

## **Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**I Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Mark 2:23—3:6; II Corinthians 4:5-12**

The Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time? Why would this not be the Second Sunday (with Trinity Sunday being the first Sunday) of this season of the Christian Year?

One of the peculiarities of the Christian Year is the fact that it has both fixed dates (e.g., Christmas) and adjustable dates (e.g., Easter). That, in turn, creates a significant timing problem for the entire Christian Year.

Easter is a moveable date. It is determined by the Pascal Full Moon (or the date of the full moon in the latter part of March or in early April). Thus, Easter can fall on any Sunday between March 21 and April 25. This irregular date then skews the dates for the beginning of Lent (40 days earlier, not counting Sundays) and the end of Eastertide (50 days after Easter). That, in turn, impacts the start of the season of Ordinary Time.

But the beginning of the Christian Year – the first Sunday in Advent – is fixed by Christmas always falling on December 25. How, then, does Ordinary Time get from a movable calendar skewed by an Easter that changes each year, back to a fixed calendar that must be in place so that Advent (the beginning of the Christian Year) can begin four Sundays before Christmas Day (December 25)? This is how it occurs.

The designation of the date for Easter in any given year determines the beginning of Lent. Therefore, the period between Epiphany (January 6) and the beginning of Lent is computed. The Sundays between the Sunday after Epiphany and the Sunday before Ash Wednesday (the beginning of Lent) are counted as “Ordinary Sundays” (those Sundays can either be designated as “Ordinary Time” Sundays or as “Sundays after Epiphany” – the alternative we choose). Then, the date for Trinity Sunday (the beginning Sunday of the “Ordinary Time” season) is determined, because it, too, is skewed according to when Easter has occurred that year. Those two calculations will then give you the fixed Sunday within the season of Ordinary Time that the Ordinary Time schedule should begin. That, in turn, gets you on the fixed schedule that will make all things right for the beginning of Advent and the beginning of a new Christian Year.

So, although it would seem that this Sunday ought to be the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, it is according to this adjusted calendar, actually the Ninth Sunday. And so, everything else in the schedule is made right when we name it as the Ninth, rather than the Second Sunday.

Would that everything else in the world or in the church could be made right so easily!

**I Samuel 3:1-20** is actually two stories in one: the well-known story of Samuel’s initial meeting with God (vss. 1-10) and the second a story of a terrible prophecy that is destined to rock both the household of the high priest Eli and of Israel itself.

I Samuel 3:1-10 is the story of the first experience of the young lad, Samuel, in hearing God’s call to him. But the story is far more profound than that, if one does a careful reading of the text.

“Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days” (3:1). We learn from this introduction that “the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord” – that is, that he was fulfilling priestly functions under the supervision of the high priest, Eli (cf. 2:18). We do not know how old Samuel was in this story, but the implications are that he was a lad who had not yet entered adolescence. In this story, Samuel’s vocation is expanded from being one who exercises priestly functions to one who is called to be a prophet (a prophet being defined as one who hears and shares the word of the Lord). Later, in I Samuel 7, his vocation will be further expanded when he is called to exercise the office of a judge of Israel.

What is most significant about this passage, however, is the statement that follows the description of Samuel. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days”. God, this text is telling us in the often understated way that is so Jewish, is withholding His word from Israel. Such withholding of the word of the Lord is a sign of God’s displeasure, whereas hearing and speaking the word is a sign of His favor (cf. 14:37; Ps. 74:8; Lam. 2:9).

But the text is quick to add, “The lamp of God had not yet gone out (in the tabernacle) (3:3). This is a metaphorical statement, not a statement of literal reality. God’s presence in the tabernacle and in the midst of His people has not yet been snuffed out. Rather, Samuel’s presence still brings a flicker of hope to believers that God has one in their midst who is committed enough to be the vehicle of God’s word to them.

The stage is now set for God to act. As Samuel was lying down at night, waiting for sleep to come, he hears a voice, “Samuel, Samuel”. Thinking it is Eli calling, Samuel arises and goes to Eli to respond to the call, only to discover that Eli has not called him. He returns to his bed, only to have the same process repeated two more times. Eli finally realizes that it may be God who is calling Samuel, and instructs him to respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”. Samuel obediently follows Eli’s instructions, and God speaks the prophetic word to Samuel. The word of the Lord is no longer rare in those days!

