

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
9 June 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Third Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Together, We Value: SHARING OUR STORY”

Second sermon in *Part I: Together, We Value*
of the series: *Together, We are Community*

Discernment Insight #2:

SHARING OUR STORY: Calvary’s theological and spiritual culture make us a unique church in the Denver metro area. Calvary will continue to embody who we are through our community’s regular practices and will act to tell our unique story well, expanding our reach in the Denver metro community.

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript is a transcript of the word that was spoken that day, so there could be grammatical errors and missed meaning due to not hearing vocal inflection for meaning.

The apostle the apostle Paul had a very rollercoaster relationship with the church at Corinth, and I'm not talking about a three to four minute roller coaster that you might ride at an amusement park. This was a long and winding road type of situation, and was a *very* rocky road especially at the end. And the reason we know about the depths of this relationship is because of all the correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians. We have what we think are two letters in our Bible, but scholars tell us there were probably at least five, if not more. And we know this either because of literally what we read here (in the text), or what we read *referenced* here.¹

So I'm going to go through these five letters. First is *Letter A*. We don't have the text for *Letter A*, but we know it exists because it's referred to in *Letter B*. And what we can tell is that in *Letter A* people are really excited that Paul helped them found this new community of faith and church in Corinth. They want to follow his counsel. They respect him. They're asking him about holiness and how to live in the world.²

In *Letter B*, which is what we all know as First Corinthians in our Bible, the people are still in a good relationship with Paul. They ask his counsel on a number of different issues, but they are starting to have some factions and fractions among

¹ J. Paul Sampley, “The Second Letter to the Corinthians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” Sen. Ed. Leander E. Kick, *The New*

Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume Eleven (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000) 5.

² Sampley, 10.

themselves. In other words, they're in some disharmony among themselves, but still in harmony with Paul. There are no issues with outsiders coming in at this point, or other authoritative voices trying to lead them astray.³

Then there's *Letter C* and we don't have the text for *Letter C*, but we deduce that it is a very painful letter. It's referenced in what we all now know as Second Corinthians chapters 1-9. What we learn in this correspondence is that things are not good between Paul and the people in Corinth. For example, somebody from the outside came in and started bad mouthing Paul, and, essentially, nobody in the community stood up for Paul or had his back. So he's upset. And apparently in *Letter C*, Paul really calls the people to task, and his helper, Titus, eventually writes back to him and says, "Calm down, Paul, the people are being faithful to your teaching again; it's going to be okay."⁴

Now *Letter D*, which is actually what we know as Second Corinthians 1-9...well, it seeks to build on whatever tactics were used in *Letter C* to point

out some painful truths about this disharmony that was happening in the Corinthian church. Paul is trying to rebuild those relationships, but even more, he's trying to really enhance his own ministry and his reputation. He wants their allegiance again. He has what I would call a 'capstone ministry project' he's working on, which is to have all the churches that he started contribute to ONE offering for the believers in Jerusalem. They've had a really hard time; the Temple's been destroyed, they're under persecution, and so he wants all the churches to participate in this offering of support for them. And, the Corinthian Church is being a little ornery. They don't know if they want to be generous in this way. And—we also learn in this *Letter D*, that there are *outside* leaders that Paul's people are listening to. In other words, they've pulled away from him a bit and are starting to wonder, "maybe these other leaders have a better truth, a better story to tell."⁵

And then there is *Letter E* and that's what we know as Second Corinthians chapters 10-13. And scholars believe these were actually probably originally two

³ Sampley, 10.

⁴ Sampley, 10.

⁵ Sampley, 10.

different letters because there's a huge shift in language and emphasis. Paul and the Corinthians have never been in a more contentious relationship than they are in these chapters. People are putting Paul to the test right and left and all these “outside leaders” are gaining ground, gaining authority. And it's splitting the church. Now, Paul, in this moment, seeks to *detract* from his rivals by showing how he's distinct and giving them encouragement and he's trying to get their allegiance. And he says, “you know what, I promise that I'm going to come see you in person soon.”

