

Scriptures: Luke 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

God Is Love

There are a couple big take-aways, in my opinion, of that first Scripture reading we heard from Luke's gospel this morning. First, that Jesus Christ, is Lord of Creation – He knew where the fish were, and told them where to cast the nets! And secondly, that Simon Peter recognized Him as God-in-the-flesh, fell on His knees, and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). In other words, "Get away from me, I am a sinner." That's something each one of us could say to Jesus at some point in our life. Fortunately, through the process of sanctifying grace, when we trust Him to free us from sin, He transfers His goodness and holiness onto us at the cross. That doesn't mean we're instantly made perfect and holy, it's a process. The Holy Spirit is constantly at work inside us nudging us ever closer to being a carbon-copy, if you will, of Jesus Christ. He wants us to be better, clearer bearers of His Image. So how do we do that? How do we demonstrate God's character traits to the rest of the world? If you brought a Bible, or have a Bible app handy, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. I'll be reading from the New International Version. **Read 1 Cor. 15:1-11.**

Last week we talked about love. God is love, and He expects us to love if we're going to really follow Him. It's tough loving people sometimes. Last week we heard Paul tell us that we could have all sorts of gifts and skills, but if we didn't have love for others, what we did have, didn't amount to a hill of beans. In skipping over a couple chapters from last week to this one, we miss Paul's instructions about using the gifts and skills God gives us, in love towards others, and how to use them to benefit others as acts of worship.

It's tough to love our enemies. We live in the most prosperous country in the world economically, and in regards to individual rights. There is no other country in the world that has the freedom that we do. Yet our country is one in the depths of spiritual poverty, especially when it comes to being in relationships. According to the Guinness World Records website, America has the third highest divorce rate in the world, being beat only by Maldives, an Islamic island nation in the Indian Ocean, and Belarus, a former Soviet republic in Eastern Europe.¹ In our country today, it's hard to look across the political landscape of Democrat or Republican, and love those not like us. We hear so much negative drivel on the news and social media, that it makes it hard to not get caught up in all that junk. The same thing could be said of the Church, in general, too. Overall, we need reminded by God on how to love fellow human beings. To turn things around, our country, and the Church, needs a revival – a spiritual reawakening – and New Hope, that begins with you and me. So how do we begin a spiritual revival,

¹ Information retrieved at <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/highest-divorce-rate>

without tossing everything we believe in as followers of Jesus Christ out the window in favor of what's current, politically correct, or seems like a good idea?

Hold Firmly

Paul tells us what to do in this instance. He says, "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand," (1 Cor. 15:1). We know what the gospel was that Paul's talking about – it's the gospel, the good news – of Jesus Christ, the God-Man who laid aside glory, to come down and live like the least of us, even to the point of death on the cross to take our sins away! Jesus takes our sins away. What a blessing to know Him! "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain," (verse 2), Paul tells the Church. In studying this text across Bible versions, some amazing things come out in verse 2. The Amplified Bible reads, "By this faith you are saved [reborn from above – spiritually transformed, renewed, and set apart for His purpose], if you hold firmly to the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain [just superficially and without complete commitment]."

I'm convinced that much of the ruckus we see today in the Church, generally speaking, is caused by folks not holding firmly to the word. They say they believe, but it's just a superficial kind of thing. When it gets tough to follow Him, they're gone. They hear something they don't agree with, maybe a policy of the larger denomination, and they split. They don't want to stick around. You'd be shocked at the number of people who view the United Methodist Church, as a denomination, in a negative light based on bad media sources, and how many of them have left, or are attempting to leave the Church. Friends, I want to tell you, the fundamental beliefs of the United Methodist Church, contained in the *Book of Discipline* (2016), have not changed since the denomination started in 1968. There have been minor policy changes, for instance, making sure we have Safe Sanctuary policies in place to protect kids and at-risk adults. Do we have to agree with every policy? No. That's why we have an annual conference, and a vote, so that our views, and what we believe the main thing which should be focused on stays the main thing. And that's making known to the world Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected!

Paul explains this very well. He says, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve," (verses 3-5). All Scripture points to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He's the fulfillment of Scripture. Paul's talking about both the Old Testament, and also Peter and the disciples as eyewitnesses. Paul's also pointing out that he didn't get the gospel directly from Jesus Christ – he got it from other followers of Jesus. Remember, originally Paul was Saul of Tarsus, and was a persecutor of the Church. In fact, Acts 7:58-60 records that Paul held the cloaks of

those who stoned Stephen, the first martyr of the Church killed for his faith in Jesus Christ.