There are two significant truths captured in this first story, symbolized in the persons of Eli and Samuel. Eli was the high priest – the servant of God responsible for bringing the people of Israel before God for confession of sin, redemption and blessing. He did that priestly task faithfully. But the text also tells us that he had poor eyesight (3:2). I would suggest that Eli’s blindness was not only physical; it was spiritual, as well. He could not readily perceive God at work in Israel’s midst (1:12-18) and therefore could not produce a people who were spiritually discerning or obedient to God (2:12-17). The difficulty Eli had in perceiving that what Samuel was hearing was God speaking is an indication of his spiritual obtuseness. One could say that Eli was faithful in his service of God, but he was not one who was in any kind of discernible relationship with God or spiritually discerning. He was like those religious leaders who are committed to the institution of the Church, but have no discernible relationship with the Lord of the Church. He was one who “seeing did not see and hearing did not understand”.

Samuel provides an alternative to Eli. And that is why it was Samuel who was called beyond priesthood to the offices of prophet and judge, while Eli was not so called. Before this nighttime event, Samuel was likely no more relational with God than was Eli. After all, he was a priest not because he chose so to be, but because his mother made a vow that he would be a priest and had

placed him in the service of the tabernacle (1:11, 24-28). But when God spoke to him, Samuel responded “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”. And indeed, he was truly and fully listening.

So God spoke to Samuel and commanded him to do what he did not want to do (3:10-14). But he did it nonetheless, proving his obedience to God’s word (3:15-4:1). What is crucial in this story about Samuel, and what differentiates him from Eli, is that he is open to God’s word, hears it and acts upon it (3:10). The Word is the important reality in this story. It is what God is all about. That word which once spoken had created the world; that word which would one day redeem the world, had now come to Samuel. And Samuel had responded, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!”

If this first story is sheer delight and joy, the second story is dark indeed. The first story ends with Samuel meeting God and asking to hear God’s word: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!” But what God’s servant, Samuel, hears is not good news that he cares to share with Eli. Yet Eli insists. And so Samuel, obedient to the heavenly message, begins his prophetic role by sharing with Eli this message from God.

“See, I the Lord am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever” (3:11-14).

Eli’s family will be punished because “he did not restrain” his sons who “were blaspheming God”. What was God talking about? What was the great sin that Eli’s sons were committing? And what was Eli’s contribution to that sin that required God to punish not only his household, but him as well? The mystery is unraveled in I Samuel 2:12-17, 22, 25b.

“Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or the duties of the priests to the people. When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest’s servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or cauldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest’s servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing, ‘Give meat for the priest to roast; for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.’ And if the man said to him, ‘Let them burn the fat first; and then take whatever you wish’, he would say, ‘No, you must give it now; if not, I will take it by force’. Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord; for they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt. Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. (And he sought to correct them.) But they would not listen to the voice of their father.”

One cannot appreciate what the author is disclosing here about the sons of Eli without first understanding how Israel was governed during the period of the Judges. The government of

Israel in its earliest days was a loose confederation of sovereign states (each of the tribes) held together by a common religious sanctuary (technically, Israel was an amphictyony). The making of war, the interpretation of laws held in common by all the tribes and the selection of warlords would be done at the sanctuary during religious festivals. Therefore, rather than having distinct arenas of religion, politics and economics, they were united together around the sanctuary.

This reality reflected itself in the leadership of the amphictyony. There were three types of leaders: *judges* who had the twin responsibilities of adjudicating the law when called upon and acting as occasional warlords to address a common threat to the tribes; *prophets* who were to speak God's word to the people at their gathering times at the sanctuary that would help the tribes select people as judges/warlords; and *priests* who conducted the worship life and interpreted the laws by which the amphictyony, all its tribes and all its people ordered their life together. Of these three leaders, only the priest permanently held his position. Judges were appointed only when the nation was threatened from without, and prophets only appeared occasionally to speak God's word to the people. But the priesthood was the central core of the amphictyony, conducting the daily worship of Yahweh within the tabernacle, teaching and interpreting the Law, and providing the continuity that held Israel together as one nation. Further, whereas judges and prophets were chosen charismatically by God, the priesthood was inherited, passing from father to sons and thus offering, in its very structure, the only continuity that Israel had.

