

The Glass Half Full

1 Corinthians 1:1

1/20/08

When I go to the doctor, I usually expect that there is a level of expertise and training for the doctor to be able to make a diagnosis. Today there are tests and machines and advances in medicine, and physicians are able to combine all these technologies along with years of education. To combine all of this so that a diagnosis is presented, even if it be as simple as you have a cold to something even more serious. So I became very troubled when I heard of these rumored notes from hospital charts;

Patient refused autopsy

Patient has left white blood cells at another hospital

Note: patient recovering from cut on forehead, patient became very angry when given an enema by mistake.

Patient has chest pain if she lies on her left side for over a year

The second day the knee was better and on the third day it disappeared

The patient is tearful, crying constantly, she also appears to be depressed.

The patient has been depressed since beginning to see me in 1993.

She is numb from her toes down.

Occasional, constant, infrequent headaches

Patient was alert and unresponsive.

Rectal examination revealed a normal sized thyroid.

She stated that she had been constipated most of her life until she got a divorce.

Skin somewhat pale but present.

Patient has two teenage children but no other abnormalities.

You expect Paul to get it right. You expect Paul who has been an apostle, who has been a part of starting churches, who has been a frequent leader and mentor of this Corinthian congregation to get it right. But when you begin to read this letter, when you begin to read what Paul is writing, it is a joke, it is laughable. It's as if somehow they screwed it all up and we hear what Paul is saying and we simply find ourselves shocked knowing the truth about this community and about this church. Today, when we write a

letter we just say dear so and so. That's it, that's our salutation, that's the beginning. But back then, in that time, there was a recognized form of how you write letters. You say who it's from, Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ. You say who it's going to, to the church of Corinth and those called by God. Then there's a salutation or this thanksgiving that is offered, "We thank God always for you in our midst..." something along those lines. What we would expect to hear might be Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ; we've got that part down. To the church in Corinth, a church divided internally and divided against me personally, the apostle Paul. To those who are immoral, to those who are litigious together abusing the Lord's Supper and pridefully, ostentatiously, displaying spiritual gifts, and to top it all, a community that has trouble with the resurrection. Then you get to that part of the thanksgiving and you can imagine Paul writing, "I am glad I am here and you are there. I am glad that I am far away from all your fighting and bickering and your confusion and all that is going on in your community and I leave you to it. I hope all goes well and I thank God that I am where I am right now which is far away from you." That's not what he writes. He writes, "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 in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ both their Lord and ours. For in every way you have been enriched in Him in speech and knowledge of every kind." Laughable! You would think Paul would know a little bit, have a little bit of expertise and have some spiritual discernment to understand exactly what's going on with this community. This is a joke! Is he trying to be funny? No, this is the beginning of the Epistle, the Church at Corinth.

One of the things that my mentor, Woody, said to me is he said "really there are three things that are most important in life -- attitude, attitude, attitude." Paul has an attitude that contradicts the reality of what the eye can see. Paul has an attitude that transcends the actual concrete circumstances that are before his eyes. So Paul has this optimism, this hope that wells up within him. Paul is optimistic, Paul is encouraging, and he is excited about what God is doing in the midst of this congregation. I've said before there's the way it ought to be and then there's the way it is. I think it's important to see that for Paul in that juxtaposition that Paul is all about the way it ought to be. Paul is all about looking at this congregation and sensing and seeing what God is doing and what is

happening despite contractions and evidence to the contrary. Paul is a messenger of hope. Verse 9 is the source of that hope should we wonder where does this unbridled optimism come from. Where does this sense of encouragement and hope, where does it emanate? We look at verse nine and we hear these simple words, God is faithful. Hey, you may not look like much; you may not act like much but guess what - God called you. God called you and one of the things Paul is saying is that God is faithful. That God is faithful! And not only that, here are all the wonderful things I see God doing in your midst. And so there is this attitude of optimism, this attitude of encouragement, this attitude that sees the good in those in the church in Corinth. The power of attitude, I think, cannot be understated.

I turn to three thinkers, one is John Ortberg in his book, [If You Want To Walk On Water You've Got To Get Out of the Boat](#), a book studied by our Transitions Class not too long ago in which he states that "hope does not just motivate people to positive action it actually has healing power." He cites a medical study in which 122 men who had suffered their first heart attack were evaluated on their degree of hopefulness and pessimism. Of the 25 most pessimistic men 21 had died 8 years later. Of the 25 most optimistic only 6 had died. Loss of hope increased the odds of death more than 300%. It predicted death more accurately than any medical risk factor including blood pressure, amount of damage to the heart or cholesterol level. Ortberg adds, "better to eat Twinkies with joy than to eat broccoli in despair." It is Chuck Swindol who said, "Words can never adequately convey the incredible impact of our attitude toward life. The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10% what happens and 90% of how we respond to it." Attitude, attitude, attitude! Henry Nouwen and his book, [Here and Now, Living in the Spirit](#) shares, "I have a friend who radiates joy, not because his life is easy but because he habitually recognizes God's presence in the midst of all human suffering, his own as well as others. My friend's joy is contagious. The more I am with him the more I catch glimpses of the sun shining through the clouds. Yes, I know there is a sun even though the skies are covered with clouds. While my friend always spoke about the sun I kept speaking about clouds. Until one day I realized that it was the sun that allowed me to see the clouds. Those who keep speaking about the sun while walking under the cloudy sky are messengers of hope. The true saints of our day.

Paul is one, a messenger of hope, as he speaks about the son, the S-O-N, despite all the clouds or the failings of the Corinth community. Paul continually lifts up before them this possibility of what God is doing in their life, of what God is about, that God is faithful in their midst. So, Paul is filled with this sense of optimism. As he looks at others he sees within them good, he sees within them potential, and he literally sees hope in and for other people despite the contradictions. Not only is Paul filled with this optimism, not only is he filled with this sense of hope for others that is directed to and for them, but Paul is all about sharing it.

