

CALLED TO BE SAINTS
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You are God's Beautiful Beloved Child, Paul says (in a roundabout way). In your baptism, Paul says, God claimed you for new life in the peace of Christ: a peace that passes all understanding.

But this "you" is not just "you" – individual – Gusti ... Jack ... Lois ... although it is, I would argue, quite *personal* ... Pat ... Jan ... Gordon ...

It's not just "you" individual who is God's Beloved Child, but "y'all" in the Greek. Or perhaps more to the point: "God claimed all y'all ... in all y'all's baptism ... as God's Beloved Child ... to live as The Body of Christ ... in grace and in peace.

The prophets call it The Beloved Community, this vision of who we are meant to be in our collective baptism. The Peaceable Kingdom is another word for it. The Great Shalom. Where we have finally figured out how to love God and our neighbor with all our heart and soul and mind. Where we have finally figured out how to lay down our sword and shield. Where we have finally figured out how to dwell as wolf and lamb together. With the little children leading us.

We learn this from Paul's letter to the Galatians, in which he describes the very first baptismal liturgy of the early church, recited by confirmands as they rise from the waters: "there is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Imagine reciting this liturgy over and over as newcomers join the Body. Over and over a renewed commitment to live as a Beloved Community. Where there are no more racial and ethnic and religious divisions. Where there is no more economic exploitation. Where there is no more gender-related oppression.

This is the "sainthood" to which the Corinthians have been called. To which the Galatians have been called. To which you and I have been called. "The provisional demonstration of the kingdom of God," as we say in the Presbyterian tradition.

This is the whole point of the grace and peace of God, Paul says to the Corinthians: that you testify to this vision of the Beloved Community, to this image of who The Body of Christ really is.

And look, Paul says, my brother Sosthenes and I are living proof of this very vision. (At least in the minds of some Pauline scholars, who think Sosthenes may have been a former slave of Paul, until they are both baptized into the Body of Christ.)

The problem is, you are not actually living the sainthood of your calling, Paul will go on to say to the Corinthians later in this letter. Chastising them, with great love, but with great sadness.

The problem is, Paul will go on to say, The Beloved Community you are meant to be as The Body of Christ has become instead a broken congregation spiraling back to all those divisions we vowed to set aside.

And Paul will give one heartbreaking example of this in the second half of the eleventh chapter, as it relates to the Sacrament of Communion.

In the Corinthian church – and the early church in general – communion is a full meal. A potluck of sorts. Maybe even a "Moveable Feast." Where members of the community bring what they can to share with the whole. Some bringing very little. Some bringing quite a lot.

As you might imagine the ones who can bring quite a lot are more wealthy. They can afford to take the entire day off of work. They maybe even have servants to help prepare the food for the sacrament.

As you might imagine the ones who can only bring very little are less wealthy. Perhaps still enslaved, with great difficulty getting away from non-Christian masters. Yet still faithful members of The Body of Christ.

Instead of sharing the whole meal together as a re-enactment of the loaves and fishes miracle, Paul laments, the early birds have gorged on every single worm there is. Leaving crumbs for those whose life circumstances have held them back.

Instead of living as The Beloved Community God intended in their baptism, where there is no division of race, gender, or economic status, the Corinthians have instead hardened those divisions, dishonoring The Body of Christ.

But Paul has not given up on them.

In this first chapter of the letter, in his opening remarks, Paul calls them to the better angels of their nature. Reminds them who they really are. Who they really want to be. Beloved Children of God.

Every last one them called to be saints. Every last one of them strengthened by God in the midst of their failings, so they may become “blameless.”

You have everything you need, Paul says. “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift,” Paul says, to correct your behavior and live as God intended.

It is not unlike “The Letter from a Birmingham Jail” written by Martin Luther King, Jr. to eight white Alabama clergymen criticizing his presence and methods in the Civil Rights Movement.

“I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth,” King writes in response to their arguments against his ministry. “I want to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.” And then, of course, King goes on to defend the motivations, tactics, and goals of the Civil Rights Movement from an explicitly Christian perspective.

“You are God’s Beloved Child” you can almost hear King preaching in this letter, as he tries to find common ground with these pastors. Called to be Saints. Don’t you remember. God wants you ... all y’all ... all of US ... to live as The Beloved Community. One Body of Christ, in whom there is no longer slave and free. In whom there is no longer *the legacy* of slavery. And God has given you every spiritual gift to make it so.

One of the recipients of King’s letter was the Rev. Edward Ramage, Moderator of the Synod of Alabama at the time and Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham. Deeply moved by King’s letter, he changed his heart and mind. He “repented.” He resolved to live in the grace of his baptism and ultimately stood up to segregationists in his congregation, leading the community toward greater openness, integration, and a legacy of activism that continues to this day.

We do not know, ultimately, if the church in Corinth responds in the same way to Paul’s call to be saints. Paul’s follow-up letters indicate the struggle continued. Just as the struggle continues for us in this country to live the baptismal vow that there be “no longer slave or free” in body or soul. And that there no longer be the legacy of slavery in body or soul ...

And so you and I here at SPC have been invited to read yet another letter from another saint of the church calling us to even greater sainthood as The Beloved Community in our adult Sunday Seminar throughout February and March. *Dear White Christian* by Jennifer Harvey.

I have not yet read this letter. I am, to be honest, somewhat afraid to read this letter. It’s one thing to read MLK’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in the safety of my seminary studies and imagine I would never take the white moderate position of the clergy to whom King writes. But in the pulpit of a southern Presbyterian church, most likely built with slave labor, I’m afraid I will be challenged in ways I am not yet able to imagine.

What if this letter asks us to hear the letter of a former slave-woman sitting in our own church balcony a century ago in the era of Jim Crow? What would she say to us about our need to repent for the legacy of white supremacy, yes even here in our own congregation? What would she say to us about repairing the breach that remains?

I hope she would follow in the words of the apostle Paul, to call us to the better angels of our nature. To chastise us for our failure to live up to the baptismal covenant. And to challenge us to trust that God is giving

us everything we need to make the right amends. So that we, too, “may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Amen.