When we read the author's account of the actions of Eli's sons, and read it in the light of an understanding of the nature of the amphictyony, we begin to understand the seriousness of what was happening there. It was not simply that Eli's sons were taking unauthorized portions of sacrificed animals for their own consumption, or that they were taking advantage of women participating in tabernacle worship. It was that they were using their political-economic-religious position to exploit the nation and its people. They were using their position to build as great a power for themselves as they could, no matter how it oppressed and exploited (both sexually and economically) the people. Yet they could not be stopped. And they could not be stopped for two reasons.

First, there was no alternative to the inheritance model of priesthood, no means by which priests abusing their position could be removed from office (that was why God had to destroy the family and to clearly select another to take their place – Samuel). Second, the high priest, who was the father of these priests, seemed helpless to exercise his office as head of their household to stop this abuse. He was either unable or unwilling to take charge of the situation, and so had to be removed by God from this office, no matter how kindly he seemed to be to Samuel.

This was why Samuel was so important to the change that had to occur if there was to be any future to Israel. The boy Samuel, although not a relative of Eli's, was fully a priest as well – and, taken his actions, a more faithful priest than the sons of Eli. But he was a priest, not because he had been appointed to that task (no one was appointed a priest; he was born into the priesthood), but because he was dedicated to that task by his miraculous birth and the dedication of the boy to the priesthood by Samuel's mother. Therefore, if Eli and his entire family were eliminated without progeny, Samuel would be their natural successor as high priest. That was exactly what God was planning, and that was exactly what came to pass.

Samuel reluctantly shared with his mentor the prophecy God had given him. And Eli recognized the justice of such action by God. Eli responded to the dark news that Samuel brought to him, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him” (vs. 18). But in saying so, Eli’s heart must have been breaking!

The story concludes, “As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord” (vss. 19-20).

As a result of this event, an important principle entered into the national and corporate life of Israel – a principle unique for its age of almost-exclusively hereditary leadership. For Israel, even when dealing with hereditary leadership, *abuse of office would lead to removal from office!* God would have justice done! So even for those who would inherit their position in society, they were expected not to operate above the Law but in conformity to it, seeking justice in their political life, equity in their economics and relationship with God (“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”) and each other as the foundation of their religion. And on such a faithful performance of this duty would they be judged or celebrated.

**Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18** is one of the most profound and insightful psalms in the Psalter. It begins with the penetrating words, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away” (139:1-2). With these opening lines, the Psalmist introduces his theme – God’s omniscient and utterly loving relationship to us. God knows us through and through because he has created us and loves us with the deepest, giving love – whether we respond to that love or not.

“You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it” (vss. 2-6).

What the Psalmist proclaims here reveals the profound difference between the ancient Hebrew faith and the religions that surrounded Israel. God is described in the most intimate terms possible. God knows each of us through and through, for nothing is hidden from him. It is not simply the words we speak or the actions we take that expose us to God. It is the very thoughts we think, even when those thoughts are in the process of being formed! Every instinct, every emotion, every reflection, every temptation that wells up inside us, God already knows about before they are even fully formed. Yahweh has indeed “searched me and known me”, and yet in spite of what he sees, still chooses to love me. We can only respond, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain (or even understand) it”!

The Psalmist then declares several things about our relationship with God. First, we cannot escape from God or his love – whether we are in heaven or in hell, the limits of the earth or of

the universe, the extremes of night or day (139:7-12). God sees right through them – and us! “Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as day” (vs. 12).

Second, there is nothing we can do, think or be that will surprise God. He knows us fully because God created us. He knew us when we were only “unformed substance”. He “knit us together in our mother’s womb”. He determined the length of our life, and the substance of that life – even before the first day of that life occurred (vss. 13-18)!

