

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
REV. CHRIS MOORE, ASSOCIATE MINISTER
405-842-8897
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
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1 Corinthians: 1-9

UNOPENED MAIL

In the 1950s, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a letter. This letter has since been read in countless places, many of them by Dr. King himself. The letter contained stark and prophetic exposure of our own national identity and called us to a higher purpose. But this letter was not written from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. It was written in 1956 and was entitled, "Paul's Letter to American Christians". In this letter, King imagines himself as the Apostle Paul and pens a letter in Paul's name, like so many did in the ancient times. He wrote this letter in the fashion of Paul, mixing a gentle pastoral hand with the prophetic voice of instigation.

After a proper salutation, befitting a letter from Paul, King has the apostle praise the American Christian for great advancements in technology, transportation, medicine and science. He marvels at our skyscrapers and subways, our ability to eat breakfast on one continent and dinner on another, our elimination of many diseases. He encourages us in our endeavors and praises our accomplishments. Then he has this imagined Paul step from a pastoral voice to a prophetic one, saying: "...America, as I look at you from afar, I wonder whether your moral and spiritual progress has been commensurate with your scientific progress...Your poet Thoreau used to talk about "improved means to an unimproved end." How often this is true. You have allowed the material means by which you live to outdistance the spiritual ends for which you live. You have allowed your mentality to outrun your morality. You have allowed your civilization to outdistance your culture. Through your scientific genius you have made of the world a neighborhood, but through your moral and spiritual genius you have failed to make of it a brotherhood."

King goes on to be much more specific in a section of this imagined letter that

is every bit as poignant and controversial now as it was 50 years ago. King has Paul confront capitalism itself. He has him address an economic system that evokes a sense of gross materialism and a push to make a living instead of making a life. "They tell me", this Paul says, "that one tenth of one percent of the population controls more than forty percent of the wealth. God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty." In King's belief, Paul would call for us to eliminate this inequity as our Christian duty, not as the slippery slope towards an amorphous "socialism".

Dr. King firmly believed that the church was called to be the "conscience of the state", speaking truth to power. He believed, like Paul, that we had to bear witness to our culture – to stand with it where we can and against it where we should. But, he also believed that this must begin with each and every one of us. How are we treating ourselves and one another? For the first and foremost direction of Jesus was the Golden Rule...the rule that Jesus phrased this way – "Love your neighbor as yourself." But this was only a paraphrase of a contemporary Rabbi, the great Hillel, who said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."

It is a lesson that we continue to try to go and learn, though there have been many times in my life that I think that Paul's letters and the letters of Dr. King, the one from Birmingham included, have gone unopened. They sit like so much junk mail on the desk of our national psyche and await our attention. But we are too preoccupied with entertainment and acquisition to worry about what they have to say to us. So we don't read them. We fill ourselves with other things.

What you heard read is Paul's introduction from his letter to Corinth, his salutation in the elaborate structure of Greek letter writing. He greets people in proper fashion and then immediately tells them a crucial thing – that they have been enriched, the text says, by the testimony of Jesus and should know that they are not lacking. This church in Corinth was a relatively new city on the main trade and shipping routes for the empire. It was a place of great commerce, fabulous wealth and unprecedented vice. It was a tough place to avoid temptation, and not just the lustful kind...but the kind that we struggle with – the lure of easy money, the seduction of possessions, the entrapment of "me first". Paul is, in typical fashion, trying to both be a pastor to them, to encourage them in their struggle, and to point out the places they are missing the mark.

Paul, it is important to note, was a pastor, not a theologian. That's why we must read his works as if he is responding to specific issues in his time and place, and not making general theological rules for the whole of Christian experience. It can be hard when you're a pastor to know when to be pastoral and caring and when to be prophetic or to make a moment "teachable". That is a fine line. This past week

has been a struggle for all of us. For those of us who wear these robes, or who stand in this kind of position, it has been a week of trying to decide between being pastors and being prophets. Paul was dealing with people in crisis also – trying to encourage them pastorally to continue to resist the temptation to “give in” to the way that the empire ran things while also prophetically pointing out the ways that they themselves were missing the mark.

The great debate over the past week has been over the use of the shootings in Tucson to politicize certain things or to lay the blame at the feet of some people over others. It would be nice, as Jon Stewart said the other night, if we could draw a direct causal line between one person's statements and the actions of this individual, just as it would be nice if we could blame all of the economic inequity in the world on Wall Street, or the uber-wealthy. It would be nice because then we could dismiss it. We could move on. But the truth is that we are all guilty of giving into our baser personas, we are all a part of the our dysfunction as a human family, of living a step removed from our call as followers of the teacher who said to us, “how you treat the least among you is how you treat me”. We are all tempted to join the empire, to put it in Paul's vernacular. So we find ourselves here, our allegiance to the illusion of “might makes right” being played out in front of us by a sick young man with easy access to a 9MM handgun with a 30 round clip. Perhaps we want to dismiss this also – to pile him onto the same heap as Goldman–Sachs or British Petroleum or Islam...so that we can have an easy scapegoat...something that sets aside the deeper, more troubling questions this brings up.

