

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 “New From the Inside Out”

This is our last Sunday in First Corinthians. We've been working our way through parts of this book since early January. For the most part we've been tackling the theme of what does it look like for the Holy Spirit to be present in our personal lives and in the church. The passage that Tom just read is kind of the beginning of Paul's wrap-up to this letter to the Corinthian church. There's a lot of important things packed into these 11 verses. In a nutshell Paul talks about how Christ's life, death, and resurrection and how it all relates to the scriptures, is the foundation of the good news that Jesus called his apostles to preach. That's when Paul inserts himself into the story and lets his readers know how he stands apart from the other apostles. See, Paul wasn't an "original" apostle. He wasn't an eyewitness to Jesus' life and death. Nor was he really a witness to the resurrection either, although he eventually had an encounter with the Risen Christ on the way to Damascus one day. But the awkward truth is that the reason why he was on the way to Damascus in the first place was to persecute Christians. That's what he did. And because of his former vocation, he labeled himself as the least worthy of all the apostles. In fact, he said that he had to work harder than all of the other apostles to earn the right to be heard and to even be considered an apostle himself.

But he also goes on to say that God isn't impressed with his hard work. It's not like Paul had this little "apostle punch card" where he could get a stamp for every good thing he did and once the card was full, he could redeem it and be an "official" apostle. One does not become an apostle by doing good works. You've got to be transformed. And that transformation has to happen from the inside out. Like we learned last week, deeds don't mean much unless they are backed up by love. And we can't really say we're very good at loving unless our deeds back that love up. What we do and what we say need to inform one another. They need to be fully integrated. This is actually one of the key themes to this whole letter.

Of course, the question we always want to ask as the church who bears Christ's name is, "How are we doing?" Some of you ... me included ... might think we're doing pretty good. Every room of our facility is being used for ministry, and every day of the week there's ministry going in our church. Well that's great, right? Yes. That's what a lot of people might say. Not everyone thinks this, mind you, but in all honesty that's what a big percentage of our folks do say. Six years ago, we made a decision to be an outwardly focused church. That means, our focus is to be faithful to the ministry that Jesus calls us to do by doing what Jesus did during his earthly ministry. We want to be "out there" addressing the needs of our community, right? And we're doing this! We're "out there!" Take this last week for example. We got some media attention! We got almost 4 minutes on Action News for two different projects we're involved with – the Community Interfaith Memorial Service that we helped plan Friday and hosting Safe Space during the coldest week of the winter thus far.

A lot of you have left comments on social media or texted me or told me how proud you are to be a part of a church that's out there doing good "Jesus work." Some of you might be thinking, "Two appearances on Action News this past week! Four minutes of air time? Wow! Our pastor is out there waving the First Christian Church flag! This must come naturally to him. His gut-level response to our community's needs must come from a deep wellspring of love and compassion that just bubbles up from within his soul!" *Sometimes! Sometimes* this is true. But a *lot* of the time, my gut-level response to something is *way* different than what actually comes out of my mouth. "Oh, come on Jesse, you're Mr. Compassion." You may *think* so, but listen ... one of the skills I've developed over the years is catching myself and biting my tongue before I say something horrible and mean. *Especially* when I'm *not* feeling very charitable. I can give the *illusion* of being compassionate and charitable, but deep down inside me, there are some ugly things going on! "But you're a pastor!" Yes, I am. Me and 600,000 other ordained clergy in the United States. And I'll guarantee you they all struggle with this too.

I know I've said this before - The only thing that stops me from saying some of the terrible things that pop into my head is that Jesus won't leave me the heck alone! And it's my own darn fault too. I'm the one that said, "Yes" when my church camp director invited campers to follow Jesus. I'm the one who said, "Yes" when my pastors and professors challenged me to study the scriptures and put the highest priority on the words of Jesus. I'm the one who said, "Yes" to the people who encouraged me to use my gifts for ministry. It is entirely my fault. I gave Jesus permission to pester me. And believe me, I try so hard to ignore him sometimes. But he won't stop. Even when I tell him to stop, he keeps hammering at me. Even when I go right when he leads me to the left, or backwards when he leads me forward, he never gives up challenging me. He's like some 1980s pop-song that gets in your ear and won't go away. Like, "I'm Walking on Sunshine." "Don't Worry Be Happy." You think listening to another song will get rid of the one burning a hole in your brain, but nope. It remains there. Haunting you.

