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Sermon: January 14, 2024

When I agreed to lead services today I did it without checking the readings first. I'll be completely honest and say that if I had read the Corinthians lesson I am not sure I would have agreed, the reasons why I will talk about in a moment. It was a good thing though. It has challenged me to build deeper meaning and understanding of the text.

When I hear any readings discussing the idea of "sexual immorality" I immediately start to chafe and become uncomfortable with the potential implications. Especially when put so blatantly as Paul did. "The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body...Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 16 Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her?" In this reading it's only women who are directly referenced as being the ones tempting men and tainting them with their immorality.

We have all seen the impact of conservative interpretations of teachings like this being used to control women and their bodies. We live in a world that has put the burden of modesty and morality on women. To make sure we never act in a way that might tempt a man to even consider sin. It is true, now more than ever, with post Roe legislation being passed across the country, dress codes in schools that sexualize the bodies of children, and where trans girls and women are demonized simply for existing.

I would hazard a guess that many of the people in this room believe in the bodily autonomy of all people, and like me, might also struggle with readings from 1 Corinthians today. I might even challenge why readings like these are still a regular part of our lectionary, but the reality is that they are. If we are going to read this text every couple of years in our congregations we must try to build an understanding of how it might still be relevant in our lives. After I was able to get myself off my internal soapbox I attempted to do just that.

At first I wanted to get more context so I read the section immediately before it, and let me tell you what, that did not help. Verse 9 says, "The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes,[a] men who engage in illicit sex,[b] 10 thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God." Two thumbs up for including men in that verse, but we truly do not have the time to break down the damage that has been done with its different interpretations and translations over the years.

So I turned my attention toward Paul. Perhaps if I could understand him and where he was coming from instead I could better understand the text. This was a much more successful study. The Episcopal Church states that “Paul’s writings have been foundational for Christian theology of salvation, the Christ, the church, the Spirit, and the end times.” Which I had come to understand through my research. Paul, much more than Jesus ever did, sets forth what the early church should look like. That is no different when he was writing to the Corinthians.

I found an article titled “Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a community in the middle of a culture war: The church at Corinth had many problems. Some simple kindness would have helped”. This article really helped me to consider the text this week within the context of the entire chapter and how it relates to the other things Paul was saying in his letter. In it the author writes, “This is where we start to build up a more detailed picture of the community, and it is not a pretty sight. The church at Corinth was a mess. I count 15 distinguishable problems that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians...When we take a step back from all the ins and outs of the issues in the letter, we can see that Paul is urging something simple on the Corinthians. A great deal of what he says can be summed up in the phrase ‘appropriate relating.’...[he] describes at length the principal Christian way of relating, which is with love.”

I’ll be honest and say that Chapter 6 Paul we have read today seems to be pushing love for everyone much less than Chapter 13’s “Love is patient, love is kind.” Paul. But after all of that I was seeing the very human Paul and considering what he was trying to accomplish. I began to see some parallels between him and Luther as well, a figure I understand much better, helping me to understand Paul better. Both of them were frustrated with the church they were seeing and were attempting to put forth what they believed the church should be working to become, and the changes that were necessary to achieve that goal. At times we also see Paul’s frustration boiling over in his writings. I could see lessons like these in that light. Where Paul was looking at Corinth exasperated with them just asking them to look around them and attempt to be better people. Wasn’t I also just feeling my frustration rising in reaction to his writings much in the same way he was with the Corinthians?

I have never been a biblical literalist, but with lessons like the one this morning I have heard that literal interpretation and seen its impact so often that I couldn’t see past it. I needed to put in some work to be able to put it within the larger context of Paul’s teachings and the chapter. I think that a lot of what Paul was trying to accomplish with this letter to the Corinthians is still very relatable in this day and age. Churches are

extremely divided, there are many opinions and ideas attempting to coexist in one space, and many of us are considering what the future of Christianity should look like.

My challenge to you all would be this, what would you want to say if you were to write a letter similar to Paul's. What would you say are the changes most needed for the Church to grow and to progress? Perhaps even considering where we see the church failing to live up to the foundational principle of loving your neighbor. It is very fitting right now as it's a time of change and evolution and growth both here at St. Thomas's and in the wider church. I look forward to having conversations with all of you about those ideas and how we can work together to make them a reality.

Amen.