

God's Partner

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

1 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! 3 We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, 7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. 11 We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. 12 There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. 13 In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Are you one of those persons who think you are not called to ministry? Have you forgotten that as a member of the church, and therefore God's partner, you have work to do regardless of your age, your gender, your work status, your socio-economic situation, or whatever your challenge? Maybe you think your lack of theological education disqualifies you from accepting your call to partnership in God's work.

Paul wrote three letters to the Christians at Corinth, his first and "severe letter," did not solve the problems of a community that was divided, distracted, and self-preoccupied, reconciled with neither God nor one another. Now he reminds them the radical new way of life offered in the gospel of Christ, demands total allegiance, even if the cost of that allegiance is the kind of suffering he himself has willingly endured: "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments" (vv. 4-5).

Our scripture is Paul's third letter and climactic appeal to the Corinthian church. That message is concentrated in a pithy summary that immediately precedes our passage: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (5:21). Our reading opens with the appeal that follows from this message: God's ambassadors, having delivered their communiqué, now make their entreaty on behalf of their sovereign. Following upon

Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, the apostles are bringing that message of grace to the Corinthians by means of a direct appeal—like the appeal brought by an envoy on behalf of his king—not to receive it "in vain." In other words, Paul is begging them not to respond in such a way that God's grace in Christ will have no meaningful effect on them.

Paul introduces his main point by citing Isaiah 49:8 in the exact language of the Septuagint, which begins, "At a favorable time." This is part of one of the Servant passages in Second Isaiah. What lies before the Corinthians is more than just a decision to recognize Paul as their founding father; it is a decision to recognize and welcome the grace that exists in their ministry of reconciliation.

Paul goes on to proclaim, "See, now is the favorable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (6:2b). God's *kairos* or favorable time is now—in the atoning death of Jesus and in the apostolic proclamation of it. And, we may surely add, in our sharing of the same gospel today.

As partners of God, we share the same message as Paul: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (5:17, RSV). The church lives in the knowledge of this good news, and whenever the gospel is shared and heard, that is the *kairos*, the favorable time, the now of God's salvation, foretold by the prophets and proclaimed by the apostles. The grace of God in Christ Jesus may light up our own worldly reality at any point in "chronological" time.

For Paul, as God's emissary, messenger and partner, having delivered the message and made his appeal, he then presents his credentials. In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul is defending his apostolic vocation and message from those who have called them into question. We squirm because, in an era when fundamentalist extremism threatens the integrity of all faith traditions, we have lost our ability to distinguish between "passion" and "fanaticism." What sort of Christians will willingly, even gladly, endure beatings and imprisonments for the sake of their faith? Extremists. Fanatics. People who fly planes into buildings or bomb abortion clinics. We have become frightened of

passionate faith, faith that commands total loyalty and obedience. Rather, we embrace a gospel of reason and moderation.

In order to grasp his point, it is not necessary to delve into never-ending speculation about just who Paul's opponents were or what they were teaching, for the issue here concerns Paul's own apostolic credentials. He opens (vv. 3-4a) by saying that the apostles "commend" or "recommend" themselves, and proceeds to unroll a catalog of specifics. The first (vv. 4b-5) stresses endurance in the face of hardships; the second (vv. 6-7a) lists eight qualities or gifts of apostolic ministry; the third (vv. 7b-8a) is a general list. The fourth and final group (vv. 8b-10), composed of seven pairs of contrasting terms, underscores the radical difference between our lives before Christ and our new lives in partnership with Christ: from the false perspective of this world, the apostles appear as impostors and nobodies who are dying, punished, sorrowful, poor, and possess nothing; but the light of the gospel reveals them in fact to be truthful and well-known, ones who are living, rejoicing, bestowing riches, and possessing everything.

Paul is arguing that the nature of their ministry is one that looks weak because of their experiences of suffering, in contrast to those "superapostles" whose ministry looks strong and authoritative because of their outward appearance and works of power. But Paul lists his sufferings as a résumé of sorts, one that proves one's ministry's real power because it reverses the traditional categories of power and weakness according to the model of Christ, whose weakness by suffering and dying on the cross was ultimately revelatory of God's power to overcome death.

