

Yes in Christ

Date: 21 June 2020, 2nd Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's online

Series: God's Power in Our Weakness

Texts: 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:11

Have you ever promised one thing and then done something else and had to do a whole lot of explaining to patch things up? Once when Claire and I were dating I was an hour and a half late for a date. Claire was understandably very upset. She had been waiting, wondering what was going on? Why is he late? Doesn't he care about me? Is he trying to test me? Is he playing a cruel joke on me? Now I was battling with some mental health issues at the time, and it was a real struggle for me just to leave the house. But if I had gotten out of my own head and thought about Claire's perspective, that may have helped me get my act together. When I did finally arrive we had to have a long talk and Claire was very gracious to forgive me.

Why this story? Well 2 Corinthians is a window into Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth. Reading the letter is like listening to a phone call, but you can only hear one side of the conversation. As we listen we hear just how the good news of God's grace in Jesus shapes how Paul relates to the Corinthians as their pastor. We also hear how Paul's deep desire is that this good news would shape their lives.

We pick up the letter where Paul is trying to explain why he changed his plans to visit them and the misunderstanding that this has caused. In verse 15-16 Paul says he wanted to visit them on his way to Macedonia, and on his way back from Macedonia. But we learn in 2.1 after his first visit, he changed his travel plans.

I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. Instead, he wrote to them. That letter does not survive, but from this letter we can see that was difficult for Paul to write and it caused them pain, but he wrote what he did because he loved them, 2.4:

I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

From 2.5-6 it looks like that letter contained a stinging rebuke to a particular individual. We can imagine it may have been along the lines of the issues Paul raised in 1 Corinthians - like a man in the church carrying on an affair with his step mother. The rebuke was also for the church as a whole. Indeed Paul's first visit had been painful too. In 7.5 he writes,

For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within

That conflict, the letter and Paul's change of plans caused grief and confusion in the church in Corinth. Reading Paul's answers we can pick up some of their questions. Where did they stand with Paul? Why did he change of plans? Why was he angry

with them? Did he actually care about them, or was he lording it over them? Were they even Christians?

I think about when one of my kids does something they shouldn't, especially if it's dangerous. I raise my voice at them and tears start to well up in their eyes. They need to know that what they've done wasn't ok. But even more they need to know that I love them. In fact it's because I love them that they're getting in trouble, because I want them to be safe and to do the right thing, or as we say, "make good choices".

It's not just kids. Communication between adults is hard enough. I can't count the number of times I've said something to someone and they have taken it completely differently from what I intended. If you think about communication there is the speaker, the message and the hearer. On the speaker's side there is what they intend to say. There is what they actually say. Then there is what the other person hears and how they interpret that. If you think about when you listen, all kinds of things can affect what you hear. You're having a bad day and so an innocent comment becomes an insult. You've got a bad relationship with the speaker, so you expect an attack. A topic of conversation triggers your memory of a childhood wound and you have an emotional reaction out of proportion to the present situation.

How does Paul address these complexities and the Corinthians' insecurities and anxieties? And what might God teach us through him? First, he says, "Look at how we've acted in the past," 1.12:

Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

Holiness and sincerity. Not with worldly wisdom, or more literally, the wisdom of the flesh, but according to God's grace. This is what godly character in leadership looks like.

Second, even in the midst of miscommunication, Paul is hopeful. 1.13:

For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, 14 as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Sometimes you can get so stuck in your own head that it's hard to know if your take on a situation has any connection to reality. Fears, doubts, trauma, even pride can so overwhelm you that they become the lens through which you see the world, and they make it hard for an outside message to filter through. But Paul says, no there is an objective reality. On the day Jesus returns, his judgment will lay things bare. Wounds

will be healed. Pride will be brought low. The truth will out. And because of that, understanding is possible now. And so he will keep the lines of communication open.

Third, Paul speaks to the heart of the Corinthians insecurities. He may have changed his plans, but that doesn't mean God has changed his mind about them.

But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." 20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.

Sometimes when we read the worst into the words and actions of others it's because of our own insecurities and anxieties. Maybe wounds that you've received make the sky always grey. In Jesus, God's word to you is not "Yes" and "No", but always "Yes". In fact on the cross Jesus took God's word of "No" so that you might receive God's "Yes". That word of "Yes" in Jesus is the bedrock of our lives. Without him, we are nothing. But in him we can stand. And Paul reminds the Corinthians that this is the truth for both them and him. They meet each other in Jesus.

What's more, for those who trust in Christ our standing before God is unshakable and our future is secure because he himself has made his home in us by the Holy Spirit.

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, 22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

In Jesus, God is for you. He is for you. And if you trust in Jesus he will pour out his Holy Spirit on you. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of glory and eternal joy in the presence of God. That is our hope and security, whatever life throws at us. Do you know that? Are you trusting in Jesus?

Placing your feet on the solid rock of God's "Yes" to you in Jesus allows you to take a step back and evaluate what others say and do towards you from a place of safety and security. You will be able to hear even criticism and not respond in anger or self-loathing. You can ask, "Because I am safe in Christ and the Holy Spirit is transforming me to be more like Christ, what do I need to hear in this criticism?"

Finally, there are lots of lessons for me as your pastor in these verses. Paul's heart and joy are deeply bound up in the spiritual wellbeing of the Corinthians. All his decisions are for their good, and not his own comfort or power.

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. 1.24

Sometimes his leadership meant tears and anguish, and yet he is full of hope for them because God is at work. That is a model that I want to follow.