

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, please sit.

My name is Brad Brunfelt, and I am very excited to be able to speak to you today.

I am currently attending Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque Iowa, and as part of my program St. Paul's has been kind enough to let me preach today.

When my family came to this church 15 years ago, we came not knowing what kind of place we would encounter, and neither of us was Episcopalian. This was not our tribe. Becky was Catholic, and I was Lutheran. I would imagine that some of you today did not grow up in the Episcopal faith, some of you have been here since you were born. Some came from other faiths looking or not having any church background. Together, here in this moment, we are comprised of dozens of stories and faith journeys.

That is what Paul faced in today's letter to the Corinthians. Paul was a devout Jew, and prior to God's message breaking into the Roman empire, people didn't really cross the tribe line. Your society was where you found your strength and your meaning. For Jewish people in the Greek world, being Jewish was to practice Jewish ritual rites and follow Jewish Law.

Paul, for his part, had persecuted Christians until his conversion. Up until this time in history, there were not yet efforts that had been made to reach out

beyond the confines of Jewish society. Jesus was preached by the apostles as a fulfillment of Jewish scripture, for Jewish people, in the Jewish Synagogues.

For them, it would have been mind-blowing to consider letting Greeks into the church. Greeks did different things than they did. They didn't keep dietary laws. They didn't observe a day of rest of the Sabbath.

Greek society was ever present in Corinth. It was an incredibly important city. It sits on a small peninsula. On the end of that peninsula are some of the most dangerous waters of the entire Mediterranean. Corinth, up the shore from those dangerous waters allowed smaller ships to safely come to shore, and be dragged several miles to the other side like a portage!. Larger ships unloaded their wares and people carted them across the divide and loaded them onto other ships.

Its geographical importance and strategic location eventually made it a provincial capital, and it was full of Greeks, Jews, and Africans of every kind. It was also known for its Las Vegas type lifestyle. To be called a Corinthian was tantamount to be called out for drinking too much. Every kind of vice known to humans was present in Corinth.

But it was here that Paul had started a ministry, spending 18 months establishing a church of Christ in Corinth in a few houses. It is here that the real story takes place.

While missionaries are rightly credited for starting churches like Paul, the real missionary work was done by regular people; traders; sailors; and people at markets getting food. They spread the gospel so fast, that it took only 7-800 years for Christianity to sweep across the known world in Europe, even reaching so far as China. Paul had found Greeks worshipping as Christians. This created a central challenge. Who was in and who was out? How do we even define what we are?

After Paul left Corinth for Ephesus to establish the community there, people began to struggle. Without Paul present, this very diverse community had struggled to understand their newly formed Christian identity. Just because all were accepted didn't mean it was going to be easy to adjust. Some of the misbehavior was pretty severe.

But Paul, rather than just condemning the Corinthians, chooses love. He first thanks them for all they have accomplished so far. He then recognizes their strengths and their love for God.

Paul's impulse toward gratitude models for us what makes us Christians – that we show our love to others by being authentic to our true selves. This is likely what set Christians apart in Paul's time. It was the love of Christ and the freedom it offered that drove the masses of people to Christianity throughout Europe. And it is still what sets us apart now.

Martin Luther spoke of this in his sermon "Two Kinds of righteousness". In it, Luther says that Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection frees us from worrying about our own salvation, because Christ has justified all humanity with God. Released from this concern, we are free to love and busy ourselves instead with reaching out to serve those in need.

And what need there is. In our society, we can get overwhelmed and even exhausted by trying to understand all those needs. But we don't need to. That's God's job. Instead, understanding what Christ has done for us compels us to look around at the light of Christ in our daily life. To observe those around us, and to observe our baptismal vow – to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

If that is the mission, we have work to do. People in this community and in every community are suffering from stress, division, anger, isolation, mental illness, addiction, and loneliness. There are people who need us to reach out and

find them. Having heard the message of judgement from society, they operate thinking they are unworthy of grace. We can be the light for them.

But as my professor Winston Persaud so beautifully stated – Even as we try to do good, we sin. We cannot escape its presence in our lives. As imperfect humans, we seek to do what is right, and we so often miss the mark. The more we try to do good, the more we must put ourselves at the foot of the cross and ask for God's help and forgiveness, not out of guilt, but out of love. And we must seek to forgive not only others, but ourselves.

But God does not call the perfect people, because there are none. God calls the weak. God calls the sinner. Jesus' call to mission of the woman at the well – someone who had been divorced several times and was with another man – all marks of imperfection in her world. Paul calls on the people of Corinth – sinners of every kind – to show God's love to the world. These are real people. They are us.

It is we, the truck drivers, the lawyers, the health care workers, the psychologist, doctors, janitors, bankers, teachers and police who spread the good news of Christ in this world through our love, our patience, and our kindness.

These are the spiritual gifts we are given; To be the light of Christ in a world that so desperately needs it.

Amen