

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

2 Corinthians 2:1-10
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
May 29, 2016

ADULT MESSAGE

I have a little “**Family Circus**” cartoon here. It is done by **Bill Keane**. This one shows the little brother and sister talking while Grandma reads the newspaper in the background. Big sister says to little brother, “**The two places we know we’re always welcome are church and Grandma’s house.**” (Repeat.) I like that. It is very good to know that you always have someplace to go when things get bad.

Things were bad in Corinth, the early Christian church that the Apostle Paul started. That congregation had been fractured by false teachings, a challenge to Paul’s leadership, sexual impropriety, and the notion that they were super Christians who didn’t have to worry about how they treated each other or others around them. When they gathered for Agape feasts, it turned into a drunken orgy and there wasn’t even wine left to serve communion when the poor people showed up. Paul warned about bringing judgment upon themselves by what they were doing. Their problem was with **how** they were **observing** the Lord’s Supper, **not** with **who** was **receiving it**. The selfish way they were celebrating Holy Communion was certainly not an expression of God’s love for all people.

Today, Paul is writing concerning some person who has caused some sort of offense or division in the Corinthian church. We don’t know what the man did. The letter that describes his offense has been lost. In today’s short passage, Paul uses the word “**pain**” five times. They have been experiencing **pain times five** in their church. But here Paul is writing to encourage the Corinthian Christians to **forgive the man**. The fellow is still involved in the church, the error of his ways has been made clear and he has received plenty of judgment and condemnation from his fellow church members. There is a time to **confront** people who bring pain and division to the church, but then there is also a time to **comfort** them. Paul says it is **time to forgive**. There has been pain for Paul, the whole church and the offender. But now is the **time for forgiveness, restoration and healing**.

When I came to First Lutheran four years ago, you also were experiencing **pain times five**. There were several small groups among you, each of which was **grieving its own kind of hurt and pain**. All sorts of different people were wounded by the past few years of **staff turmoil** and people leaving their positions. Add to that the **lack of conversation and prayer** regarding the **human sexuality decisions** made by our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at its member assembly. **Angry words, hurtful comments, disrespectful actions** had happened and all of this **left pain times five**. But there was also a **deep yearning** amongst you for a **fresh start**, for **forgiveness** and **healing**.

Mel and **Marion Gilmer** and I were visiting a couple of days ago. We were talking about all of the **turmoil and broken relationships** happening in the world around us right now and even in our own families. That's when Mel emphatically said, **"The Church is all about love. That's it!"** There's that **love** word again. Paul used it in his letter to the Corinthians too. He uses the **"agape"** word. This is the highest form of love. It is the kind of love that is **selfless, generous, sacrificial even, loving others who are totally undeserving**. Jesus used **agape** when he told us to **"love our enemy."** He didn't mean to **"like"** our enemy. Agape love means for us to have **deep concern for the well-being** of that other person. And if we are to have that **deep concern** for our enemy, surely we are to practice the same kind of love for our fellow Christians.

Paul is using **agape/love** as the **foundation** for what he is asking these early Christians to do. Paul sees God's love as the **source, reason** and **goal** for his entire ministry. Jesus has come into this world to **redeem** us for God. Jesus has come to **rescue** us from the power of sin, evil and death. Jesus has come to **adopt, claim, forgive, heal** and **renew** every person. Paul, who started out arresting and killing Christians, **experienced the love and forgiveness** of God in Christ. God's love and forgiveness brought Paul to **"joy."** **Joy** comes to anyone who realizes that they have been **bought and paid for by Jesus**, that they are **beloved to God**, that they are **secure in God's embrace** right now and **in God's everlasting care**. This is all about God's love for **undeserving sinners** like Paul, like the fellow who he was advocating for, and like **you and me**. **Jesus will never let go of you**. You can

always cling to and count upon Jesus, in the **best of times** or in the **worst of times**. The **most important and amazing gift** we can receive in this life is **Jesus** and **Jesus is yours** and **you are his**. Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul tells us that **nothing** can **take us away from God's love** for us in Jesus. **Jesus loves you**.

Do you see? **"The Church is all about love. That's it!"** Mel is right. **Everything we do as Christians** is done in the loving embrace of God. And that's where **"forgiveness"** comes from. God forgives us. We forgive others. The Corinthian Christians had **pain times five**. But they weren't suffering alone. God in Christ had a good firm hold on them and wasn't about to let them go. Paul tells the Corinthians to **forgive their errant fellow member**. He uses the word **"forgiveness" five times** in this short passage. The Greek word here, for forgiveness has the sense **"give freely."** Paul invites them to practice **forgiveness times five**. Paul killed Christians, yet tasted the love and forgiveness of God in his own life. Now he is an **advocate for forgiveness even of those who have hurt him, hurt the church he loves**. Remember, **"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?"**

I heard world famous theologian, **Walter Bruggeman**, years ago say, **"Any time you draw a line between yourself and another person, chances are pretty good that Jesus is standing on the other side of the line."**

In this same letter to the Corinthian church, Paul says, **"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."** (1 Corinthians 12:26) **Linda Hommes** lifted that notion up this week in her letter to the editor in the Aitkin Age. She is commending the editor, **Adam Hoogenakker**, for his **sensitive coverage** of the **recent tragic story involving two young people** in our community. She writes, **"As one who has lived in this community for 25 years, I've seen it come together to surround its members who have experienced life-changing and often traumatic events. This is one of them for the two affected families and their friends. Our First Lutheran Church abides by the philosophy that we celebrate the good times but also stand**

together in the not-good times. These families need our support as they go through the judicial process. I, for one, will stand with them.

Paul makes clear that we the church, as individuals and as a community have the **power to forgive one another, just as Jesus has first forgiven us.** We have that **power to use against Satan** who delights in breaking apart relationships, families, churches. We have the **power to agree to disagree** about a lot of things, because we are **grounded in the undeserved, priceless agape/love of God for us and for all people.** We have the **power to live into forgiveness, healing and new starts.** Again and again. Not easy. Doesn't always happen quickly. But we **keep praying for it** and **trying to practice it** in our own families, church and community.

First Lutheran had **pain times five.** First Lutheran **longed for forgiveness, healing** and a **return to joyous living** in the love of God. And God held on. And God has been faithful. And forgiveness and **healing times five** have been happening and continue to happen amongst us. We are **still human.** We **still hurt each other.** We have **disagreements over politics,** over **school referendums,** over **moral issues,** over **Christian doctrine,** over **social statements** of our church, over **church policies,** over **Lutefisk vs. Swedish meatballs...**

And we have the **love of God for us times eternity.** And we have **God's forgiveness times eternity.** And we have **healing power to start again and again loving and trusting God, loving and caring for neighbor** and world **times eternity.**

We **love because God first loves us.** We **forgive** because God first forgives us and again and again. We **serve** because God loves and cares for us every day. We **give ourselves away** because Jesus first gave himself away for us. **"The two places we always know we are welcome are church and Grandma's house."** I hope that is true about Grandma's house. I know it is true about God's house. **"For God so loved (agape) the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."** (John 3:16-17) Thanks be to God. Amen.

