

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Second Sunday after the Epiphany • January 19, 2020

Isaiah 49:1-7 • Psalm 40:1-11 • 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 • John 1:29-42

There are parts of 1 Corinthians that many of us know and love. Love is patient, love is kind. The famous image of the church as the body of Christ. The oldest recording of Jesus's words from the last supper, long before the gospel writers got there.

Today's reading, which is the greeting from the very beginning of the letter, is neither widely known nor particularly loved. It feels rather ordinary. But there's actually something pretty remarkable going on under the surface.

To see why, think about how we normally begin letters and emails. When I write an email or letter to someone, I usually start by giving my name, my title, my organization, and some possible connections we might have. "My name is Joseph. I'm the pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Wyckoff. We both know Jim Knol from Christian Health Care. I came to an event you hosted last year." Basically, I'm trying to make a case that my letter or email or whatever is worth reading. And the way I do that is by getting the reader to understand who I am. That I am someone who is worth their attention.

What does Paul do when he writes to the Corinthians? He does the exact opposite. He runs through who he is in just a few words. Paul. Apostle. We both know Sosthenes. Instead of putting a bunch of effort into explaining who he is, he starts by telling the Corinthians who they are. "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

One of those words is worth unpacking a little bit. And that's "sanctified." What does it mean for the Corinthians, and by extension us, to be sanctified? Well, when you sanctify something, you set it apart for some special use. In the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites have liturgical vessels that are sanctified. That means they are only supposed to be used in the temple. They're separate. You don't eat dinner with the same plates you use in the temple. And sometimes it's not just objects but people who are sanctified. In Leviticus, God sanctifies the Israelites.¹ Israel is set apart, they have this unique relationship with God. We don't talk about sanctification a lot. But we do talk about a closely related idea, which is holiness. Those two words are often translated interchangeably in the New Testament. When you sanctify something, you make it holy.

A couple years ago we did a wedding here and on the way out of the sanctuary this kid ran up to the font and plunged his hand in and started splashing the water around. Which, as far as I'm concerned, you know, knock yourself out. But his parent grabbed his arm and pulled him away, and admonished him, "You're not allowed to touch that." And when the kid inevitably asked why, their parent responded, "Because it's holy." We think of holiness as out of reach, other worldly, off limits.

In the 50s and 60s, that's how the altar rail functioned in many Lutheran churches. It would have been common for the pastor to preside at communion by himself and no one would be allowed to go inside the altar rail. Why? Because it's holy. It's separate. In some churches, the ushers would even get up and lock the gate so that you couldn't even get near the altar. The implication is clear. This space is holy. This space is not. Guess where you get to hang out.

And when we think of holy people, we probably think of something similar. That they are spiritually superior to us. That they have some predisposition, some knowledge, some innate ability

¹ Leviticus 19:2. "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."

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that makes them exceptional. Because of their gifts, they're up here. And we're down here. And the way you become like them, the way you become holy, is by sinning less and behaving better.

But Paul says that way of thinking about holiness is totally backwards. What sanctifies you? It's right there in the text. He tells that Corinthians that you have been sanctified "in Christ Jesus." So what makes you holy is not your behavior or your beliefs or your spirituality or anything else you might come up with. What makes you holy is your relationship with Jesus. And your relationship with Jesus is a gift. It's not something you choose for yourself or achieve on your own. It's something that came from outside of you. So holiness is not about you setting yourself apart from other people to get closer to God. Holiness is about God being set apart in the mystery of the incarnation and coming among us. Holiness is not something you acquire as you get closer to God. Holiness is something God gives away.

You can see why Paul wants the Corinthians to begin by understanding this. Because if you start with a skewed view of holiness, you'll end up with a totally backwards view of what the church is all about. Think of how we usually describe church. We say what? It's not a building, it's a community! Which is kind of true. But according to Paul, that's not good enough. It's not just a community. Bridge clubs are communities. Political parties are communities. Book clubs are communities. And those are all fine and good. It's great when people can come together around common interests. But the difference is that the church is a group of people who gather together because we have been invited by God. We don't gather together because we have common interests or common goals or common agendas. God knows we often don't. We gather together because we believe that God has invited us into relationship.

But it's very easy for churches to forget that. And when we forget that God, not people, makes the church holy, there are constant problems. For the church in Corinth, the big problem was spiritual narcissism. There were people who believed that their gifts were more important than other people's. That their financial gifts, their spiritual talents, their theological credentials were more important than other people's. These are the people who are really important in the church, and these are the people who are less important. We go out of our way to serve the people we believe have the best gifts, and we ignore the people we think don't contribute anything to our common life. The Corinthians acted as if they were the ones who sanctified the church.

For us, the problem is less spiritual narcissism than congregational consumerism. We view other people as a means to our own ends. We prioritize our own experience of the church that we want to have there for us when we need it and if someone doesn't fit into that, we cut them down to size. People often tell me that they find the church to be judgmental, hypocritical, and concerned primarily with petty issues that no one outside the church cares about. They don't know the half of it. We often treat our communion vessels with more respect and care than we treat one another with.

Back when he was a parish pastor, Gordon Lathrop, who is a liturgical theologian, we read one of his books together a couple of years ago, would process in on Sundays and reverence the altar. That's typical. But then he would do something surprising. He would turn around and reverence the congregation. A way of acknowledging not just that the sacrament is holy. But that the people are holy, too. And they're holy not because they're faithful or talented or pious or show up most weeks. But because they are sanctified in Christ Jesus. They're holy people not because of what they do, but because God invited them.

This is one reason why we if you read through our bulletins, our website, our print materials, we don't use the language of guests and visitors. We have people who are new, but we don't have people who are guests or visitors. And that's because we've been invited by God. Advent isn't my church. And it isn't your church. It's God's church.

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So as soon as you show up here, you are a part of this community just like everyone else. Whether you worship every week or twice a year. Whether you've been here for forty years or forty minutes. Whether you give fifty thousand dollars or fifty cents. Whether you've been Lutheran through and through your whole life or you might technically still be Episcopalian but you aren't sure. Whether you come to this church for worship, for AA, for the YMCA program, with our community partners. If you come into this church because you need to sit in the sanctuary and get your head clear. If you come into this church because you need to talk to Pat and me about the Love Fund. If you come into this church, and you really don't even know what you were looking for. Everyone gets the same hospitality. Everyone gets the same respect. Everyone gets the same welcome. And they get it not because of what they have to offer but because of the one who invited them.

So take a some advice from Paul. Don't focus on who you are. Focus on who they are. Remember who invited them. Remember that they are holy. Remember that they are sanctified in Christ Jesus. And who knows? You just might remember who invited you, too.

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