

June 11, 2017

TEXT: 2 Corinthians 13:5–13

TITLE: Putting Things in Order

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

How many times have you written a short note to someone and found that you ran out of space to say everything you wished, so you end up writing smaller and smaller to squeeze your thoughts onto the paper? It may be a thank you note or a birthday card—you tack on a brief comment, then remember something else you wished to say, and before long you are writing on the back or squeezing words on the bottom. It happens to me a lot, and based on today's reading it appears like it also happened to the apostle Paul. He's writing the church in Corinth, using long sentences until the last paragraph, when suddenly his phrases get shorter; he gives a quick series of imperatives—"Put things in order. Listen to my appeal. Agree with one another. Live in peace"—followed by a wonderful benediction about Christ's grace, God's love, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Here's the same question, but in a slightly different form: How many times have you run out of space in a note to someone with whom you have a disagreement? It is one thing to fill up the remaining space on a card that's a love letter; it's another thing to know how to close out a letter to someone with whom you're at odds or have argued with. Any final words need to be honest about what's been said earlier in the letter while ideally lifting up a sense of hope that things can be mended and will be better in the future.

Church conflict wasn't invented in modern times. The Corinthian church had a lot of issues, including a big one about pastoral leadership. Paul was the mother and father of the Corinthian church. He'd birthed it, founded it, and yet now some other preachers were causing discord within this young family of faith. The last three chapters of this book involve Paul trying to get the church to settle down and focus again on the things he'd taught them. That theme is still present in the last verses of the letter, like in vs. 10 when Paul said, *I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.* "May not be severe in using my authority"—it almost sounds like when you were fighting with your sibling in the back seat of the station wagon and whoever was driving said "Don't make me stop this car!"

Church conflict exists—just as conflict in general exists. Divisions, partisanship, distrust, fear of the other seem to be dominant phrases in today's world. We'll consider what we can do about those things in a moment, but it's helpful to direct our attention to the list of imperatives Paul squeezed in at the end of his letter to the Corinthians—especially the very first one: *Put things in order.*

That is advice that likely every one of us could apply to some aspect of our life right now. The renovation work here at the church took a serious turn this past week when movers came and emptied out many of the offices up on the second floor. To get ready for them, a lot of housecleaning has been going on at ELPC. Let's just say that having a

bunch of storage space in a big church building makes all of us borderline hoarders. Hey, why clean out shelves full of old arts and crafts supplies when you can always squeeze in some more glitter, glue and stickers, just in case you need it later? True story: Why throw out poster boards from displays that happened 20 years ago or three bags of palm branches from a Palm Sunday held years ago, when all that stuff can be tossed on top of file cabinets and forgotten? Now don't laugh at our closets unless you want me to mention your closets, guest rooms and basements at home!

Putting things in order requires setting priorities: What do I really need to keep, what can I de-clutter from my shelves or from my life? Setting priorities requires self-examination—asking the hard questions: What is important in my life, really important? Paul said to the Corinthians, *Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Don't you realize that Jesus Christ is in you?* Jesus Christ is a guest in your house, in your very being. Examining ourselves with that in mind raises the question about whether what we are saying or doing is at odds with this close presence of Christ in our life. And remember, this is self-examination. It is not complaining about the clutter and chaos caused by someone else—a spouse or family member who is messing up your life, leaving emotional baggage stacked in your personal storage spaces. This is when Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount grab our attention—the ones asking *Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own?* (That's Matthew 7 if you want to re-read those words later.)

Putting things in order means self-examination, setting priorities, re-committing ourselves to that which is good and true and faithful, since we are in Christ and Christ is in us. But remember, Paul is writing to a group of people here. He's not limiting his words to personal therapy sessions. He wants the Corinthian church to put things in order—to heal their relationships. I can well imagine Paul writing those same instructions to us as Americans today, given our national divides.

Jean Vanier runs a series of communities around the world where people with intellectual disabilities, people who are differently abled, live together. Vanier is often asked how he is able to keep the peace in these challenging, diverse communities. Like Paul, he offers simple, succinct words of advice—words it would do us all well to remember. He says we should respect every individual human being. We should create space for them to grow and become mature. We must stay in dialogue, constantly adapting our expectations about how to live together. And a good starting point is to always direct your attention to those who suffer the most. Respect—dialogue—compassion: those are pretty good priorities for how to put things in order in all our relationships.

But how do we do that in a world in which the daily news is full of stories of acts of terrorism and violence? Bombs outside pop concerts. Stabbings in streets and on subways. A one year anniversary of the Pulse attack upon innocent LGBT young adults in a dance hall. Putting things in order as it relates to peacemaking in a violent world requires honest self-examination while holding onto Christian values. Too often some think that the answer is more guns, more weapons, as if that alone will stop random

acts of violence. We drop bunker busting bombs, but recent terrorism attacks have involved driving trucks into crowds of tourists. It is a lie to believe that high-tech drones and missiles can stop low-tech violent acts using trucks, knives and cyber-attacks. And it's time to stop allowing the U.S. military complex from profiting from this lie.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wrote these wise words: *The truth is that we shall only be safe when others are not frightened of us, when others do not feel silenced, despised or suffocated by us.*¹ The path to global peace is not paved with military might or promoted by nationalistic, "me first" rhetoric. This is also true for families—power imbalances and abuse will not lead to mutual, covenantal love. It is also true for churches—doctrines of judgment and schism can never lead to honest confessions of sin and commitments to be the welcoming body of Christ across lines of race, class, gender and sexual identity.

Hear this good news: There is reason to believe we can live in peace with one another. And it is found in the final words Paul scrawled at the end of his letter. Normally Paul writes a short benediction at the end of his letters. Galatians ends: *May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters.* Same thing at the end of I Corinthians: *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.* But sometimes you need to say something more. Sometimes you need to name the deep truths in life, the broad foundation upon which we stand and find our courage. So at the end of Second Corinthians Paul describes the fullness of God's being as actively seeking to give us peace. Paul provides an early description of the doctrine of the Trinity—there is one God in three persons, a God who exists in relationships of mutuality and love, just as we are to exist in relationships of mutuality and love.

Paul squeezes all that in at the end of his letter: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.* Every one of the verbs in that benediction is like a two-way street. The grace of Christ comes to us, forgiving us, and evoking from us fruits of the spirit. The love of God comes to us, blessing us and leading us to respond with love and praise. And the communion of the Holy Spirit is by definition a mutual connection between us and the Lord—a breath of life, a creative force, a spirit of shared values and faith uniting us with people here and around the world. This triune benediction is both the ideal and the norm—grace, love, communion. That's how we put things in order. That's how we live in peace.

There's more I'd like to say but I'm running out of room on this page. Examine yourselves honestly. Be the church here and the body of Christ out there. Take time to put things in order. Live in peace. You're not alone. Ever. And as we say almost every Sunday, Paul and I say once more in conclusion: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit—thank God—is with all of us.*

AMEN

¹ Rowan Williams, quoted in *The Christian Century*, May 3, 2003, p. 7.