



Being the Church: Letters of Christ

TEXT
2 Corinthians 3:1–3

August 9, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Friends, I confess to you that of all of the Apostle Paul's letters, I love the letters to the struggling Christian church in Corinth the most.

Oh, the other letters are important, powerful even: Paul's strong letter to the Christians in Rome about authority and power; his thoughtful letter to the Colossians about philosophy; the letter to the Galatians about the relationship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians; his letter to the divided Ephesians about unity. Oh, and his letter to the Philippians — thank you, Jesus, that was not the only letter in the New Testament because the Philippians are just way too good. They are so good they are borderline annoying.

And the church in Corinth? They are a mess. They are fighting with one another pretty much about everything: about the role of women in the church; about food sacrificed to idols; about rich taking advantage of the poor; about how to stay married; about sex and sexual immorality; even about whether the resurrection really mattered.

Finally, they get so wary and weary of the Apostle, some of them send him a letter asking for letters of reference, of recommendation. Hey, Paul, could you send us any letters from other churches where your ministry has been successful? We just want some evidence that you are actually a good apostle because right now, we're not so sure.

Paul's response: Surely, we do not need letters of recommendation. Don't you see? You are our letters of recommendation. Because you, each of you, are letters of Christ — written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Do you not understand? You followers of Jesus, you are our letters, human letters of Jesus because the Spirit of the Living God has written the good news,

the grace of God upon your hearts. Think of it. The Spirit of the Living God has written upon your heart the good news of Jesus for the whole world. With every beat of your heart, that good news is to be shared, proclaimed in your words — but even more importantly, in your actions. You are the living, breathing, heart-beating letters of Jesus. You embody him to the whole world.

I love that image. It seems to me that the Apostle Paul is reminding the believers in Corinth that the gospel is not something written in stone forever and forever. It is not even written in ink. It is written by the power of the Spirit of the Living God on human hearts because the gospel is changing. It is not static. It is not supposed to be lived the same way in every age.

In these months, everything around us has changed. Being family, being friends, being students, being teachers and administrators, being employees and employers, everything has changed. So why should being the church be any different?

So, we are not worshipping in our sanctuary at Village on Antioch. And we are not worshipping in our sanctuary at Village on Mission. That means

we are called to be the church in new ways.

The challenge is that the church is not always great at embracing the new and innovating, even changing.

Several years ago, I was invited to deliver two lectures at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. This is the seminary I attended. It was a high honor. I planned to arrive on Tuesday, the day before my lectures, and visit with some friends and my former professors. At the last minute, a friend who worked at the national offices for the Presbyterian Church asked me to come to an important consultation in Louisville at the church's headquarters. The consultation was all day Tuesday, the day before my lectures in Chicago. I looked at the flight schedules and figured out that I could go to Louisville early Tuesday morning, stay the whole day for the consultation and then that night catch the last flight from Louisville to Chicago in time for my lectures the next morning.

So, I went to Louisville for the consultation and then went to the airport. Everything was on time and I thought, great. This is going to work. I boarded the flight and settled in. Then I looked at my watch and noticed that it was a few minutes past our departure time. Southwest prides themselves on being the nation's best on-time airline. As I waited, I grew more anxious. I remember thinking, "Oh no. If this flight does not go, I am going to have to find a rental car and drive overnight to Chicago."

Just then a young man came on the plane and apologized for the delay and said there was a problem, and the whole plane groaned. He said that we were on a brand new Boeing 737. It had all the latest equipment on it. This plan could land in dense fog. At the gate right next to us was an older Boeing 737. It did not have the latest equipment, and it could not land in dense fog. That flight is trying to go to St. Louis where they have dense fog. Chicago Midway is crystal clear. "When I say, 'Go,' I would ask all of you to please get up and get your things, and we are going to change planes. Just sit on that plane exactly where you are on this plane and if we move quickly, everyone can get to their destination just a few minutes late. Ready? 'Go.'" And just like that, all of us got up and collected our things and proceeded to change planes.

It was like this bizarre ice-breaker from youth group. As I was walking to the next gate, the young man who made the announcement was standing there, thanking everyone, and I stopped and said, "Um, excuse me, but may I ask you a question?"

He said, "Of course, sir."

"So who decided to do this? Who decided to switch planes?"

He said, "Well, sir, I did. I am the senior gate agent here at Louisville for Southwest Airlines."

"Yes," I said, "but whose idea was it?"

"Well, sir, it was my idea. I am the senior gate agent here for Southwest Airlines." This

young man, it was his idea. He explained that he did call operations and tell them he was going to do this so they could record the aircraft switch, and he had talked with the four pilots and they thought it was a good idea — so he just did it.

I remember saying to him, "I'm sorry but I'm a Presbyterian. Do you have any idea how long it would have taken us to make this change?"

He said, "Um no, sir. I don't really go to a church, but I was raised a Baptist."

I told him, "Well see, first we would have had to form a committee. Then that committee would have called for a study. Then we would have debated the results of the study, and then we would have made a recommendation and presented it for consideration."

"About how long would that take?" he asked.

"Oh, a year to a year and a half tops," I replied.

"Well, that really wouldn't help right now, would it?" he said.

"No!" I said. "That's my point!"

Come on, Paul. Show us some letters of recommendation, some good references for your ministry. Don't you understand? You are our letters of recommendation — because the gospel is written not on tablets of stone, not even with ink, but by the Spirit of the Living God on your hearts; on living, beating, real, struggling, wounded, hoping, human hearts.

While we are being the church, we are being change and

transformed. And when we get to the other side of this — and we will get to the other side — we will be transformed by the grace of God. We will be even more faithful in our witness, and more courageous in our justice, and more truthful in our righteousness. By the grace of God, we will be even more the church that Christ is calling us to be. Because the gospel is not written on tablets of stone, but on our hearts. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.