Third, God knows our attitudes and actions toward others. He knows of our hatreds, our loathing of those who loath God. And he knows we know of that amazing love even of those who loathe God so that he will not act against them as we might, if we were God (vss. 19-22).

So, before such an awesome, remarkable, holy and loving God, how can we respond? There is only one way: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (vss. 23-24)!

Psalm 139 is an overwhelming and moving psalm, so moving that I have found it is among the most comforting selections I can choose for a funeral or memorial service. What makes it so deeply touching is what separated this psalm from all the other religious literature of its time, and what separated Yahweh worship from the worship of pagan gods. Relationship with this God is personal! God has the most insightful understanding of each of us and all of us as God’s people; there is nothing that can be hidden from him. And yet, in spite of such a knowledge, our God chooses to love us and to call us to follow him. Yahweh is a God who wants relationship with his creation, and he will assertively seek such a relationship. Oneness with this God does not come about by following proper ritual, learning liturgy, performing sacrifices, conducting ordered worship but by coming into a face-to-face relationship with the One who can see right through you! Psalm 139 is such an overwhelming and moving psalm, because it so beautifully describes the overwhelming and moving God whom we worship and adore!

**Mark 2:23-3:6** consists of two stories that are both the culmination and capstone of the stories that preceded them. All those earlier stories had contrasted Jesus’ actions to liberate people and the constraints of Israel’s religious/political/economic leaders as they sought to use the Law of Moses to control the people and to bring wealth and power their way. Now the theme reaches its denouement in these final two stories.

Here is the first story: “One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath’” (2:23-28).

One cannot truly appreciate the confrontation that was happening here unless one recollects the “politics of bread” that was so integral to life in Jesus’ Israel. The Jewish religious system was not primarily a religious institution. It was an *apparently* religious body granted by Rome the responsibility to govern the nation. That religious community was to share that responsibility in Judea with the Roman procurator, and in Galilee with the Herodian nobility (note 3:6). But their primary role was to be the on-the-ground political operatives of Israel, controlling the legislative and judicial systems of Israel, maintaining peace among the people, and administering justice. And they were to exercise this control through the religious vehicles of synagogue, the temple and the Mosaic Law.

Further, we must understand that these “religious” leaders, along with the Herodian nobility and the land-owners, controlled the vast percentage of the wealth of the nation. These native-born leaders made up only 2 percent of the population, but owned around 70 percent of the wealth. Conversely, around 90 percent of the people were peasants, most of whom were farmers. Those farmers lived on the edge of economic disaster. Most farmers didn’t own the land they farmed but rented it from landowners. When they harvested a crop, about 50 percent of that harvest would be paid in rent to the landowner, 25 percent would be paid to Rome and the Herodian nobility and 10 percent went to the priests, Pharisees and Sadducees. Given the addition of village taxes, the typical farmer realized only about 12 percent of his harvest as his family’s annual income which had to be used not only to sustain his family for a year but also to purchase next year’s seed so that he could continue subsistence farming. This was the “politics of bread” that drained the resources of the peasants, kept them in a permanently impoverished and potentially expendable state, and maintained the power of Israel’s religious aristocracy. This action by Jesus’ disciples and Jesus’ defense of the same is a direct confrontation of Israel’s religious/political/economic leaders’ practice of this “politics of bread”!

Jesus and his disciples are walking through a farmer’s field on their journey from one town to another. While walking, the disciples comb heads of grain so that kernels slide off into their hands. They then rub off the husks of the same and eat the grains to give themselves extra energy (sort of like we would do today with “trail mix” as we are taking a hike). The problem is that they are doing this on the Sabbath, and Sabbath Law states that one is not to harvest on the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15).

The Pharisees, seeing what the disciples are doing, call Jesus on their action! “Why are you (permitting your disciples to do) what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” Of course, this provision of the Law was created in order to keep people from actively working on the Sabbath, thus making relationship with God and family more important than money. But the Pharisees were using the Law as their principle means of dominating and controlling the people, forcing them to be subservient to the political and economic policies of Israel’s religious aristocracy. Jesus saw the actions of his disciples as being totally innocent and at the same time saw through the Pharisees’ manipulation of the Law. He therefore decided to confront them rather than yield to their demand. And the way Jesus chose to confront them is intriguing indeed.

“Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the

Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions” (vss. 25-26).

Appealing to I Samuel 21:1-6, Jesus notes that David, marching his troops into battle, commandeered food from the tabernacle of God. Likewise, Jesus’ “troops” (the disciples) are “marching into battle” against the political/economic/religious oppressors of God’s people, and he has the right to commandeer food for them, even if it is the Sabbath.

But there is a larger argument Jesus is making that goes beyond his “Christological prerogative”. The point was that David’s troops, heading into battle, were hungry – and their hunger justified the seeming desecration of the tabernacle. Likewise, Jesus’ troops were hungry – and Sabbath Law shouldn’t stand between them and the abating of their hunger. So, Jesus is implying, Israel’s religious leadership’s practice of a “politics of bread” is creating mass hunger and poverty throughout the country. Thus, Sabbath Law is not to be used to try to “keep the peasants in their place”, but rather the larger issue is that Israel’s religious leaders should use their favored position, not to maintain their own power base, but to use their power to bring greater economic and political justice to the peasants, manifested in them having a sufficiency to eat! For “the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath. For the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath”.

What Jesus is doing here is an act of civil disobedience! He is using the reaction of the “Principalities and Powers” to the innocent action of his disciples to have some “trail mix” to publicly confront Israel’s leadership and call them to accountability for their people-harming use of the Mosaic Law. There is nothing so foul, Jesus is suggesting, as using a “politics of bread” to gain conformity from the people, because it is hitting them at their most vulnerable point. And therefore, he and his disciples will refuse to cooperate with that leadership’s manipulation of the Law in order to enforce that politics. Instead, they will protest, and they will publicly disobey the Powers. And what will the Powers do about such disobedience?

The next story continues the same theme of civil disobedience around the misuse and abuse of Sabbath Law by Israel’s religious, political and economic elite. “Again, Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come forward’. Then he said to him, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (3:1-6).

This story violates sacred space as well as sacred time, since this healing both takes place in a synagogue and on the Sabbath. This is the very center of the “symbolic order” of Israel’s religious/political elite – the center of their authority – and Mark wants the reader to understand that Jesus is now directly taking on these Powers at the very center of their power! Jesus and “his troops” have arrived at the “battle site”! And, indeed, Jesus does battle there!

This story is not about the healing of a man with a withered hand. If that was all this story was intended to be about, then that healing could have been conducted by Jesus in private – and no one would have had cause to be offended. Instead, Jesus chose to heal the man in the most public of places, the local synagogue. Likewise, if that man had a withered hand for much of his life, what difference would one more day make in getting it healed? Jesus could have waited until the Sabbath was over before healing that man's hand.

No, this story is not about the healing of that man with a withered hand. It was about the direct confrontation of Israel's "Powers that Be" by intentionally healing the man in sacred space during sacred time, so that the confrontation could not be ignored but had to be addressed. It was a direct "in-your-face" action on the part of Jesus, and it had its intended result.

This story, so early in the Gospel of Mark, is meant to present when Jesus "crossed the line" – when he passed "the point of no return". Once Jesus took such conspicuous action in front of his enemies, he had forced their hand. They now had the alternative of only two responses to Jesus' action of publicly healing the man on the Sabbath. They either could revise their interpretation of the Mosaic Law and thus begin treating the people with justice, compassion and equity (rather than using the Law to increasingly exploit and oppress the people). Or they could begin planning the elimination of Jesus. They chose the latter (3:6).

Jesus acted intentionally to confront the systems. That he intended to do so, and understood fully the consequences of what he was doing, can be noted in what he said to the Pharisees immediately before he took that irretrievable action. "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" The purpose of civil disobedience is to break a law in order to draw attention to deeper issues of morality (that is, the "Law" behind the "law"). Jesus is about to disobey the Law by healing this man in a public place in sacred time. But he does so by paraphrasing a "higher law" – Deuteronomy 30:15-18 – in his rhetorical question, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save live or to kill". Deuteronomy 30:15-18 reads:

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today by loving the Lord your God and walking in his ways, then you shall live and become numerous and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods (i.e., the worship of power, wealth and domination of the Romans) and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish"!

