

## 07 February 2021—The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Bishop Philip Wright of Belize once said this: “God does not give a mission to the Church; God gives a Church to carry out God’s mission.” This might seem like linguistic hair-splitting, but Bp Wright makes an important distinction. Borrowing from another wise person, the American management guru, Steven Covey: “The main thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing.” In Mr. Covey’s experience of organizations, keeping ‘the main thing the main thing’ is essential. Keeping ‘the main thing the main thing’ is super-essential for the Church. Realizing the Church exists to carry out God’s mission is super-crucial to our effectiveness.

In our Prayer Book Catechism, page 855, the Church’s mission is clear: “...to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love...through the ministry of all its members.” In today’s second reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians Paul writes a description of what this all-hands-at-the-oars mission of restoration through prayer, worship, proclamation, justice, peace, and love looks like. He writes, *I am entrusted with a commission...that in my proclamation I may make the Gospel free of charge...for though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a servant to all, so that I might win more of them.*

Paul uses the word ‘free’ twice, referring to the Gospel, then referring to himself. When we hear the phrase ‘free Gospel’ we might think in economic terms. It is certainly true there is no entrance fee for the Church—one indication we are not a club. Yet obviously more is meant. As we read the New Testament, it is apparent Faith is not performance based. Faith *produces* changed actions, thoughts, words, and changed perspective, values, and goals. Paradoxically, faith does not necessarily produce morally superior people, since one of the primary changes we experience is the desire for and practice of repentance. It is the sick who need a doctor, not the healthy. It is not moral superstars who require grace but mere humans, doing as best we can, making mistakes along the way. Faith is not being sinless; faith is giving up our sins to God as quickly as we are aware of them, as thoroughly as we are able, as many times as we commit them.

Of all the sins of his opponents, the one Jesus has the least patience for is hypocrisy. We usually think of hypocrisy as saying one thing but doing the opposite or condemning a certain sin and then engaging in it. Such is hypocrisy. However, so too is being hypercritical of others’ sins and quite comfortable with or blind to one’s own. As an example, those who roundly condemn sexual permissiveness and endlessly share in salacious detail with everyone in earshot who is lustful and what they are doing with whom. We do not live the Faith by condemning lust, and relishing gossip. The cunning trap of hypocrisy is that we can each see it vividly in others, and be utterly blind, deaf, and dumb to our own. Remember this, especially when you think you are a paragon of virtue, when you are critical of others.

The notion of moral superiority is a lie. The Gospel is free to all because everyone requires God’s grace to grow to maturity. Everyone—no exceptions. We have all *fallen short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23)—no exceptions. And since, *...while we were still sinners Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8), and *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved* (John 3:17), the Good News of God in Jesus Christ is free to all. This is the incomparable beauty of our Faith: only our unrepented sins keep us from loving God and growing up into Christ. Yet even in our blindness and pride, God loves us and longs for us with infinite passion.

The free grace of God makes us free. We are so free that, released from the silly conventions of society, we become servants of all, sharing the free Gospel freely with all. Everyone is already pre-qualified: poor, rich, middle class; washed, unwashed; homeowners, street people; Democrat, Republican, apolitical; believer, unbeliever; old, young, teenagers, infants; botox, detox, messed up, messing up; black, white, yellow, red, blue, purple, and indifferent; loved and unloved, lovable and unlovable. No one is disqualified, dismissed, or discounted.

We want to be servants of all to win many because of the nature of what we are given and yearn to share: God’s eternal, infinite, free love for all. Paul says that he conducts himself as those to whom he is reaching out. This is not bait and switch or playing falsely. We meet people where they are because God’s loves them just as they are, and *...we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us* (2 Corinthians 5:20). This is the main thing. This is why the Church exists.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.