Now it might be helpful for us to know that one of the reasons that trust was breached with Paul and the Corinthians is because somewhere in that timeline between *Letters B and C*, Paul promised an “in person visit” soon and he never showed up. This is long before text messages and GPS tracking and flight alert updates. These people did not know why Paul had not showed up. Paul says he was busy with important and other ministry and we have no reason to doubt that he was, but that still left the Corinthian

church feeling ignored, left out, not seen, or heard.⁶

I give you all this fun biblical scholarship context to say that by the time we get to these verses today, the Corinthians do not think highly of Paul and he's kind of struggling to think highly of them too. He loves them. He founded this church. It's an extension of his heart, but he's a little angry and upset. He also knows that they're really concerned about him being full of ego. And so he is kind of cautious in this text, and tries hard not to brag too much. He doesn't “toot his own horn” here as much as we see him do in some of his other letters.⁷

And this is why we start reading this stuff about recommendation letters. Did you notice this? In Paul's day, not unlike in our own day, the way that people had credibility in new communities was because of recommendation letters—letters that were written on their behalf. Another community would give a “stamp of approval” to a person so that as they entered a new community, the new community would say, “well, if so, and so person or this or that important Community thinks

⁶ Sampley, 10.

⁷ Sampley, 62.

they're okay then we think they're okay too, because we trust them. We respect them. So their blessing is our blessing.”

Fun fact, the history of joining a church by transfer of letter goes back to this tradition! One's former church writes a letter to the new church saying they're in good standing; they're good people; you don't need to worry about them; they've been baptized and cleared, and all that “stuff” churches seem to care about. But in *today's passage*, Paul is trying to differentiate himself from these outside leaders and authorities who are trying to win approval with the Corinthians by showing up with their letters of recommendation. Paul is saying, “Corinthians don't fall into that pattern! Don't let these letters fool you. You can write anything you want about another person on a sheet of paper. You can't trust what is said there. *What you trust is what you see*. Their behavior, what's before you...what do you see with your eyes? What do you hear with your ears?”

And you can feel his sarcasm dripping from the page as he asks, “are we beginning to commend ourselves again?” Meaning...boost up our own

egos? Surely we (meaning you, Corinthians and me, Paul), surely *we* do not need (as *some* do) letters of recommendation. *To you or from you* (verse 2). You see, Paul's cautioning people against both *accepting* letters of recommendation and *writing* them for others. He doesn't want them endorsing anybody else. And so he states quite profoundly and powerfully, even from a place of pain, these words: “*YOU yourselves are OUR letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of the [beating, pulsing] human heart.*”

A lot is happening in that one sentence. (It's a classic Paul run on sentence.) First and foremost, Paul is saying we don't need letters that tell us how great somebody is or how great they think we are. Our faith can speak for itself. God's presence lives within each one of us. “You're not perfect, Corinthians. In fact, I'm kind of angry at how you're behaving, but God is still at work in you. I see that *your story* is important.”

And notice that Paul is not just saying *you*, he keeps using the words *we* and *us*, uniting himself with the Corinthians, trying to bridge that gap, reminding them that *he's part of them*, he's with them. He's the one that formed their community. "Remember, we're in this together," he's saying.

"And not only that," Paul says, "this, this community, you Corinthians, that's the *only letter* anybody needs to understand who Christ is!"

That's pretty bold, isn't it? It's a strong statement. It's almost as if he's saying to them, *people are reading your lives*, they're watching what you do, what you say...so you best be on your best behavior, right? I mean, that's one way of looking at it from this parental point of view. But another way, is to look at it from a very empowering point of view. Paul is saying, "I know how messed up you are right now. I know all the factions and the fractions between you, the pain and the questioning, and I know I've been absent, and you've been saying things about me...But you know what? *That* story, *this* story, the mess of this relationship....*that* IS the story

of Christ. That's the *Story of the Living Spirit of God* in relationship. This IS the story proclaiming something new and something true to the world."

It's really quite a profound theological thought. Paul has a way of just dropping these profound theological statements in these letters. It's mind blowing if we take a step back to that worldview. I mean, nowadays we say a lot of times, "Yes, your story is important and my story is important." And we see the *imago dei*, the divine image in each other. But THIS was new for Paul's day and it was profound.

As he speaks to the Corinthians, and as he encourages them, he's referencing things that we may not pick up on, but he's referencing back to a new covenant given by the prophet Jeremiah who said, "you know, don't worry about the tablets that were given to Moses, the tablets of law. But remember that I am writing *my story* on your hearts," God says in Jeremiah 31. "*I will be your God. You will be my people.*" (Jeremiah 31:32-33)⁸

⁸ Sampley, 63.

And in this reminder, Paul is saying there's a way of life that that doesn't come through specific rules, but comes through an overarching call to love God and love neighbor and love self. That's the *heart work* that Paul is reminding the Corinthians about. You can check laws off of a list. You cannot check love off of your heart. Each heartbeat. Each moment is a chance to love and to love again. And the chances just keep coming—beat by beat, moment by moment, loving act by loving act.