Paul asserts his and his coworkers' legitimacy as ministers of Christ while, at the same time, he shows their care for the community by offering their affection and talking to them as beloved children. He mingles affection and careful argumentation about the nature of their ministry in a complex attempt to accept the grace embodied in their ministry. **Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll**

In essence, Paul is writing his own letter of recommendation to a church he planted, loves, and feels betrayed by. Paul is aware that he is coming on strong: "I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters" (10:9). However, he rants, he raves, he boasts, he dramatizes himself. This is his effort to convince the Corinthians to accept his authority and mission among them. By realizing that his labor on their behalf has been faultless; that as a servant of God he has been in every way commendable; that no matter what has befallen him—and the list of disasters is long—he has more than earned their trust. He has taken an overwhelming serial adversity and prayed that it would become "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech" (vv. 6-7). Whatever may be his fear of appearing foolish, of violating decorum and going "too far," he opens his heart wide. In fact, nothing else in the rest of his correspondence approaches this level of self-disclosure. Paul gives himself to his vocation, the exuberance with which he not only speaks frankly, but in effect gives himself away! **Peter S. Hawkins**

When we share God's good news, we should pray like Paul's appeal directly and intimately to the Corinthians—addressing them by name and calling them his "children"—pleading with them to open their hearts to the gospel and be reconciled to God. **Garrett Green**

Let me tell you about two women I know. One, in partnership with God, has a ministry to people who are confined to their homes or nursing homes. Even during this pandemic, she has reached out by telephone, and dropped off reading materials to let them know they are being thought of, prayed for and loved by her and even more importantly, by God. Another lady I know, has used the pandemic to become a super tipper. I use to question why she and others insisted on eating out during the height of the pandemic when others were avoiding such places; but she has been a blessing to others. Rather than giving a 15% tip at restaurants, she gives more generously. Recently she learned that her generosity has been recognized as a blessing directly from God to help a family that was in great need. In my own case, I was sure I was

disqualified because of past lifestyle and age; but God removed all the barriers, and you have allowed me be God's partner and do ministry with Unity Christian Church for these eleven years. These are not perfect women, but persons who, in partnership with God, do what they are empowered to do.

Paul directly urges the Corinthians to view their ministry properly, embodying the work, if not the very being, of Christ, and to act appropriately in response to this grace they have received. Paul's pastoral message to the self-preoccupied Corinthian congregation and to us is, in effect, "Get over yourselves!" In Christ we are a new creation, a new community: the former things, including competitive social hierarchies, have passed away. As God's partners, our job is not so much in applying balm to wounds as it is in proclaiming the good news that each person has been declared infinitely precious in God's eyes; that a life's value and worth grow not from the status attained through wealth or position in the community but from being one for whom our Redeemer died upon the cross; and that true joy grows not from the absence of hardship but from knowing God's grace even within that hardship. Christian community is not formed or maintained through holding tastes and interests in common, and authority within Christian community is not to be confused with popularity. In their founding essay for The Ekklesia Project, Stanley Hauerwas and Michael Budde wrote: "Thomas Aquinas claimed that our ultimate destiny is to be made friends with God—a view that obviously challenges the superficial understanding of friendship that assumes friends 'like' one another. Charity, according to Aquinas, is that agent that makes such friendship possible. To be so formed does not mean that we all share a common 'experience,' but—more important—that we share common judgments. Charity, after all, is the deepest form of knowledge."

Paul seeks to make of the Corinthian church a community defined by mutual charity rather than by competition for spiritual "knowledge," and he demonstrates a model of authority based not upon superior personal wisdom, but rather upon willingness to surrender comfort, safety, and personal ego (no small challenge for

Paul!) in service to the gospel. Paul, however imperfectly, seeks to embody "servant leadership." Servant leadership does not claim personal power, but rather seeks to give itself away in Christian love for others. It does not employ threats or manipulation, but only the proper tools of charity: "patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. (v. 6)" As God's partners, how do we help to build a genuine Christian community, fully reconciled with God and with one another? By loving that community unconditionally ("There is no restriction in our affections") with a love that will risk speaking the unpopular truth that the community needs to hear ("We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians," vv. 11-12).

If Aquinas is correct in saying that it is our destiny to be made friends with God, being God's partners, we must practice being friends to others who also seek to be made friends with God. For Christians there can be no such friendships unless we are rooted in charity. **John T. Mcfadden**

[David L. Bartlett (2013). Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Westminster John Knox Press. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]