

What Kind of Mobility? – Judy Cox

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

May the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O God, our Strength and our Redeemer.

It was a small town on the East Coast. Their realtor, knowing they were new to the area, was filling them in a bit, trying to help them learn this new setting. They were floored when he recommended his church with these words: *I attend such-and-such Prominent Church; it's good for business!* True story. Wow. That realtor would fit right in at the church in Corinth!

As we consider this letter from Paul to this young church, we need to remember that we're reading someone else's mail. We must understand their context: there is a mailing address on that envelope, and it's not ours! The metadata on that e-mail don't connect with our account! Who were these original recipients? What were their circumstances, and the values of their culture? How does the letter's content relate first not to us, but to them?

So let's talk a little about Corinth... The city sits on an isthmus, the narrowest strip of Greece between the Aegean & Adriatic seas. Merchants favor this short overland route that avoids the long, dangerous sail around southern Greece. Corinth, straddling the trade road, collects hefty duties on merchandise flowing both east and west, and rakes in the money!

The old city of Corinth was destroyed around 150 B.C., and rebuilt as a colony a century later, settled primarily by freed slaves from Rome. This center of wealth is “new money,” not “old”—no aristocratic families or cultural traditions to speak of! In this diverse “city of opportunity,” with the reputation of much money but little culture, one's rank matters a great deal. Even for that day, Corinth is unusually competitive and status-obsessed; it's a dog-eat-dog world of trying to “get ahead” of one another, looking for “upward mobility,” both financially and socially.

All their Mediterranean cultures run on the patronage system; focus on rank and status is a given, and patronage provides the way to advance. The writings of Plutarch, priest of the Greek god Apollo, and a biographer and historian contemporary with Paul, help us understand. He observes that, just as ivy twines itself around a strong, tall tree to gain height, so someone unknown will seek connection with a person of reputation, to be “under the shelter of his power and grow great with him.” For you Jane Austen fans: remember Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, with his patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh?? Or Mr. Elton the social climber in *Emma*? Jane Austen can help us understand Corinth too!

Paul has heard from Chloe's household that the church is splitting into factions. Five years earlier, when Paul founded that church, they met in the villa of a wealthy member; Romans 16 tells us that Gaius first hosted the Corinthian church in his home. Growth forced the church to split physically—even large villas could hold only 40-50 in one meeting area. But these church divisions mentioned by Chloe's folks are much more than geographical. Paul, aware of the danger, speaks urgently to end them!

Reading their letter, we might jump to the conclusion, mistakenly, that these church splits come from doctrinal differences, or personal preferences—Bible scholars tell us they sprang from their status concerns.

In every era the church struggles with how surrounding culture can shape us in ways contrary to the gospel; the church in Corinth has been infected by the secular mindset particular to Corinth. Church members, enviously aware of their “low” position, try to do their social climbing inside the church as well as out. Self-promoting and competitive, they assume they should increase their status by aligning with a rising church leader. They evaluate the apostles or evangelists by who impresses them most with their “rank” and “influence,” and, assuming competition there, too, choose one over the other in order to gain advantage. Their world is squeezing them into its mold.

Paul will have none of it. He ridicules their competitive attempts at one-upmanship and church social climbing. *“I, for one, am one of Paul’s people.” “I, for my part, am for Apollos.” “I am a Cephas person.”* And finally, playing the Jesus card: *“As for me, I belong to Christ.”*

He would find them laughable—if they weren’t so dangerous to the young church.

He lets loose with some impressively snarky rhetorical questions (Jane Austen didn’t invent snarkiness!): *--Has Christ been apportioned out? Surely Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul???*

That is, how can you try gain advantage, aligning with a human leader, stepping on others in your rush up the social ladder? You want to follow other leaders and put them in Jesus’ place! JESUS is the Name in which you are baptized! JESUS is the one crucified for you!

Paul continues: *Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.*

He isn’t setting “Word” against “Table” here---this isn’t a tension between a ministry of preaching and a ministry of sacrament. He’s speaking to what sways the competitive Corinthians, looking for personal advantage even inside the church. Performing baptisms and crafting sermons are aspects of ministry which, given their issues, could focus them too much on the one ministering. Paul, and these other leaders, call their attention to Jesus, to his “downward mobility” expressed by the cross! These church factions are destroying the unity of the Body of Christ by ambition and self-seeking for upward mobility, in direct opposition to the way of the cross.