Paul is all about letting others know. He is all about getting a pen out and paper and writing a letter and telling them all about it. Where others might write them off Paul is writing to say, "Hey I believe in you, I see good in you, I see God in you."

I can remember a young woman who was struggling with her self-image, I had no idea that she was struggling with how she looked and how she felt about herself and at one point she shared these fears with me and really in a kind of unthinking, unprepared way, without any sort of real thought to anything, I just said something like, "that's silly, you're beautiful," and I went on. She wrote me later to tell me that my words really caused her to reflect and that she truly felt beautiful and she had not felt that way in a long time. To begin to see the good in other people, to begin to see the potential, to begin to see that which is there, that which is laudable, that which is due to be praised.

I think there are many who help us see, I think it is Paul in our scriptures, I think it can be pastors, it can be friends, and it can be family. It can even be children. There is value in someone else who looks at us, someone else who sees us for so often we don't see the whole picture. Often we're tempted to look at the parts that are less presentable, the parts that are less laudable and the parts that are less than we might hope them to be. We can have a sense of discouragement with ourselves. How wonderful it is when that Barnabus, that brother of encouragement, that sister of encouragement pulls alongside of us and says, "I see wonder in you." The person who has that unbridled enthusiasm and optimism for us and goes so far as to let us know it.

Some might be quick to call Corinth a failure, write that letter and say, "you know what? You guys are getting it all wrong. There are other places for me to go that are worth my efforts. There are other places that have potential but you're not it. Good

riddance, goodbye, I hope you guys finally work it out.” That’s not the letter that Paul writes. Not the letter he writes at all. Instead Paul sees God’s faithfulness. That’s what he sees. He says, guess what? You’re stuck with God. Like it or not. God called you, God brought you, God is working in your midst, God is doing powerful and miraculous things and God is faithful, he is going to continue to do that.

Today is a very exciting afternoon in my house for today we have the conference football playoff championships. It’s been kind of sad - not only have the Titans lost but the beloved, immortal, Dallas Cowboys have also gone down. That sad fact is only balanced by the divine justice of the universe in the fact that the Steelers are not in the playoffs. Which, of course, leaves one in a little bit of a quandary of wondering exactly for whom to root. Which team to back and to cheer for at this point? Well, I’ve decided to hitch my wagon to the star of Brett Favre. I figure if you don’t root for Brett Favre it’s sort of like being un-American in some sense. But ABC news reported this on Brett Favre, “For it was on September 30, 2007, Greenbay quarterback Brett Favre broke Dan Marino’s record of the most touchdown passes thrown in football. His new record stands at 421 and counting, and counting. Two weeks later, Favre broke another record. His 278th picked pass makes him the most intercepted quarterback in the history of the National Football League.” It kind of reminds you of another athlete, Babe Ruth, who once held a record of 714 homeruns while at the same time striking out 1330 times. I guarantee you that as you watch football today, that as you hear Brett Favre being spoken about, they are not going to stand up and present him as the most intercepted quarterback in National Football League history. They are not going to put that on and show you replay after replay of dropped passes, of interceptions, of sacks. Instead, what you are going to hear about is the great potential that is there, of the most touchdown passes that have been thrown. There is an opportunity, certainly, to look in the other direction; but it is Paul who sees that same potential, that same incredible aspect of achievement of what God is doing in and through us, that Paul lifts up. No highlight reels today of Brett Favre being the greatest failure of the National Football League. No talk in any way, shape or form like that.

None of that will come out of Paul’s mouth either. For Paul’s optimism comes from another plane, comes from looking beyond that which we can see. For he says, Not

only do I see the good in you but I see the God in you. I see it plain as day and I want to make it known to you, I want to share it.” So you failed, so you made a mistake in which there is no rationalization, no justification, no place to hide, no excuses to be made.

Welcome to the human race. Certainly I’ve failed and others have failed as well, guess what, God is faithful. No one is going to stand at the end and log your record of failures. So, other people are making your life difficult and they are not living up to your expectations and they are not doing as much for you as you think they ought to do. In fact, you find that at times they are difficult and irascible, that they are unpredictable and capricious, and you are thinking to yourself, “They are a nuisance.” They have great potential, they have great opportunities; there is an opportunity to look into their eyes and see the wonder and the joy of God that is at work in their lives for truly God is doing great things.

So maybe you feel terrible about your life and maybe life is hard, maybe life has put a set of challenges and circumstances before you that truly others would look at and say, “That is difficult.” But Paul would remind us that God is faithful. Period! Paul is going to look and he is going to see that reality being lived out in a people. Being lived out that they are being filled in a sense. To use Paul’s words, “They are being enriched in speech and in deed and in action,” when all that you see speaks to the contrary in speech and in deed and in action. This is not a group that you would consider to be enriched but Paul does. That’s what he believes as certain as the rock and the foundation of Jesus Christ himself, Paul believes it and he shares it. It’s less about the glass being half empty or half full. It’s less about what happened in the past or even the present or what’s going to happen in the future. You can think of what Paul’s communicating as a photograph of a glass that is there with water in it, as a snapshot that is taken, and there you see the glass with the water. But really the picture is one in which there is a spicket and a faucet and the water is pouring into the glass so that the glass is in this process of being filled, of being enriched, of being transformed by the power of God. As continually working and changing and metamorphosing our very being. It’s not half full or half empty, it is filling and overflowing and that is what Paul sees. That is his attitude, that is his optimism and that is his unwavering hope. To be enriched in every way. So Paul writes to Corinth and he writes to us, is it a joke? Paul did not think so. Amen.