

Sermon for Sunday, June 16, 2024

1 Corinthians 15:1-26 and 51-57

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today we complete our reading of the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 15 Paul makes his argument about the resurrection of the dead and the belief upon which all followers of Jesus pin their hope. Paul, as usual, packs many ideas into run-on sentences that can make it a challenge for us to grasp his thought process. For my sermon today I'm going to make a few comments about Paul's list of witnesses in verses 3 to 11. Then we will focus our attention on verses 12 through 20.

- "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?"
- "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised;"
- "and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain."
- "We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ-- whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised."
- "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised."
- "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."
- "Then those also who have died in Christ have perished."
- "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

In earlier parts of this letter it is clear that Paul has been answering questions that have come to him from the Corinthian church. It is not as obvious in this section.

In verses 3-11 Paul lists a number of witnesses who actually saw Jesus alive after his death and burial. They were eye witnesses to the resurrection and proclaimed/stated clearly (and at a certain amount of risk to their personal well-being ) that Jesus was raised from the dead. Paul's point is to affirm that all these people saw Jesus alive and they are proclaiming this news far and wide. If, as witnesses, they are telling everyone that Jesus was raised, then the Corinthians have no business to say that there is no

resurrection of the dead. To be clear: to the best of our knowledge based on Paul's writings he never saw the resurrected Jesus as his list of witnesses did. Yes, Jesus did appear to him on the road to Damascus but this appearance occurred after Jesus' ascended to heaven. The list that Paul gives us is of people who saw Jesus alive during the in-between time after his resurrection and prior to his ascension. (The gospels affirm that Jesus appeared first to women, but sadly, Paul does not name any of them in this list.)

Beginning in verse 12 Paul's argument takes a trip down logic street. You can tell because he is using "if-then" statements. His first statement is that "if there is no resurrection then Christ has not been raised." The proclamation of the early witnesses is false; it's a lie. Logically then, if Christ has not been raised then Paul's proclamation has also been a lie and a complete waste of time. In addition then those Corinthians who, with faith, believe this proclamation are also believing a lie and wasting their time.

From Paul's perspective what is even more frightening is that he might be accused of misrepresenting God. In other words, he could be making a claim about God's power that is untrue. Or accused of telling a lie about God. Why? Because he said that God raised Jesus from the dead.

If God isn't powerful enough or didn't act to raise Jesus from the dead, then believing in YHWH, the God of the Jewish people is fruitless and a waste of time. In addition the good news that our sins are forgiven is irrelevant and all those who have already died believing everything what Paul taught about God and Jesus have wasted their time. If these beliefs are meaningless then the only thing they (and we) are due is pity for our foolish belief in his words.

And then along comes verse 20. It is a stunning counter statement to everything that Paul has written. Paul asserts, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died." This is an amazing and challenging statement because we have to believe; first the witnesses and then those who recorded the stories for those of us who follow. There are no eye-witnesses still alive that we can speak to. We, like all those incredulous Corinthians, have to take the words, the stories written in the Scriptures, in faith. We have to trust. We have to believe without proof.

Of course the Corinthians, like us, are trying to figure out how this resurrection business is going to work. What's it going to look like?

That's when Paul writes about the mystery of resurrection in verses 51-57. "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality."

To clarify: when Paul says, "We will not all die" he is doing so based on his belief that the return of Jesus was imminent. He could not imagine that we would be sitting here 2000 years later. He is writing to the Corinthian audience who is trying to understand two things in their context: How's it going to work for those of us who are still alive when Jesus returns? The second question what's going to happen to those who have died and are buried? How is that going to work?

As we gather here 2000 years later, eternal life and the resurrection of the dead remain steeped in mystery. We don't know how it's going to work. We don't know what our eternal body is going to look like. We don't know. Now we can imagine, but in another place Paul says that "we see in a mirror dimly." So, yes, we can imagine, but as we do so, we do not have full understanding.

For 2000 years the stories of Jesus' resurrection from the dead have been passed on to us. We can believe those stories or not. But Jesus teaches in John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. We are the "whosoever" friends. We gather here in belief. And when our belief falters or doubt creeps in, we utilize the faith of our friends to keep us strong.

With this sermon we complete our walk through Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. It's remarkable to think that his words would carry so much weight and benefit to us as followers of Jesus—almost 2000 years later. We can give thanks for the gift of Paul and his ministry and words trusting that they will continue to build up the body of Christ just as they have done in the past.