Maybe we understand the Corinthians’ issues after all: with which ministries do we connect, and why? Do we ever align ourselves with THIS as opposed to that, for our advantage? Is our goal unobtrusive service in Jesus’ name? Or at some level might it be to associate with the cool guys involved, so we join their inner circle? Do we serve the needy out of compassion and love, or maybe because the trendy, cutting-edge ministry will look so good on our resumés? Or even more obviously, like that East Coast realtor, might it serve to line our pockets?

Not that we should beat ourselves up, or stop serving, when we realize our motives are mixed! No, we give thanks that Scripture continues to pierce and reveal our thoughts and intentions, even to ourselves. God is still faithfully working with us! We give thanks, too, for how Scripture interprets Scripture, and how today’s Gospel text interprets Paul powerfully.

Here we see Jesus at the beginning of his trajectory of “downward mobility” that takes him to the cross that Paul preaches. Jesus hears that John has been thrown in prison and, per the NRSV, “withdraws” to Galilee. Matthew tends to use this verb for movement from one place to another in the face of some threat. We are alerted that John's arrest is a dangerous situation for Jesus, and he must choose how to respond. But he doesn't “withdraw” per conventional wisdom, for personal safety's sake. Choose Jesus does, but Matthew affirms that he chooses obedience to God's vocational call on him as expressed in Isaiah. He goes far from the centers of power, from the movers and shakers, to the back of beyond. Whatever the current bright center of their universe, Galilee for centuries has been the corner it's farthest from! Jesus settles not in a major city of Galilee, but in a fishing village. In his downward mobility he aligns himself with and in service for the outsiders, the nobodies from nowhere, bringing light to those who sit in darkness, in the shadow of death.

Later in chapter 14 Matthew will explain that John was arrested for speaking truth to power, for calling out Herod. Jesus' proclamation here in Galilee doesn't distance him safely from John—his message is identical to John's in chapter 3!: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*. He's the relay runner catching the baton, the Olympic torch carrier taking up that blazing torch from John for the very last leg. He's carrying that message to the darkest places, to the littlest, most overlooked people.

His trajectory of downward mobility continues. He takes the initiative to assemble his own inner circle—and look who he chooses to be with him! Fishermen might not have been their lowest of the low, but we would call them the “working poor,” barely surviving in a system highly controlled and taxed. These nondescript nobodies he asks to join him, become his closest associates. They are those privileged to be alongside, as the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus preaches actually breaks in on Galilee! These overlooked ones get to witness that Kingdom firsthand in Jesus' teaching, proclaiming and healing.

So Matthew traces the beginnings of this Messiah's path, the path Isaiah first describes, his path of downward mobility. Already the trajectory is clear: his forerunner has been arrested. Already, in these first chapters of Matthew, we see the self-emptying and self-sacrifice of Jesus that will lead him to the cross Paul preaches in Corinthians. In accepting and living a human life, through the mystery of the Incarnation, he empties himself, as the Wesley hymn goes, “of all but love!” In his life, suffering and death he accepts humiliation in further self-emptying, obedient to the point of apparent failure, and of a shameful, painful death. And in the resurrection, God vindicates him, proving that this self-emptying, NOT self-promotion, expresses responsive obedience to the love of God!

One of my mentors coined a phrase that certainly describes us reading these texts today: “we look at Jesus, we look at ourselves, and we confess the great difference!” We might be tempted to do so despairingly—we know we're addicted to our self-promotion, our self-absorption. But this gospel of Jesus is GOOD NEWS, my friends! Jesus comes alongside us—us self-promoting, self-absorbed wanna-be insiders, us outsider nobodies sitting in our darkness—with his light. That same power that raised him from the dead is breaking in on us through him!

Jesus delivers us by giving us himself—we are loved, and filled and carried by the undeserved favor that is the grace of God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Living in that grace, the love of God can pour into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. We can love others and ourselves not with something we muster up, but with God's own love. This is the mindset, the lifestyle of unity in love, to which Paul calls the divided Corinthian church. This is the life to which we too are invited.

Every week at St. Paul's we come to the Table Jesus spreads. Here we are reminded that his Body has already been divided—broken and given for us. Here we receive the nourishment he provides, the strength that he gives. Reconciled to God and to one another, may the only division of Christ's body we witness be that in which we share, as we come and receive Christ!