And so as Paul asked them to reflect on their life on what people are seeing through their life, he's asking them, "Do people read you and see love or hate? Do they see bickering or belonging? Hope or harm? Truth or tattling?"

Paul reiterates that unlike any fancy recommendation letters that only a select few people could translate and understand way back then, *your lives* are read by *everyone*. You don't need Google to read somebody's life. They feel your Energy. They see your actions, they hear your words. It's translatable across all cultures, ages, experiences. Are you loving people through your lives and

creating community through your lives, or are you not? It's kind of that simple, Paul says. *They themselves* are the letter of Christ. And through their lives, their stories, they are "recommending Christ," if you will, to the rest of the world! And people are either going to like what they see or not like it.

In our modern context, sometimes the church does something harmful and that is why somebody leaves the church. That happens. And we know it is, because it's a story some of you have who are here in these pews this morning. Another experience, though, that I fear happens a lot more frequently, is that people kind of walk away confused, or just hurt...maybe by some hypocrisy, or some inconsistencies, or because something doesn't feel relevant for their life. Or maybe they feel excluded by a conversation or an event, and it's just kind of like a fading or a drifting away because their story isn't heard or seen or valued. And I wonder Calvary: What it would be like if we thought of our communal life together as a letter of Christ, a letter of recommendation that we're co-writing together for the world? And we can't write it unless Morgan and David and

Kent and I and ALL of us each tell our own stories with full authenticity and honesty. Our stories *are* God's story. When we are most true to ourselves, the Spirit of the Living God is most alive, even in the messiness and the pain of it all.

For some reason a cartoon image comes to mind for me about this...but I wonder if we are all like sealed letters (with legs and arms and eyes are on the envelope), and we're walking around as these sealed letters...with our stories locked up inside of us. And we're waiting for someone to come up to us with a letter opener right to open our letter and let our story shine.

When will we let our stories shine?

We have a unique story Calvary! We like to say that Calvary is the best kept secret in Denver. And we kind of say it like it's a good thing or a cool thing. It's not a cool thing, though! Like...it's not good. That we're a secret?! Because if we're a secret; if something good is happening in this building or out in the cyber world with those worshipping online; if something good is happening in our Blessings

program and through Family Promise...if something good is happening in our advocacy and in our care and connections with one another...then if we're keeping that to ourselves...if we're holding that as a secret...what are we doing?? We're *excluding* people from the story of God who really need to hear that they're a part of that story too.

And the truth is, they already are part of God's story. Whether we extend that invitation to them or not. But *a lot of people* need to know that *their* story matters and that their story is part of this bigger story.

What will it take to allow ourselves, in small ways and big ways, to authentically share who we are? Not to get more people to come to church. (Now, I'm the pastor and I love people coming to church. I would love new members. I'm not anti-church-growth. I am pro-church-growth. I want that.) But that's not what this is about. And that's not what we mean when we talk about the value of sharing our story.

It's not about getting more people inside of our church because we have something really cool and special. It's

about getting the message of *God's love out into the world* so that people know THEY are really cool and special. *They* are beloved by God. They have a purpose, a call and a hope.

There are a lot of ways that we can do this practically. One of them is to sign up and volunteer at PRIDE in a couple of weekends. There are a number of people in our church who have found us through PRIDE. One of them is on our staff now.

Another way to share the story of Calvary is to just go to coffee with somebody that you know. And you don't even have to talk about church initially. Just ask them where they find meaning or belonging. Ask them how they're dealing with the news and the heartache and the election stress and all that's going on. Ask them how they're dealing with the diagnosis in their family, or whatever is happening in their lives. Listen to their story and you will find ways that your story connects to theirs and there just might be a window in that conversation for you to say, *"You know, I have a community where other people share part of that story too."*

We're already seeing that done beautifully in our *I am Calvary*

series. And it's my hope that as we continue to get the message out about Who We Are that we take these words from Paul to heart. That you believe that *Your Story* is authored by God, co-authored with you. That God is empowering you and equipping you and calling you for something important. And—you're not doing it on your own, you're doing it in community.

Let's share this good news with the world. Let's get out those letter openers. And ask if we can open the letters of each other's lives. And see how the Living Spirit of God is at work.

You, Calvary, are the letter of Christ, the letter of God's love, and how you live your life and share your story and your love, that is how the world will come to know of God's love and Christ's compassion and grace. The world is reading your heart, beat by beat. What story are you telling?

Amen.

