

Text: II Corinthians 6:1-13
Title: With Open Hearts
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Roger Allen Nelson

The Reformed Church in America is tearing itself apart over same-sex marriage and the place of gay members as Elders, Deacons, or Pastors.

There are two well organized and financed advocacy groups at opposite ends of the spectrum. The Gospel Alliance positions itself as the defender of a “biblical” understanding of human sexuality. Room for All couples the inclusive love of God with a commitment to LGBT Christians. The Reformed Church has no idea how these two interpretations of scripture, sexuality and the gospel of Jesus Christ will coexist in the same denomination. There’s been conferences, statements, overtures, study groups, deliberations, hand-wringing, lament, papers and prayers.

Recently the leaders of the Gospel Alliance and Room for All met for a retreat. There had been hurtful rhetoric, character attacks, broken relationships, and some hard realities. At the end of the retreat most of the participants signed a joint letter of repentance, common commitments, and longing for a way forward. They didn’t have any solutions, but they made promises about how they would treat one another.

As that letter was published others began to weigh in. They took exception to the wording, they challenged the commitments, they offered critique. Which in turn caused a rupture between those who participated in the retreat and those who voiced criticism without having been present. And that exchange led to another letter of reconciliation and shared commitment....

You get the idea.

There was lots of hurt.
Lots of misunderstanding.
Lots of brokenness.
Lots of letters.
Lots of nothing new under the sun.

Dear friends, the New Testament includes two letters between Paul and the church in Corinth, but biblical scholars believe that there were at least one or two other letters exchanged and a substantial case can be made that II Corinthians is itself the composite of a couple different letters. There was lots of hurt, lots of brokenness, and lots of letters.

So, our text this morning is part of what Paul wrote to defend himself and defend the gospel. Our text is part of Paul writing his own letter of recommendation to a church he planted, loved, and yet felt betrayed by.

And maybe that’s a good place to start.

The church is a collection of common cracked clay jars. And while those jars may hold great treasure they can also generally make a mess of things. I don’t know of any church without issues. I don’t know of any congregation that has it all right. I don’t know of any

Body of Christ that doesn't have an underbelly with some indigestion and a few ulcers. I know very few who haven't been hurt or disappointed by other jars of clay.

There's a church that closed in Lansdale, Pennsylvania. The building was first sold to an Elks Lodge, and when it changed hands again the new owners turned it into a bar with stained glass windows and karaoke on Wednesday nights. In 2011 a burned-out pastor named J. R. Briggs noticed the building and decided to use it for the first ever Epic Fail Pastors' Conference. There are lots of conferences for winners, what about one for those who lose....

Briggs posted the idea on-line and within hours he had hundreds of comments, emails and questions. When the Epic Fail conference opened there were one hundred pastors from seventeen states who descended on that old church building to eat, drink, pray and tell the truth. Briggs writes:

People shared their stories and struggles with refreshing courage. They opened up about their battles with depression and suicidal thoughts, their terror of failure and their broken hearts over a failed church, nine years prior. They shared how dry, lost and alone they felt. I looked at my watch. We were seventeen minutes in and people were standing up telling complete strangers stories of pain, loss, fear and deep wounds... There were no superstars, no impressive videos, no greenrooms and no lanyards... There was laughter and tears and refills. It was, as one retired pastor put it, "a kiss from God on our bruises."

Since its birth at Pentecost the church has been a collection of common cracked clay jars and its leaders have always had clay feet. A decidedly human enterprise, the church has fought and fractured and fumbled along. And while the gospel itself is a story of resurrection (that requires death), and while the Spirit of God continues to live and move, we would do well to remember rightly our history and hold this moment, and one another, with humility, kindness, and a spirit of forgiveness.

The Apostle Paul planted a church that impugned his reputation, went sideways theologically, and broke his heart. And yet, even given that reality, Paul picks up on a text from Isaiah and announces that "now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."

Salvation doesn't hang in the balance,
salvation isn't waiting around the next corner,
salvation isn't a goal to be reached.
Salvation has been accomplished by God in Christ.
Salvation is now. And therefore, today, creation turns on a whole new axis.

That doesn't mean that there won't be all manner of trials and troubles. Paul goes on to detail how rough his journey has been. And, that doesn't mean that life won't be full of paradox. Paul lists a variety of ways in which two realities can be held in tension at the same time.

*Genuine, yet regarded as imposters;
Known, yet regarded as unknown;
Dying, and yet we live on;*

*Beaten, and yet not killed;
Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,
Poor, yet making many rich;
Having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

Paul proclaims the cold hard truth of his experience following Jesus Christ. He would have felt right at home at an Epic Fail conference.

But then Paul offers a beautiful image. He writes that he has opened his mouth and his heart. The word translated here as open actually means to be enlarged or expanded. So, despite his broken heart, despite his sense of betrayal, despite being bruised Paul's heart is reaching outward. And he encourages the Corinthians to do the same.

Live with your heart expanded.
Live with your heart enlarged.
Live with your heart open.

Hope's own, Ted and Josie Boswell, were CRC missionaries in Japan. They moved back to the states in large part to find better schooling for their daughter, Maika. They came to the southwest side of Chicago so that she could go to Elim. Providentially, better than a decade later, Maika is now living, working and thriving at Misericordia ~ the Catholic network of homes and work programs for the developmentally disabled on the north side. Thanks be to God.

Misericordia is usually translated as mercy, but its roots in Latin are the combination words for misery and heart. Mercy grows out of the heart. It's a helpful beautiful reminder....

Because, in effect, Paul writes to the Corinthians....

Even as God has been merciful let us be merciful.
Even as God has expanded his heart let us expand our hearts.
Even as God has opened his heart let us open our hearts.

So. If you take our text and cut out all of the middle stuff about trouble and paradox and combine the first and last lines you get a good summary....

As God co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain but open wide your hearts....

That's not a bad word of encouragement.

The way of God in Christ is an open heart. For God so loved the world that he opened his heart and offered his Son. In response the world (we) abused, mocked, denied, beat and ultimately killed his Son. His open heart is broken and bruised. And yet, he calls us to the same. With open hearts let us love one another.

With open hearts let us love the last, the lost, the least.
With open hearts let our lives be marked by mercy.
With open hearts let us see all others as God's beloved.
With open hearts let us make room for all.

Our hearts may be bruised and broken in the process, but it seems the way of God in Christ.

Barbara Brown Taylor has written that during communion we hold up a whole loaf of bread as a reminder of the whole, perfect presence of God among his people. But then that loaf is torn apart, the crumbs fall onto the table and spill onto the floor, as a reminder that the *shalom* which we long for is found through the brokenness of God. We are reconciled to God and to one another through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And, God has given to us this ministry of reconciliation.

As common cracked clay jars, we are Christ's ambassadors. Therefore, "as God co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain but open wide your hearts...."

Amen.