

How many of you have received a real, snail-mail letter this last week?

As much as we use technology, the internet and email, isn't it wonderful to receive a letter in the mail box? I think Emily Dickinson was right when she said,

“Letters link souls”.

And that's a good way of looking at all of the letters Paul wrote that we read in the Bible.

They were written so Paul could continue to connect with those communities in his absence. They were a kind of presence in absence. They're about relationship—both a witness of Paul's relationship with these communities, and agents of that relationship—the letters themselves actively build and sustain relationship.

This one to the troubled community in Corinth is about Living in the present, in this time and place, It's about living a life pleasing to God. And it's about the power of God to bring new life from death; it's about the power of God to help us see new creations. It's about the love of Christ that sustains us and compels us to act.

In Paul's time, he would not have been doing his own writing. He would have had an assistant, someone that he would have dictated his letters to. So, picture a very distressed Paul writing to the Corinthians, with tears; not a calm and serenely composed Paul, off in a secluded room, but with much anguish. Anguish over how the energy and excitement of a new community has been overcome by distractions, conflict, competition over leadership.

I picture him pacing back and forth, speaking 100 miles a minute and the scribe writing furiously. Paul, dictating his thoughts, feelings, revealing his very soul in care for a people threatened with danger several thousand years ago.

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians appears to be Paul's response to some new Christians, one particularly vocal and troublesome, that infiltrated the community in Paul's absence and swayed the community from the path he had set them on.

What upsets Paul is not that he has lost a following but that they are being led from the truth, and that he is being wrongly accused or misunderstood.

It is a letter written in a particular time and place; for a particular situation. A Letter never intended to be scripture, but simply correspondence...

And it is a letter that is Holy Scripture for us today—for God speaks through these emotional, energetic words of the apostle Paul.

In particular, this letter speaks of death and new life.

Today, Rebecca will be baptized. Rebecca, did you come to church today prepared to die?

In the deep flowing waters of baptism we share Christ's death and receive new life. In baptism our self-centered desires and living is killed and new life emerges; we are drowned and rise again to new life. The water is a visible sign of the old being washed away, All that you have lived, all that you have experienced and a new creation beginning through the cleansing of water, God's word and the Spirit.

A new life lived no longer as or for the old self, but a new life lived for him who died for us. The Spirit will continue to work to bring an internal change from the old life to new life with a new orientation. To a new life with Christ at the center.

And you join a community that looks at the world through the eyes of the gospel with these words of Paul ringing in our ears.

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

In Christ, from Christ, we live differently. We see the importance of relationships, of community. We see the importance of service and love.

Paul was accused of being “beside” himself, of being out of his “right mind” as he answered the call of God.

Some would say that we are “beside ourselves”, not in our right mind”, that we can not, should not answer the call of God made known by the Spirit. If we had listened to them, or our own fear, Community Family Life Services would not have been started; LifeLine Partnership would not have found a home in our church and in so many hearts.

In the coming weeks this community will make decisions about opening our hearts and space to another congregation. We are beginning to talk about wise use of this very space and resources. These discussions are offering opportunities to think creatively, to open our eyes to new creations.

And “the love of Christ urges us on”. A love that took him to the cross and beyond. It is Christ’s love, not our love for Christ, but Christ’s love for us that gives us the strength to reach out, to welcome, to share with one another and the world the love of Christ.

In a few minutes we will all say, “We welcome you into the body of Christ and the mission that we share”.

In Christ, we are made new. This mercy and grace that we share, unites people from all lands and races, and brings us to one table to share one bread of life, one cup of salvation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.