

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

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

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Enriched in Him - January 15, 2023

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

A church community is many things. Every one of us has a different idea about what this group, this place called Collingswood Presbyterian Church is and what we do. Some are here because they've been here since childhood, even infancy. Some are here for the music. Some are here because of the fellowship. Some are here because of the Christian ideals we promote in our mission and worship. I'm sure there are other reasons for being part of this community and I'm sure that whatever are reasons are today, they were different in the past and will be different in the future.

We keep reminding ourselves that being a congregation is separate from conducting our worship, fellowship, and mission in a particular building that happens to be in a particular location. Not one of the buildings that Jesus, for example, preached in still stands. All that is left of the Temple in Jerusalem is a stone foundation known as the Western Wall. You can find some church buildings in the Middle East, and parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia which have been used in Christian worship for well over 1500 years. The Ethiopian Church claims to be one of the first and in continuous existence from almost the time of Jesus. Likewise there are Christians in India who say the Apostle Thomas is their spiritual father. But most of the places they started out in are long gone.

The point is that individual congregations and church buildings come and go. The Church of Jesus Christ is forever.

This week, our particular congregation received approval from the Presbytery for Southern New Jersey to list our beautiful building for sale. Only God at this point knows who the buyer will be or whether it will continue to be used as a church or converted to another use. While we are sad to be departing from this wonderful place — a place in which so many people have wonderful, powerful memories, the sale will give us the ability to conduct new kinds of ministry in Collingswood and beyond. What that will be, we don't know. However, when we rely on God's Holy Spirit, we can have no doubt that what God is calling us to become will be more amazing and wonderful than anything we can imagine right now.

The operative word, friends, is spirit. God's spirit. The Holy Spirit and spirituality is something we don't talk about nearly enough in church and that's unfortunate. There is no doubt, friends, that it is easy to compare our church community with other organizations we belong to because there are many similarities.

Perhaps we belong to a service club like Rotary. Perhaps we participate in a sports league. Maybe we're in a book club or support group. These are all like the church in that they have a stated

purpose, some kind of organizational structure, and regular meetings which follow a predictable order of events. Indeed, many secular groups are just like the church.

However, because we are the church, we are also radically different from secular groups, despite our commonalities. We are different because unlike secular groups, we have Jesus Christ as our founder, leader, and savior. No other human organization can make a similar claim and because we have Christ, it makes all the difference. All the difference in the world.

Here we do more than fellowship together, sing together, eat together, work together. These are things all organizations do. But here, we dare speak of much more important things. Here we speak of God and our relationship with God. That decidedly does not happen at the Rotary, in the Bowling League, at our children's dance lessons, or even at Weight Watchers. God is not part of their equation.

But here, God in Jesus Christ is what we are all about. Without God, without Christ, we are nothing. There would be no point to our existence without Jesus, would there? The beauty of our building, the gorgeous stained glass windows, the glorious piano and organ — all of that is useless and senseless apart from Jesus.

So here, we walk carefully into the highly personal world of relating to God. Here, we challenge people to get closer, to build a strong lasting relationship with God. Here we dare believe that the thoughts in our heads are not just there on their own but are in part placed there by God. In short, as the church, we assert that there is another dimension to life and living beyond what we experience with our senses. God, the God who created us, the God who loves us, affects our lives just like God affects everyone's life. Many who are not part of the Church deny or reject the idea that there is a God working in our lives, but here, here, here we embrace that notion.

As the church we confess that because of Jesus, our lives are different and are better. Perhaps we can't exactly describe how they are different, or how they are better. We, nevertheless, just plain know. God is in our hearts. God is in our minds. God is in our spirit, soul, inmost being, whatever makes us unique in the entire universe. God is there.

And that can be scary or off-putting to some. It is hard, very hard sometimes to wrap our minds around the notion that God is so intimately part of us. As the ancient poem goes, "God be in my head, and in my understanding; God be in my eyes, and in my looking; God be in my mouth, and in my speaking; God be in my heart, and in my thinking; God be at my end, and at my departing."

In short, God is everywhere and permeates our being. As Christians, our fundamental humanity is totally bound to God.

Therefore, it doesn't matter where we worship, when we worship, or even how we worship. Once we embrace the fact that we are God's and wholly God's, we know that we are part of God and God is part of us.

Now, because God is part of us, we do in all kinds of ways have access to God's power and God's ability to interact with creation. The real purpose of this thing called church is to empower every one of us to become closer to God in Jesus Christ so we can in turn become more and more like Jesus. Because God lives in you, and you, and you, and me, God is in touch with us personally. Because God is in touch with us personally, God is speaking to us every day.

The choice for us is whether we choose to listen. Do we, will we, pay attention to that small, still voice dwelling within us?

Such was the issue facing the Apostle Paul as he wrote to the fledgling church he started in the city of Corinth. The book of First Corinthians details Paul's attempt to explain to a particular church community — and by extension, us — that having Christ in our lives makes a fundamental difference. With Christ in our lives, by knowing him and desiring to actively following him, we are different from the world. We don't and won't think, act, or speak like everyone else. We don't and won't look at life in the same way as everyone else. We don't and won't live by simply going through the motions of life but instead, loving God, embracing God, and allowing God to transform us into people who live not for ourselves, but for the sake of Jesus.

Perhaps it is obvious that Christians, real, authentic, followers of Jesus live differently, act differently, speak differently. But at the same time, perhaps it is not so obvious.

You see, Paul had to write the Corinthians because he learned that the church there, the church that he had gotten started, that church had lost its way and was rapidly becoming just like every other organization in the world. Paul wrote the Corinthians to remind them of how different they truly are and that because they belong to God in Jesus Christ, they should welcome all the changes that have and will continue to happen in their lives.

Encountering God, being with God, praying and working, and welcoming God in ourselves makes us different and better human beings because we can and will recognize the many ways God has blessed us with abilities we never knew we had.

The Corinthians, just like us, were forgetting how much God gives us. They forgot and we forget that following Jesus enriches us. God has placed within each of us innumerable treasures of spiritual abilities. They are all there. Paul reminded the Corinthians: To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, ... All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

I invite you to look inside yourself. Look inside and pay attention. I guarantee that our God who loves us has gifted every one of us, enriched us, empowered us, enabled us in so many ways. I know it can be hard to believe sometimes that we have wise things to say, or have knowledge to share, or can build each other's faith, or heal people mentally, physically, or spiritually. You might be shocked by learning you can prophecy, or discern the Spirit working in outer or work powerful deeds.

But you can! Yes, you can!

Friends, in this new year, let us not fear to embrace the many gifts with which God has blessed us. This place, the Church, is the only place on earth that will work to help you become everything God created you to be. You are all powerful. You are all wise. You are all healers. You are all prophets. Yes! Believe it! Do not fear to explore and then exercise your spiritual gifts because they are very much there. That is what makes us different from the world: God has blessed us and we know it and we do it!

The fact that we meet in this particular building in this particular location is nothing compared to the powerful gifts God has given us to share with the world. Indeed that is the reason why we are here on this earth. We exist not for ourselves, but for each other and for everyone out there — out there!

Your spiritual gifts are calling you right now! You have a great and wonderful purpose that God has empowered you to do. Let us dedicate this year to finding that purpose and making it real, not inside these walls, but wherever we go.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.