

**“A Lot’s at Stake”**  
**Shannon Smythe**  
**June 20, 2021**  
**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
**Rehoboth Beach, Delaware**

This morning we continue our series on Tending New Creation. We are paying attention and seeking to nurture the good news that in Christ, we are new creation. The old has passed away. Everything has become new. This is good news found in 2 Corinthians 5, and our scripture for this morning comes just a few verses later in chapter 6.

2 Corinthians is an interesting patchwork of several different fragments of correspondence the apostle Paul has with the faith community in Corinth. It is a bit curious that a significant portion of the New Testament consists of letters. While social norms and polite decorum dictates that we not read someone else’s mail, the church knows no such restrictions. Instead, we are invited to consider the mail from a handful of early church communities as sacred Scripture for us today.

The challenge for us, in reading another church’s mail, is to understand its relevance for us today, in a different context and without the correspondence of the Corinthians to Paul, which would fill in a lot of gaps in the details of what their struggle was. In broad brush strokes what we can say, generally, about this correspondence between Paul and the church in Corinth is that something big is happening between them—something emotional and something very personal. One commentator says that Paul’s voice in 2 Corinthians reminds her of a person in a long marriage that has become frayed and contentious and who has reached the point where nothing will do but a row and honest expression of their heart and commitments. Wow! That’s intense. I hope that metaphor helps capture your attention to our text today—that your interest is peaked into looking at this church’s mail and wondering together its significance for us today.

There are three main emphases Paul makes in this section of correspondence with the Corinthian community that can help us zero in on why we want to pay attention to it at Westminster in our post-Pentecost focus tending to renewal and new creation.

The first emphasis from Paul is this: He longs for, he strongly urges, the collective group of church members in Corinth not to let their faith be meaningless—not to accept the grace of God in vain, not to squander one bit of it as Eugene Peterson renders it. There’s too much at stake!

We don’t much use the phrase “in vain” in contemporary parlance anymore. In the church, we have, in the past, spoken of the importance of not taking the name of God “in vain.” But Paul has something else on his mind than swearing. The Greek work for “in vain” is “empty.” Paul is concerned about the lack of fruitfulness and missing signs of faithfulness at the church in Corinth. There have been petty feuds and lots of small thinking in the faith community there. This is a community who has been divided over a number of issues: from belief in the resurrection, to arguments over spiritual gifts, lawsuits, worship, and leadership. Bickering was the norm. And Paul was deeply troubled about a church so divided, distracted, and self-preoccupied.

There are a group of pastors in our presbytery having discussions about church transformation. Recently, we have been discussing the insights from a book written by a pastor and church consultant, Thom Rainer, called *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, which looks at patterns and similarities of symptoms among 14 churches that ended up dying and closing their doors. Some of what emerged was that many of these dying churches were focused primarily on the personal preferences of the congregants, which led to an inward focus and lots of fighting over and obsession about various parts of the church facilities: music style preferences, building use, remodeling choices, memorial funds, replacing an old pulpit with a new one. People would fight and leave the church. Emotions ran high. Trust was broken. Vision was lost as trivial issues peripheral to the mission of the church (but very central to folks full of opinions and preferences)—the color of the carpet, what was acceptable behavior at youth events took center stage, consuming a disproportionate share of time and energy and something leading to outright conflict. So much is at stake but these churches didn’t realize it until it was too late and the church shuttered their doors.

This is not unlike what was happening in the church in Corinth. And Paul is deeply distressed about it. To focus on trivial matters, to bicker over differences in personal preferences, to be so self-occupied as a community is to take the radical and abundant grace of God in vain.

And that leads us to the second emphasis Paul makes, which is that now is the time for the Corinthians to show by their actions that they have not accepted the grace of God in vain. The day of salvation is not in the past or the future, but now. This is what is on the line. This is what is at stake. Paul quotes from Isaiah 49 to urge this church group to understand just this point. In effect, he is saying that today is the day for the Corinthians to demonstrate their faithfulness to Paul, to God and to one another. After all, this group of imperfect humans are God's new creation. In Jesus, God has acted decisively and completely to bring all of us back to right relationship. In the life and death of Jesus, we who were once far off, we who, of ourselves, can only ever exhibit signs of old creation life, we have been brought back by God and made new in Christ. What's at stake, then, is understanding that we now live at the intersection of two realities. One road is the old creation—bickering, self-preoccupation, obsession over trivial matters. The other road is new creation. The actions of these Corinthian church members should reflect God's gracious acts in their lives. The good news of reconciliation should be visible in how the church members interact with Paul and one another.

Friends, just like the Corinthian church, we at Westminster are called to settle our relationships with each other. We are called to drop our differences and personal preferences and collectively join hands to participate in what God is doing to bring salvation here and now.

In the final verses of our text, we hear Paul's third emphasis, which is that this faith community would open wide their hearts. Rather than responding in such a way that God's grace in Christ will have no meaningful effect on their communal life together, Paul's plea is that they would open themselves. In effect, he's telling them: "Get over yourselves!" In Christ we are new creation and that means that when we gather as the church we are called to be a new kind of community. The former ways of interacting—inwardly focused, self-preoccupied, obsessed with issues around the church facilities, these have passed away in Christ. These are the smallness that comes from within us. Paul wants us to know that in Christ, our lives aren't small but big, open and expansive. And so we are invited to live into this reality—to cease living in a small way. Each of us is infinitely precious in God's eyes. We are also called to see ourselves not as individuals but as a body that works together not for our sake but for the sake of Christ and God's vision for our world. So, Westminster,

let us open up our lives to one another, yes, in ever vulnerable, humble and authentic ways. But let us also open up our lives to the community. Let us open ourselves to those who have been hurt by the church, to those who are spiritual and looking for meaning and belonging but in new ways, to those of younger generations who can't help but experience the world differently and won't find church if it comes packaged in an outdated form. Let us open ourselves to expansive possibilities to adapting and changing and even letting go of some of the forms of church that prevent us from opening ourselves up more and more to others. May we leave behind living as the church in small ways. Let's get over ourselves. We can laugh as we do so. It doesn't have to be a dour thing. There can be joy and lightness!

We have the best reason in the world to open this faith community wider to others. God has opened Godself wide to us first! God has brought us back and made us right with God. The best response we can offer in return is to pattern our church life together on the grace of God on whom we all depend. After all, a lot's at stake. Amen.