

Why does Allison Creek Presbyterian Church exist? Is it important to be a part of a church? Why gather on a Sunday morning and offer up a worship service? Is this important? Is it?

Being part of a church can be a wonderful experience. The best friends I have including my lifelong partner I met in church. I know many of you feel the same way. Many of you have your closest and dearest friends here in the church. Many of you are yearning for close relationships with people in the church. Many of you have had some of your best experiences in life while in the church.

My children have been so blessed to be part of the church. They don't know anything different. Churches can be wonderful, spirit filled places. Here we celebrate good events like marriage and new births with one another. Here we celebrate spiritual awakenings with one another. Here we grieve sad events like the deaths of loved ones with one another. Here we build deep and long lasting relationships.

But churches can also be places that can cause one a lot of stress and aggravation. If you ever want to see an example of a church that gets exposed as a place where people are involved in petty bickering with one another, where the rich people are snobbish to the poor, where the people gossip about one another behind one another's back, where the people choose up sides against one another, then I know a church that is just like that. This church had some letters written to it and we get to read some of these letters.

The church that exhibits all of that sinful behavior is none other than the church that Paul writes to in the letters we call 1st and 2nd Corinthians. We are going to spend 8 weeks exploring these letters. We are going to spend 8 weeks exploring these letters because I think they have something to teach any of us who think that struggles in the church are something that we created in the 21st century. These letters have something to teach any of us who have ever been disappointed by something in the church.

My sister Lib tells of the time she was disappointed by the church. When she was a little child, the minister asked the children to bring their favorite Bible verse and he would preach a sermon on it. I guess that minister in the early 1960s thought these children would bring simple verses like “Jesus is love” or something. Well, my sister Lib, who would eventually be a glass ceiling breaker for women in the ministry, brought Galatians 3:28 to the pastor.

Galatians 3:28 reads “there is neither Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Sounds like a great text for a southern Presbyterian preacher to be inspired to be a prophetic voice during the rise of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights era. Young Lib brought that verse looking for some affirmation that she was as special to God as the little boys around her. Well, that preacher never did preach a sermon on that Scripture. The church disappoints.

I know a woman and a man whose one and only son died and they went to the funeral preached by their local preacher. This preacher was special to them. The mother had been on the committee that called him to that church. When it came time for the funeral service, the minister preached a sermon about how disappointed the parents of the deceased must be because their son disappointed them by the way he turned out. That couple never attended that church again and never spoke to that minister again. The church disappoints.

Martin Luther King called Sunday morning the most segregated hour in America. The Session of this church, Allison Creek, voted in 1954 to be a segregated church. The church disappoints.

If we are honest with one another, which is sometimes hard to be in the church, then we each have stories of how the church disappointed you. Maybe you felt judgment toward you; maybe you went to the church for advice and received something less than you needed. Maybe you went to a person whom you thought you could trust and they abused you physically or emotionally. Recently the Presbyterian Church has had to admit that some of our missionaries carried out physical and sexual abuse on young children.

It is clear that Paul is very disappointed in this church that he writes to in Corinth. Paul had become a Christian and went to Corinth to share with them the good news of God's love through Christ and a church was formed. Corinth was a cosmopolitan town. Had lots of diversity including lots of religious diversity. It was a town known as "sin city" because of all of the carousing that went on there.

Paul felt led to start a church there. But something went wrong. This church turns on one another and Paul writes them several letters to try to remind them of why they exist. One of those letters has been lost to us but two of those letters are part of our Bible. What we call the biblical canon. These letters are what we have labeled the First letter to the Corinthians and the Second letter to the Corinthians. And we get to read their mail.

And as we read this mail that Paul writes to this church, we get to see the things that they don't want the outside world to know. Their dirty little secrets are exposed. It is like all those Wikileaks that are exposing how governments really interact with one another that they don't want the rest of us to know about.

So how does Paul begin his letter to this church that he has heard is doing all of these terrible things? Let us read the opening verses. But I invite all of us to place ourselves into the place of the Corinthian church. Imagine that Paul knows some of our dirty laundry. Here is what he says.

Read I Corinthians 1: 1-9 from The Message

Did you hear what Paul said? Paul said being part of the church is being part of an adventure. Being part of the church is being in a place where God never gives up.

Why does ACPC exist? Well, if we allow this letter to be our guide, then we exist in order to be part of an adventure. An adventure of living in the midst of God's grace. An adventure where the journey is the destination. An adventure where you do not know what is going to happen next. But it is an adventure with others who have been chosen by God to go on that journey with you.

And on this journey we do not go alone. Paul says to never forget that God does not give up on the church.

Paul says you have it all. All of God's gifts are right in front of you. Wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the finale whenever that is.

Churches can be wonderful places. And churches can be places that really disappoint. But even when churches disappoint, God does not give up on us.

Reinhold Niebuhr put it best: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. ... Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."

It is sooo cool to be a part of a church. It is an awesome experience. It is a thrill ride like nothing else. God is alive here on this adventure. AMEN.

-Brooks, "Tree of Failure," NY Times, Jan 14, 2011 and found at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/14/opinion/14brooks.html?_r=1

-Text: I Cor. 1: 1-9

-Given: January 16, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)

Prayers of the people:

Mighty God of wind and flame, of Israel and Judah of the past and of the church today, we pause to come before you to give you thanks. We know that we have disappointed you at times. We have been petty and turned inward. We have sought to protect turf rather than share your love to others outside ourselves. Like little children, we have had to be called down for bad behavior. But you call us to be a light to the nations. You challenge us to share your good news to a global world that yearns for what you have to share. You do not give up on us even when we give up on you.

You have inspired prophets throughout the ages who have reminded us of the ways we are called to serve you. We lift up prophets like Martin Luther King and his concern for the poor and those who suffered under the sins of segregation. Give us the courage to stand with those who are considered the least in our society because you love all people regardless of their economic status or color of their skin.

On this weekend, we pray for our new governor and legislators. Gov. Nikki Haley's presence gives all of us hope that past prejudices like sexism and racism can be overcome and anyone can be given opportunities. Guide her and all of our elected officials to make good and wise decisions.