

January 19, 2020
1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

One of my favorite movies is *Rudy* (TriStar Pictures, 1993); a movie based on the life of Daniel “Rudy” Ruettiger, who grew up in a small town in a family that loved Notre Dame and especially, Notre Dame football. Rudy played on the high school football team; however, while full of a passion and work ethic that appeared to be unmatched by his teammates, Rudy’s physical size and skillset were not exactly ideal to play at the collegiate level. Nor were his grades. Thus, Rudy followed in the footsteps of his dad, brother, and best friend and got a job at the local steel plant. Yet, Rudy’s dream of attending Notre Dame and playing football for the Irish never faded and the motivation to leave everything behind, prove the naysayers wrong, and pursue his dream was rekindled upon the sudden death of his best friend. Soon afterward Rudy left, enrolled at Holy Cross Community College in South Bend (Indiana) and worked tirelessly on his studies in order to be accepted into Notre Dame; while, at the same time doing his best to keep his body in physical shape for football. During his two years, each semester Rudy applied to Notre Dame only to receive a letter of denial in the mail. That is, until his final semester and his final opportunity. As he opens the letter and begins to read it tears begin to form in his eyes and the joy of finally being accepted erupts as he shouts out the good news for all to hear. There it was in black and white before him, his future identity as a Notre Dame student confirmed. A letter that changed his life forever.

What we have before us in 1st Corinthians (and 2nd Corinthians for that matter) is a letter from Paul to the church he founded more than likely a few years prior and then left to continue his mission of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a letter from a beloved friend, mentor, and teacher. It is an intimate piece of communication with a purpose. As we will see in coming weeks, part of that purpose is to shed light on and Paul’s critique of practices that have created division as some of have put personal satisfaction and gain above the greater good of the community; especially those with fewer resources and spiritual gifts

that on face-value seemed inferior. Practices apparently that at times reveal the opposite of the self-giving love exemplified by the source of their very existence – Jesus Christ.

This week, I tried my best to imagine receiving this letter in the mail. One envelope among many that will ultimately find their way into the recycling bin. I can almost imagine quickly flipping through them silently stating in my mind, “bill, bill, advertisement, presidential campaign mailer, letter from Paul, bill, presidential campaign mailer, advertisement...” “Wait, letter from Paul...” and quickly I shuffle through them again removing that letter and quickly tearing it open, excitement and joy erupting inside me, and anticipation of hearing from a beloved friend.

As I begin to read the introductory words, a prologue which is so customary in Paul’s letters, indeed something stirs within me. A smile forms and I am once again comforted, strengthened and reminded of whose we are and all that we have been blessed and equipped with. The countless gifts God in Christ has bestowed upon us – freely and graciously. I quickly scan over them again and again.

- *“You (all) have been dedicated (i.e., sanctified) in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.”*
- *“I give thanks to God always for you (all).”*
- *“You (all) have been given the grace of God in Jesus Christ.”*
- *“In every way, you (all) have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge.”*
- *“The community you (all) are joined to in Christ is not lacking in any spiritual gift as you await the coming of our Lord.”*
- *“He will strengthen you (all) to the end and because of him you (all) will be blameless when he comes again.”*
- *“You (all) were called. Into fellowship with the Son of God, Jesus Christ!”*

These are words of life. They are words of God. Yet, one can't read them alone. No, they are to be read together as the "you" in these verses is plural. Yes, each of us has been called. Each of us has received the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Each of us have been enriched and equipped by the Holy Spirit. Each of us has been and will continue to be strengthened in our journey of faith. Each of us does indeed have spiritual gifts to make known the love of God in Jesus Christ to the world.

Yet, if we read them individually and as simply applying to our personal walk with Jesus, something would be lacking. The entire thrust of the letter would be missed. The purpose of this community of faith each of us are joined to and dedicated by God for would be lost and we would be no different than the individualism so prevalent in the world around us. These words, for Paul, simply would not make sense read alone and so we read them together.

And, as we continue on in the coming weeks these words will be the anchor for more challenging words that speak to the brokenness that seeps into the church's life together and, like an unwanted and invasive parasite slowly chews away the very life of a plant or tree, so too will a veil cast upon the light of the church. These words will draw us back. They will be our beacon of light and ray of hope when division strikes, differences surface, and ways of the world will attempt to derail the mission we are joined to.

The church will read yet again the introductory words of Paul that bring life, meaning, identity, and joy. "We are called." "We are dedicated to be saints." "We are steeped in grace." "We are strengthened." "We are saved." "We are enough together because Christ has equipped us with the gifts for ministry."

As I read this, on the day we gather for another annual meeting, I wonder what Paul might say to us. I imagine it might be something like this.

Beloved saints of God in Christ Jesus, you all are precious in God's eyes. You all, along with your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ in every place, have been called and dedicated by God for a special purpose – to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. You all have the tools you need to get the job

done if you all stay together. You all will be sustained by the grace, mercy and love of Jesus Christ. Always. Without a doubt. No strings attached. I thank God often for you all. I thank God for the work you all do in the name of Jesus Christ. I thank God for your ministries of feeding the hungry. I give thanks to God for your ministries of clothing those who need a helping hand. I give thanks to you for comforting those who ache through the warmth and embrace of a quilt. I give thanks to you visiting those who are imprisoned, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with them, and supporting this vital ministry. I give thanks to you all for opening your doors and providing shelter to those who encounter an emergency. I give thanks to you all for walking with those experiencing domestic violence. I give thanks to you all for welcoming children and telling them how much they are loved by God. I give thanks to you all for stewarding your time, talents, and resources to further the work God has commissioned you to do together in the name of Jesus Christ and supporting other important ministry and mission efforts that further reveal the kingdom of God. I give thanks to God in Jesus Christ for the love you all have for one another. You all are beloved and precious saints. Don't ever forget it and may the love of Jesus Christ comfort, sustain and strengthen you to the end.

How might you envision Paul's words to our community of faith? To the church on earth? While this letter was the Corinthians letter, it is also our letter. Let's tear it open, hear these introductory words, shout with excitement, maybe even be moved to tears for the overwhelming joy we experience in Christ Jesus our Lord, and run into the world to share this good news with everyone we meet.