But let me make it abundantly clear: The things that I say and do on behalf of Jesus are often things that do not come naturally to me. Sometimes it's not even close. And what's more frustrating is most of the time I feel like I'm contradicting myself. For example -- I'm not sure what pulls my chain more: Someone who just can't seem to get their head wrapped around the idea that "If you make bad choices, bad stuff is going to happen to you" *or* someone who makes assumptions and snarky comments about how everyone who is experiencing bad things are in that position because they make poor choices! See how weird is that? I'm mad at the person who's making bad choices *and* the person who's judging the one making bad choices! And I know this makes me sound like I'm some angry, mixed-up person who can't figure out what hacks me off most in life. I know this sounds like I'm a grumpy old cat-person out yelling at kids to get off my lawn when they aren't even on my lawn! And the problem is, a lot of the time that's exactly what I am. And again, the person who hacks me off the most is Jesus, because he won't just let me get away with all my false

assumptions and prejudices. He won't let me bow to the altar of comfort and security and popularity. He won't let me be a jerk! And yet ... a lot of the time that's exactly what I am. Does this even make sense? Because I have a feeling that either you're thinking, "Oh my gosh Jesse's a lunatic" or, "Nope, I know exactly what he's talking about because I've been there." Am I the only one who feels like this?

I didn't think so. Even Paul, the author of the text we have in front of us this morning, illustrates how mixed up we get when we decide to follow Jesus. In the seventh chapter of his letter to the Romans, he talks about how he often winds up doing the very things he knows he shouldn't do. And he says it in a way that barely makes sense. Listen to this – This is Romans 7:15-20 -

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

See? This is what following Jesus does to you sometimes. At least Paul makes a little more sense in chapter 8 when he simply says, "All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory." I can make sense of that one even though I don't like to admit it.

But back to what Paul is saying here in the scripture we're dealing with this morning. Back to what he's saying in the whole letter. Back to what we've been dealing with for the last six weeks. I think there's three things we can take home with us as we wrap this whole thing up:

1.) Hold on to the Good News. Because that good news is *really* good: God is reconciling the world through Christ. That good news is the foundation on which our faith is built.

2.) You are who you are because of God's grace, and that grace is not to be taken lightly. It ain't about you buttercup. Yes, you made the choice to follow Jesus, but without God's grace, you're just out there making noise.

3.) For this third one, I'm going to give you some fancy words to take home with you that I learned in preacher-school.

Orthodoxy – “It's all about what you believe.”

Orthopraxis – “It's all about how you *practice* what you believe.”

Guess which one I'm an advocate for? I love it when people say, “You're not a very orthodox minister, Jesse.” Because I'm like, “I know, right?” So whenever someone tries to give you a hard time and says, “Well ... your church is kind of unorthodox,” you can say, “I know, right? We're much more into orthopraxis.”

This little jaunt through 1 Corinthians has been a puzzling little roller coaster ride for sure. Whoever said being a Christian was boring wasn't paying attention. But I guess if *calling* yourself a Christian is what it's all about, then yes. That *is* boring. But following Christ? That's where it gets fun. Here's the great paradox of following Christ: What God has put inside you impacts what comes out of you. But at the same time, what you do consistently on the outside ... even when you don't feel like it ... will feed and strengthen what God has put inside you. And as far as all that angst that we feel sometimes ... that I feel sometimes when I can't seem to get a handle on why my inside and outside doesn't match. Well, as Paul says in verse “By the grace of God, I am what I am.” We are what we are, and yet God loves us still.