The Gospel

Paul recounts to us again the simple gospel account, which even our youngest kids know – that Jesus died on the cross, was buried, and three days later rose again. The Author of Life can't be held by death. Complete Righteousness and Holiness can't be destroyed by the sin of the world. Absolute Truth can't be swept away by what's convenient or politically correct. Perfect Love can't be destroyed by hatred, no matter how strong or powerful that hatred appears to be.

Church, did you know that there are people today who doubt that Jesus Christ rose from the dead? There are a lot of people out there who don't believe Jesus is God. They think He was just a good teacher. They're missing the mark! He is God-in-the-flesh, was present at the Creation, and will be after the End. There are people who sit in churches across America who doubt that He came back to life three days after being buried in the tomb. It's very sad. Many people in our country who say they're Christian do not read their Bible. They say they don't understand it when they read it. That's why it's important to be involved in a church that believes the Bible is God's word. Here at New Hope we do, and we try to put the teachings in the Bible into practice in our daily lives.

None of this is new, though. There were doubters in the Corinthian Church. People were running around telling other people things like, "oh, it wasn't really Jesus who died on the cross," or "Jesus died but didn't really come back to life, it was a ghost they saw." People come up with all sorts of kooky theories about stuff when they aren't grounded in the Truth. The Bible is truth. You can take it to the bank, so to speak. So Paul tells them – and tells the doubters today, too, hey look, "after that, He appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep," (1 Cor. 15:6). The word in Greek for the 500 refers to males. We try to be an inclusive church. So if Jesus appeared to 500 guys, how many gals do you think He appeared to? I don't know, but I'm sure He appeared to women, too. I know He did, because in John 20, on that first Easter morning, who saw Jesus first? It was a woman, Mary Magdalene. She saw Him first, and then ran to tell the apostles.

Eyewitness Accounts

Paul points out that most of the guys were still living, so if they wanted eyewitnesses, they could get them. People in those days wanted to hear things straight from the source, just like we do today. There were first-hand, eyewitness accounts available if they wanted them. When Paul says that some "have fallen asleep," that was a figure of speech they used in those days to indicate that some of them had passed away. Paul also tells them that "then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all He appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born," in verses

7 and 8 of our text. There's some stuff here we need to unpack to really get what Paul was trying to tell them. First, that Jesus appeared to James. This would have been Jesus' brother, James. Now that might surprise some people to hear. But we know from Scripture that Jesus had at least one brother, and possibly more, because they showed up with Mary in Matthew 12, while Jesus was teaching and healing people. The reason we know it's Jesus' brother James, and not James the son of Zebedee, who was an apostle, is that Paul specifically lists James by name, separate from the apostles, who are all lumped together in the verse.

I know it's a technicality, but maybe pointing it out may help to shed some light on all the various people Jesus appears to and interacts with after His resurrection. Paul also indicates that Jesus appeared to him, "as to one abnormally born." That sounds weird, doesn't it? What Paul's trying to say is that he wasn't one of the original twelve apostles, and hadn't been part of their group from the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry like the other eleven had. He expands on this idea when he says, "I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God," (1 Cor. 15:9). Paul was humble. He remembered his past, and how much he hurt not just the Church, but also how much his sin of persecution hurt his Lord, Jesus Christ. In reading it, I can't help but get a sense that Paul still feels remorse after much work, and time has passed.

Have you ever experienced that? You've done something wrong, and you repent of it – however that looks. It may be admitting you've done wrong by someone, and asking them to forgive you. It may be that you don't have a way to contact them, so you just leave it at the foot of the cross. Or it may be that you realize that some aspect of your life isn't pleasing or honoring to God, so you want to be reshaped to be a better image-bearer. We remember our past. Where we came from, and how a relationship with Jesus Christ has reshaped and reformed us, don't we? It's good to be able to see who we used to be, who we are now, and recognize that we've become a different person because of the presence of the Holy Spirit working in our life! Paul doesn't just wallow in his remorse, his guilt. He becomes actively involved in making changes in how he's living. That's what we have to do, too, when we're letting God reshape us – we have to be actively involved, and not just throw self-pity parties or just pay lip service to the changing we need to do.

Paul talks about this. He says, "But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me," (verse 10). Paul was an apostle because of the grace God had poured out on him through the work Jesus Christ did for all of us on the cross and at the empty tomb. He closes by telling the Corinthian Church that if it was he, or the other apostles who shared the gospel with them, that's what they all preach, and that's what the church believed (paraphrase of verse 11). The same rings true today. The gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected is what the Church preaches

today, and what we believe. In a moment, we'll gather together around the Lord's table, to celebrate Holy Communion together with the Church militant, here below, and the Church triumphant, those saints who have won the victory and are now present with Christ. Let's pray.

Prayer: Loving God, You have called forth disciples and prophets to live and speak Your word. Give us ears to hear, lives to respond, and voices to proclaim the good news of salvation, which we know in our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.