Perhaps the question arises during a crisis like we have witnessed this last week, or even during 9–11 or Katrina – a question I have begun to hear asked in subtle and direct ways on the talk shows and in interviews – are we inherently evil or do we possess an innate goodness? Must we fight for what we want in a “survival of the fittest” or is God's promise of enough for all a reality? Are we lacking in some sort of basic way, or do we already possess the spiritual gifts that we need to be purveyors of peace and justice in the world? Now you might think that'd I'd go to the spiritual realm for my response, but I'm going to evoke a bit of science.

In the early 1990s in Parma, Italy a neuroscientist was doing an experiment with Macaque monkeys in which they attached an MRI scanner to their brains while they gave the monkey a nut to open so they could see what neurons fired while he tried to get a snack. They observed what neurons fired and then, by sheer luck, another scientist walked into the room, saw the nuts, grabbed one, pulled it apart and ate it. The monkey stared at the man with rapt attention, and the scientists noticed something. As he observed the man opening the nut, the EXACT same neurons fired as when the monkey himself opened the nut. They had no idea what to make of this data – they thought the MRI was broken. So they repeated the experiment using other primates with a big neo–cortex and then humans and what

they discovered over and over again was something called mirror neurons. We are apparently soft-wired as humans so that if I'm observing your anger or frustration or sympathy or compassion, those same neurons fire in me as if I were having that experience. Author Jeremy Rifkin in his book The Empathic Civilization, says that this research in cognitive development suggests that we are not wired for aggression, violence or self-interest, but for sociability, affection and companionship...that our first drive is to belong.

Of course this is just one layer. Just because those neurons fire doesn't mean that I will respond one way or another. But what it does suggest is that we have built-in systems that gear us to experience the world in ways that our environment projects. Another way of saying this would be that we "are what we eat." So if our world is filled with violence, with anger and frustration, with rejection and division - we will eventually accept those things as our life experience, even if those events don't actually happen to us. And if our first drive is to belong, then what will we do to fulfill that drive? If we emulate what we see or "consume" from the world around us, then how do we think about the "cause and effect" of our rhetoric? After all, if the argument is that there is no verifiable linkage between rhetoric or intentional imagery and our actions, then why is there an 8 billion dollar advertising industry?

So while I cannot lay blame for the shootings in Tuscon at any one person or group's feet, I can say that the way that we talk to one another matters. What we choose to consume makes us who we are. Don't kid yourself - the availability of visual and verbal violence has saturated our culture, and that is not without consequences. The more "reality TV" we watch, and the further those shows have to go to achieve the "humiliation factor", the more out of touch we grow with our fellow human beings. The more angry talk radio we listen to, and it goes further and further in order to shock us, the more angry neurons fire, regardless of the veracity of the anger or the clarity of the target. And if a person feels like that collection of angry folks makes a community, then maybe that becomes the place where they belong. Maybe that fulfills the drive, even if it does so via a very negative and potentially destructive way.

People who have other connections, other communities, need not fulfill their sense of belonging via that means and so they can participate in a less involved way. They can walk in, rant and then walk back to their truer communities. But then there are those for whom the angry place is the ONLY place they belong. It becomes the thing that defines them. Dr. King warned his own followers of this...it is why he preached non-violence. He made sure that his pseudo-Paul warned the American Christian to avoid violence because if they did their "chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos."