Every Pharisee standing in that crowd and hearing Jesus' challenge, knew exactly to what Jesus was referring. They were as familiar with Deuteronomy 30 as was he. They knew the gauntlet had publicly been thrown down before them. What would they now do? Would they repent of their dominating and power-hungry ways? Or would they pick up that gauntlet and go into battle against this Jesus? "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (3:6)!

**II Corinthians 4:5-12** can be best understood in the light of the over-all theme of both of Paul's letters to the Corinthian Church (I Corinthians and II Corinthians). The Church in the city of

Corinth was a deeply troubled church, facing divisions over people and beliefs (I Cor. 1:10-17), problems of immorality (6:18-7:1), extramarital affairs, divorces and breakdowns in marriages (7:2-16), lack of accountability (3:10-17), lack of discipline (5:3-13), lawsuits against each other (6:1-11), insensitivity and lack of caring for each other (10:1-14), being seduced by the standards of the dominant culture (10:27-30), arguments over alternate styles of worship (11:2-34), dissent over the exercising of people's gifts (14:1-40), dissent over whether and how the church should be involved in addressing social concerns (II Cr. 8:1-9:15) and dissent over financial priorities (II 9:6-15).

The Corinthian Church was in such a mess, because it was split into four warring factions: the "Pauline" party consisting of those whose allegiance was to Paul made up primarily of lower class people, the "Apollos" party formed around Paul's successor as pastor of the church and made up of Corinth's intelligentsia, the "Peter" or "Cephas" party made up of Judaizers who had entered Corinth and were trying to return the church to obedience to the Jewish Law, and the "Christ" people – that is, those who belonged to none of the other three groups and thus formed their own party. Paul, observing the chaos and dysfunctionality of the church as a result of such warring interests, inserted himself as an apostle into this struggle, trying to bring resolution and unity into this mess. His letters of I and II Corinthians are his attempt to recall the Church in Corinth to both its theological roots and to its mission as Christ's body in that famed Greek city. Paul had to be rather direct and even heavy-handed in order to bring unity to his troubled church. In today's epistle lesson, Paul seeks to ameliorate some of that heavy-handedness by reminding the Corinthian Church that he has come to them as a "treasure in a clay jar" (vs. 7).

Paul reminds them that he has ministered among them in the past and now writes to them, not to exalt himself or to try to preserve his "party", but simply to exalt Jesus Christ. "We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake", he writes (vs. 5). So learn from Paul's humble sharing of the gospel. Allow "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" to shine into the darkness that your church faces, and thus allow God's healing to occur within the church and between its conflicted members (vs. 6).

Because he is nothing more than a "clay jar", fallible, fragile and easily breakable and yet appointed to hold the "precious oil" of the gospel, it is crucial that the Corinthian Church understand that any power that they see exhibited in him is really the power of God showing through him. In himself, Paul is simply that fragile vessel. It is God who is the epitome of power!

In order to demonstrate his vulnerability, Paul writes some of the most eloquent words in the epistle (second only to I Corinthians 13). "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (vss. 8-12).

When we read a statement like this from Paul in an authorized or more formal translation, the words are so familiar that we often miss the power of them which the Corinthian Christians would have heard afresh. But consider this free-spirited translation:

“You know for yourselves that we’re not much to look at. We’ve been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we’re not demoralized; we’re not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we’ve been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn’t left our side; we’ve been thrown down, but we haven’t broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us – trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us – he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus’ sake, which makes Jesus’ life all the more evident in us. While we’re going through the worst, you’re getting in on the best”.<sup>1</sup>

Then, Paul concludes, “We’re not keeping this quiet, not on your life. We say what we believe. And what we believe is that the One who raised up the Master Jesus will just as certainly raise us up with you, alive. Every detail works to your advantage and to God’s glory: more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise” (II Cor. 4:13-15)!<sup>2</sup> This is Paul’s call, and this is Paul’s gospel shared with the people in the Corinthian Church in order to call them toward a compassionate commitment to each other and to that Body of Christ!

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson, Eugene H., *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1993), pp. 441-442.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442.