

**Jeremiah 1: 4-10**  
**I Corinthians 12: 31-14: 1a**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**February 3, 2013**

Last week I proposed that we consider three ideas: how great is our calling, how great are the resources available to fulfill this calling and how great the challenge to receive and make use of those resources in service to the Gospel. The apostle Paul lived with profound awareness of all three and was alternately inspired by and tormented by them.

Paul had experienced the greatness of the calling in the mystical encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He experiences the resources not only by the power of that encounter, but also through the community that teaches him as a new Christian. Yet Paul also experiences the acute challenge of appropriating the grace which allows us to fulfill our great calling. He beholds the vision of the Kingdom of God in the unity of faith; he experiences God's yearning to bring this great vision to fulfillment on earth.

Yet at the same time Paul is tormented by the painful distance between vision and reality. He finds communities of faith to model the oneness of all people in Christ only to watch in anguish as these communities fracture into hostile groups each devoutly believing in their own fragment of truth. He watches himself alienate the very people he wishes to persuade. How well Paul the apostle would have related to the words of a Paul of this time, Paul Simon, "Slip-sliding away, slip-sliding away; the more we near the destination the more we're slip-sliding away."

I propose that what torments Paul troubles pastors and congregations. We are given this great calling: to announce and demonstrate the new relationship God has given the world

in Jesus Christ. We are called to be and grow in becoming good news. Every week we share God's great yearning in the prayer Jesus teaches us: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven*. What a grand and glorious vision! But how daunting and even discouraging to attempt to be faithful when our best efforts seem to matter so little!

I do not believe Paul ever achieves resolution of this fundamental conflict. Nor can we expect on this side of life to achieve perfect serenity—some balance of understanding which gives us utter equanimity in the midst of our own or the world's suffering. Jesus' inner peace was constantly disturbed by the pain, despair, and brokenness of humanity. Yet he does not remove himself from the pain and horror of human sin. He welcomes all into his presence. Thus Mike Saccocio of Schenectady City Mission told us when we were dealing with a conflict, "If everything is peaceful and serene in your congregation check your pulse. Troubled people came to Jesus. If they are not at Hamilton Union, you may wonder if Jesus is present." I know that there is at least one troubled soul here. You called him as your pastor. It was the profound experience that I could be "me" here, a recovering alcoholic in long term treatment for depression that allowed me to hear a call to partner with you in service to Jesus.

It is the role of the Body of Christ to be a sign of grace and hope in the midst of this world that suffers on every level of being. Yet how do we do this without becoming overwhelmed? How do we be open to sorrow and suffering and not become bitter or cynical? How do avoid withdrawing into self protected worlds which keep those who suffer at a distance and in so doing keep Jesus at a distance?

As we established last week, Paul teaches the Corinthians to nourish the gift given to each individual. He tells them that in God's sight there is no such thing as high status or low

status in the community of faith. Every member of the body is to be held in respect and appreciated. But there is more. The body is sustained not by individual effort alone. It is inspired by the breath of the Holy Spirit. It is called into being by God's proactive gift of Jesus, in Paul's words, "while we were hopeless and powerless." If God initiated the community of faith through the sending of Jesus, allowing our sin to crucify him, and then raising him from the dead, how do we get the idea that the ministry somehow depends exclusively on us? If God sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to sustain us individually and as a body, so that we are not merely an accumulation of individuals but a living breathing presence of Jesus, how can we believe that we are spiritually limited?

The task of the church is not to issue proclamations or to take arms against the sea of troubles. It is to be the Body of Christ. This is every bit as challenging as addressing all of the world's sorrows. But it has the advantage of opening us to the spiritual power which is in fact God, not us, addressing the suffering of the world. Thus Paul speaks to the Corinthians of a "more excellent way" the way of love.

This love of which Paul speaks is divine love. It is not native to human nature. It is the self-giving love by which we put aside our hopes and dreams to serve another. It is this divine love which calls us above all other loves and loyalties. When it comes to abide in the center of our lives it transcends family, work, the desire for personal achievement, the acquiring of worldly security. It is what caused Jesus to give up all earthly pleasure and power in order to bring peace to the world. This peace which Jesus tells us the world cannot give is only ours when we renounce the desire to have heavenly peace and earthly security. It is only ours when we accept our place in life as who we are, beloved children of God who abide in the heart of

God. In short, when we seek the self renouncing love of Jesus become the living animating principle of our lives and our life together, *and then* we become the living body of *Christ*. We will be fulfilling our destiny as human beings and as a community of disciples.

Yes we will still be troubled by the pain of the world. But we will be far more impressed with what God can do—indeed *what God has already done* in Jesus Christ, and so we will be a vehicle of hope and salvation to one another and to the world around us. Amen.