I hope that we open these letters again...the ones that Paul wrote and the ones

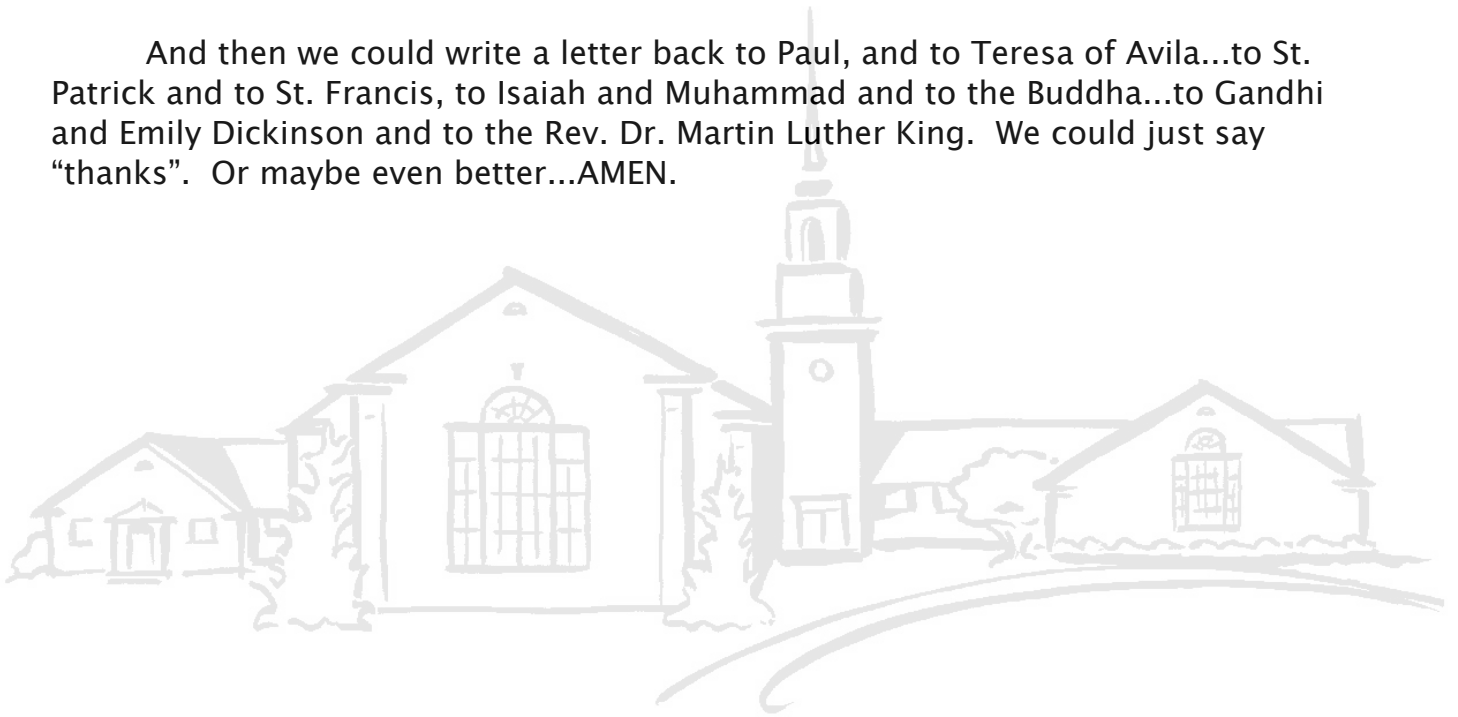
that Dr. King wrote, in Paul's name and his own. It is there that we find words of new life...new options...new reminders of the ambitions we have had. Perhaps we can sharpen our tendencies towards love. Perhaps instead of believing in our basic wickedness, we can begin to feed ourselves the nourishment of believing in our basic goodness...that a state of compassion, affection and a sense of belonging is more human, not less. What better day than the marking of Dr. King's birth to say that we believe in something we cannot yet see...that we strive for something that is not yet here...that we yearn for a dawn that hasn't arrived? What better day than this to nourish our spirits with the satisfying nutrients of love, rather than more cultural junk food?

But I must slip back into my pastoral voice for a moment...mostly because as I ask for you to seek love in all aspects of your life – to feed yourself with it – and I know how difficult that is, especially in a culture that confines love to E-Harmony and the Bachelor. What are we even talking about when we call one another to love, when we lay claim to being, as Dr. King called it, extremists for love? Later in this letter Paul addresses love, using words that are usually heard at weddings but are much more broad – for this is not romantic love that Paul speaks of, but the kind of love that Jesus says we should give away wastefully to our enemies and lavish on our neighbors. This is the love that, according to Paul, never gives up, that cares more for others than ourselves, that doesn't want what it doesn't have, that doesn't strut or have a swelled head, that doesn't force itself on others or say “me first”, that doesn't fly off the handle, keep score of the sins of others or revel when others grovel. This love takes pleasure in the presence of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, looks for the best in all things and never looks back, but keeps going to the end.

If I have all the powers of amazing rhetoric and angelic speech, but don't have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If we understand all of the mysteries of the world and have all of the answers, but don't have love, we are nothing. If I give away all of my possessions, and if I have the faith to move mountains, but do not have love...I have gained nothing. Dr. King has Paul remind us that sacrifice is required. But more importantly, condemnation and persecution must be risked in order to live up to the expectations of our Creator. When you start preaching love or talking about forgiveness as an actual practical means of living in the world you will at least be called an impractical dreamer...or maybe a dangerous radical...an extremist. But if we are not willing to say, especially after Tuscon, I will no longer participate in meanness or rudeness, because they are the gateway drugs to violence and hatred...if we are not willing to act, in all our encounters, with as much compassion and love as we can muster...if we are not willing to be marked as different because we won't advocate for war as a decent solution for any problem, for indifference as acceptable in any situation or for rejection of any human being as legitimate, then we are nothing.

Somewhere, buried on the desk of our lives together lies a set of letters...words hoping to remind us of what we once dreamed of. Maybe they won't vanquish our fears or eliminate our hurt feelings or bitterness, but perhaps they might remind us of what we once looked for on the horizon...of what we once imagined to be true. Perhaps we can set our sails for that wind again, and reach for lives that would mark us in this world as foolish dreamers...

And then we could write a letter back to Paul, and to Teresa of Avila...to St. Patrick and to St. Francis, to Isaiah and Muhammad and to the Buddha...to Gandhi and Emily Dickinson and to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. We could just say "thanks". Or maybe even better...AMEN.



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