

For Good

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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I Corinthians 9:16–23

The scripture begins midway in Apostle Paul's sermon to the people in Corinth. As we enter into the scripture, we find Paul's passion building. You can feel the intensity as he tries to impress upon the people what a life decision it is to follow Christ. He cannot help but preach the gospel. When it comes down to it there is nothing else, he can do. These are pretty powerful words from a former Pharisee and maker of tents. He is so convicted that he now sees beyond his own life and reaches to others who are not like him. What matters to him is Christ's message of God's love for all to hear. Listen as he tries to explain to this group of believers how he can meet people where they are and how important sharing the good news is.

I Corinthians 9:16–23

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

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

This is the Word of the Lord.

Paul seeks to bring in others because God's love and God's grace is what people need whether they know it or not. Paul is giving the people of Corinth the leeway to accept others who may be different from them. To be a Jew you need a pedigree, born into one of the tribes of Israel, but to follow Christ you need to be willing, Jew or non-Jew free or slave. He will use what it takes to help people understand that this message is a gift God gives for all people, that God's love is real and forgiveness is true.

When we gather with like-minded folks, even if it is virtually, proclaiming the Gospel is easy. But what happens when we go out of this space? How do we make the Gospel real and alive for others?

There are quite a bit of competing thoughts that we have to sort through. It seems that seeking out the goodness is not our "go to" reaction as we live our lives. Our first reaction when a wrong occurs is the need to settle the score. Taking vengeance after we have been wronged is far easier than seeking forgiveness. Horrible

and evil things happen and more often than not the response is a vow to pay back in kind. Look at our world politics at the verbiage going back and forth. Be careful what you do because we will do it back to you even more so. If you hurt us, we will retaliate. It almost seems as if there is no room to find the good. How do we reconcile Paul's words when it is a far more natural urge to strike back? If we live the good news of the gospel like Paul and cannot help ourselves but to preach it, then how can our voice be heard? Maybe as Christians we need to look harder to find the good.

My niece and her husband live in Atlanta. A few years ago, there was an ice storm that caught the city unawares. As a result, people were stranded on the highways for hours. The entire city was brought to a standstill. It was evident that they were not prepared for this. It was a mess. You know that heads were going to roll because they were not ready. People were going to pay for this miscalculation of nature! And I remember not being too sympathetic. Oh, Atlanta, when will you learn about winter? Take some lessons from us up here in the North.

From my niece and her husband I got an entirely different story. Ordinary people stepped up and started helping others during the storm. My niece's neighborhood is near the freeway. During the storm, a Facebook page was created asking if people needed anything. Neighbors ventured out to the freeway to the stranded motorists and offered water, food and shelter for the night. Strangers took in strangers. No one planned it and no one was appointed to do it; it was regular people helping other people. It was grace personified. People were changed by that experience for the good.

I found the good at work in one of my favorite Broadway musicals, *Wicked*. *Wicked* is the backstory to the *Wizard of Oz*. By no means is it a religious story but the good news is proclaimed in it. In the story, two witches who are very different, confront each other. They are rivals. We have Glinda, the good, popular and beautiful witch, and Elphaba, the smart, misunderstood and green witch. In their last meeting of the musical, they sing this duet called, *For Good*. Elphaba starts by singing:

I'm limited

Just look at me

I'm limited

And just look at you

You can do all I couldn't do

Glinda

So now it's up to you

For both of us

Now it's up to you

I've heard it said

That people come into our lives

For a reason

Bringing something we must learn

And we are led to those

Who help us most to grow if we let them

And we help them in return

Well, I don't know if I believe that's true

But I know I'm who I am today

Because I knew you

Because I knew you

I have been changed for good

What a complex situation Glinda and Elphaba find themselves in when they sing this song. They have hurt and humiliated each other. The natural storyline would follow that in a way of escalating the insults and trying to win, the other must lose. This story takes a turn toward grace at this moment.

“I do believe I have been changed for the better, and because I knew you, I have been changed for good.”

We follow the competitive route far more than we do the collaborate one. To be a winner means there has to be a loser. Today is Super Bowl Sunday. It is a day that wins are elevated. Who will have the best advertisement? What snack will be the winner today? It is a day of winners and the losers are sent packing. What a different mindset it would be if Super Bowl Sunday was known for winning against sexual violence and abuse. That Super Bowl Sunday was known more for feeding everyone who is hungry this day. That this would be a day where winning or losing, vengeance and reprisals were not the main event but doing something for good, healing rifts and making right carried the day.

We have a ways to go. Today as the 55th Super Bowl is played, one team will win and one team will lose. Most of our stories point in that direction. When it is more than just a game, we justify that losers deserve what they get and that is how inequities continue to stay in place.

What if that hard-wired vengeance is replaced with free grace? What if just desserts are not all there is and that evening the score is not the only way a story can end?

Elphaba sings to Glinda:

“Just to clear the air I ask forgiveness for the things I have done you blame me for.” And Glinda responds, “But then, I guess we know there’s blame to share. Together they say, “None of it seems to matter anymore.”

Christ offers us another way. In this story, two witches transcend their own selfish agenda at least for a moment to connect and to see the goodness in each other. They took a movement in which grace carried the scene.

Our Christian life is about being in relationships. God became one of us not to be alone but to connect with us humans. We are called to look for the good.

When Glinda and Elphaba sing this song, it is last time they meet. They go different ways from here. But they acknowledge the value they have gotten with each other. Elphaba sings “you will be with me like a handprint on my heart and now whatever way our stories end I know you have re-written mine by being my friend...”

May we as followers of Christ be like a handprint on the heart as we prepare for things to come and as we take the gospel outward. Thanks be to God. Amen.