Christ and to recall the immensity of our God, who is strong to save, and looking for the escape that He who by nature cannot lie has promised to provide.

And a promise made by God is a promise kept. Many in Israel forgot that. Look at the cross, remember that unfathomable promise kept at an inestimable price, and let Israel's fall increase your resolve to stand firm on the Rock, your Redeemer, who never forgets those who are His own and has been tempted in every way yet without sin. He's been through it Himself. He can bring you through it as well.

1 Corinthians 10:14-22—August 5, 2008

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

The Lord's Supper binds us to the Lord Christ. It draws us in mysterious way into fellowship with Him. It makes us partakers of His very Body and Blood. It makes us one with Him and also with one another. This is a wonderful thing, which rightly smacks of forgiveness, for that is what it brings for the believer.

But even as the Lord's Supper molds and makes more intimate our connection with the Lord and with one another, it also calls us to break connections, to sever our connections with the idols that entice us with false promises and capture the attention of our wandering eyes, to reject the false teachings that abound around us, to snub the devil and all his wicked works and ways.

Holy Communion, as its very name conveys, stokes and proclaims unity in the church. That is why who comes to the altar is so important. When someone who rejects the Bible's teachings (whichever of them that might be) or seeks a unity divorced from that which our Lord Christ bids us to cultivate through the preaching and teaching of the whole counsel of God approaches the altar, a message is proclaimed, and that message runs counter to the

Scriptures, and the Supper and the Scriptures are to walk hand in hand, not in opposition. The Supper is made a mockery of in such instances, and the unity it would establish among us is chipped away at. So also, when we ourselves approach the altar lightly, without thought, with no intention of casting off all that entangles us that is contrary to the faith, we provoke the Lord to jealousy.

We are not stronger than the Lord, and the Supper is His. And be thankful for that. Because He is not only strong to repay wickedness (and that is no idle threat or light warning), but He is also strong to save. That is why there is Body and Blood to be had in the Sacrament, after all, because He has given His only-begotten Son for our sins. Hunger and thirst for this renewing and reinvigorating Meal, and, as you prepare to partake of it, leave behind all that would turn such sweet and celestial Food bitter and foul and finding in Jesus as spot at the Table. Cherish the unity we find and display in Holy Communion, and pray that faithful Christians uphold it in their teaching and practice in this regard, both for the sake of the Meal itself, that it might be rightly administered, and for the sake of those gathered, that they might rightly approach (or not approach until they are ready to do so, having been catechized and having repented).