

1 Co 4:1-5
27 February 2011

“Unworthy”

This past Wednesday, we finished our Keukabiblia Bible study of 1 Corinthians. After Lent is over, we'll start again with 2 Corinthians. As we've gone through the letter, we've noticed a number of themes, some of which are recurring ones.

One of these recurring themes, which I mentioned last month, is the way many of the Corinthian Christians are lining up behind various leaders in the church. The apostle Paul is **one** of those leaders, and he's quite vocal in discouraging the practice. He doesn't want to support the way people are splitting up into competing camps.

There are also those in the church who aren't satisfied with simply not aligning themselves with Paul. That's not enough. Rather, they take an active, public opposition to him. His opponents target him for his teachings, and some even make their attacks **personal**. In a culture that puts a high premium on eloquence, his admittedly poor speaking ability does little to impress these folks. He no doubt has other quirks that rub them the wrong way.

(Of course today, we've risen above all of that! If we can see fit to ignore certain flaws among those who **agree** with us, we're big enough—we're evolved enough—to ignore the exact same flaws among those who **disagree** with us!)

This competition and contentiousness are in the background of today's reading in chapter 4.

I'll make a confession that I'm sure none of you can relate to. When I was in junior high and high school, I was not one of the popular kids in my class. I didn't identify with any of the cliques. I wasn't an athlete; I wasn't a member of the band. I wasn't even a nerd. (They had their group, too.) I was so unworthy! I say that, only half-jokingly. Sometimes, I actually did **feel** unworthy. But I suppose that's something common to the human experience.

It would be easy to read Paul's words and conclude that he's protesting a bit too much. In verse 1, he refers to “us.” He could be speaking about all of the apostles, but in verse 6, he says, “I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit.” We're introduced to Apollos in Acts 18, where he's described as “an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures” (v. 24). Compared with such an orator, maybe Paul **himself** is feeling a bit unworthy. That seems to be the message some in Corinth are sending.

I have yet to see the movie, but *The King's Speech*, starring Colin Firth, is about a leader with a speech impediment. More broadly, it touches on issues of **any** flaws or unworthy qualities that we may possess. It has received plenty of Oscar nominations, so we'll see what happens tonight!

It's very important, however, that we step back and deepen and widen our scope. What's really at issue is not some perceived inadequacy of Paul's. It's not about the petty squabbles among the various factions in the Corinthian church. The apostle is wise to not get sucked into that.

Paul needs to provide a firmer footing for dealing with their issues. He reframes the matter this way: “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries” (v. 1). **That** is what's most important. Paul wants to establish where

they are before, and in relationship to, God. He wants to establish a **theological** footing, in place of what can spin off into political, economic, even dietary preferences. They even fight about food. (Not that all those things are unrelated!)

As servants—and especially as stewards, because stewards have more responsibility—it's imperative “that they be found trustworthy” (v. 2). Paul knows that he and his fellow apostles will be held accountable. It may sound arrogant or defiant when he says in verse 3, that “with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself.”

Paul isn't advocating overthrow of the court system! He isn't encouraging anarchy! In fact, if the situation wasn't so out of hand in the church, he wouldn't need to use this rather extreme language.

He continues in verse 4, “I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.” Sometimes we hear people say, “History will vindicate me.” We also frequently hear—or say ourselves—as Paul has suggested, “My conscience is clear.” My conscience doesn't bother me.

That's all well and good, but it isn't enough. The human conscience isn't immune to the effects of sin. It's easier than we would like to think for our conscience to become numb or confused, especially if we're used to ignoring it! And as for the judgment of history, who can say what those in years and centuries to come will even **know** about us?

“Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time,” Paul says, “before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God” (v. 5). The apostle brings in another of those recurring themes, the second advent of Christ—which is expected very soon. The Lord is the one who understands what is hidden, what is in the heart. The Lord is the one who's **qualified** to make these judgments, these decisions.

Paul doesn't take the time to remind his friends in Corinth about this merely for the sake of discussion. He really is concerned about the way they've been treating each other. That's completely aside from any “hate mail” that he may have received. In rejecting the way certain people have been pronouncing others unworthy, Paul knows he's walking a fine line. As he says later in the chapter, “I am not writing this to make you ashamed” (v. 14).

Still, he isn't naïve. He's well aware that, much of the time, his pleas fall on deaf ears.

Earlier, I suggested that it might be said that Paul protests too much. Is he too concerned with defending himself? Australian minister Bill Loader says no, and I agree. He says that Paul “doesn't seem to need to fight for himself and his status. Where he defends it, as in Galatians, it is clearly in the interests of others and the gospel, not just himself. He has the strength and security to address the issues.”¹

Paul refuses to be held hostage to the wrong-headed opinions of others. That's how he can make the apparently condescending statements in verse 3. He wouldn't be doing his critics any favors by **not** challenging their unfair descriptions of him, or others, as “unworthy.”

¹ wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpEpiphany8.htm

A little over a week ago, I saw on the news a story about some dwarves who live in southern Ecuador. They have what is called Laron syndrome, a rare form of dwarfism. It's a genetic mutation that inhibits their growth, but it also keeps diabetes and cancer from growing. These people are resistant to those diseases. The condition has been found in mice, but with this living human population, scientists are hopeful that they can use the gene responsible for Laron dwarfism and devise a medicine to combat cancer. One might call it turning cancer cells into dwarves!

There are those who would put dwarves in the category of “unworthy” or “deficient.” I would suggest that people like the Laron dwarves force us to re-examine our definitions.

In his book, *On the Threshold of Transformation*, Richard Rohr (who I've mentioned in the past), mentions another group that many, including many in the church, consider to be unworthy. I'm speaking of people who are gay.

He says, “Each of us needs to accept and combine the masculine and feminine aspects of our personality as we grow older, just as we have the capacity to love both genders in very healthy and life-giving ways. Even if Christians would insist that homosexual persons are of a ‘lower’ order, then St. Paul has a binding order for them: ‘The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect’ (1 Corinthians 12:22-23).”²

Just to be clear, I do recognize a difference between, on the one hand, those for whom this is a sincere, soul-stirring struggle, and on the other hand, those who are simply homophobic bigots. I do recognize the difference in the two! It's just that, for me, it's no longer the struggle it used to be.

When we find a well of inner strength, it reduces our need to see others as unworthy. The greatest well of inner strength comes from the knowledge and experience of being loved. The source of all of that love is God. To know and experience that love of God gives us strength. That's important for all of us unworthy types!

It's been said, “Believing that God is both judge and carer go together. Being loved by someone who does not lie to make you feel comfortable but sees you just as you and loves you is life-transforming.”³ That really is the gospel of Christ—love for the unworthy.

The apostle Paul knows that there are many in Corinth who consider him unworthy. To be honest, there are some who hate his guts. But he also knows that he needs to stay connected. Sometimes his words are sharp, but he doesn't speak them from a place of self-importance. He doesn't speak as one who is seeking praise. He speaks as one who's willing to be there, for the sake of the love of Christ.

For all of us unworthy types, that's the only way to live.

² Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 85.

³ www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpEpiphany8.htm