

This morning, I am in the second week of my sermon series entitled “Strength in Weakness,” looking at the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians. If you are unfamiliar with this book, it is a letter written by an early church leader named Paul to a church he had started around the year 50 AD in the Greek city of Corinth, which in Paul’s day was part of the Roman Empire. Corinth was a very wealthy city and experienced all kinds of issues in their young church, which is why we have two lengthy letters in the Bible from Paul to this church, as well as evidence of at least two other letters that are not in the Bible and no longer in existence.

The timeline that we learn by reading these letters is that after Paul left Corinth to start another church, things were not going well with the church he left behind, and so he wrote the letter we call 1 Corinthians to address some of the problems. Apparently, a number of the Corinthian Christians rejected Paul’s authority and questioned his integrity, and so he followed up on his letter by making what he calls in this passage a “painful visit” to them to set things straight. In particular, we find in today’s reading that there is one individual in particular who caused a great deal of trouble who needed to be disciplined by the church by being confronted regarding his sin. Paul makes plans for a return visit, but his plans are changed, and so instead of visiting, he sends another letter with a man named Titus, which he references in 2 Corinthians 7, to confront the issues that persist. While many in the church take his words to heart and repent, there are others who are still doubting Paul’s authority or integrity. To add to the trouble, there are other teachers who have entered the community, who Paul calls “the super-apostles,” who are more impressive than Paul and are teaching a message that appeals to their desire for health, wealth, and comfort, while also throwing shade on Paul because he is poor, seems to be suffering a great deal, and is not as impressive as they are. Paul is very troubled by this reality, so much so that in today’s passage we read that he was anxiously awaiting Titus’ return visit so that he would know whether things have gotten better or worse with the Corinthian church that he loves so much.

If you had a hard time following all of that, the bottom line is that the relationship between Paul and the church he started is strained. **When it comes to unity and having harmonious relationships, there are two things that are very true:** The first is that unity matters a great deal to God. And the second is that we as humans are not only terrible at unity, but we seem to be getting worse at achieving it. Whatever your opinion is of the events at the Capitol this past week, I think it’s inarguable that there is significant division in our country, and worse, a marked decrease in civility and decency. Our discourse is dominated by a social media that amplifies every difference and every argument, and our world is dominated by technology that keeps people from face-to-face interaction, which is where many differences

can be worked through. The United States of America is rapidly becoming the Divided States of America.

And sadly, even in the church, unity can be hard to come by. A quick Google search puts the number of Christian denominations in the United States at anywhere between 200 and 1200. Apparently, there are a lot of things to divide over. It takes a lot of work to maintain unity. But unity matters to God. Remember Jesus' high priestly prayer:

John 17:20-23 - *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

Jesus says that the unity of the church will be a witness to the world that Jesus is divine, that He was sent by God. In fact, you could sum up the gospel, the Christian message, in one word: reconciliation. Listen to Paul later in 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 5:17-20 - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

The gospel message is one of reconciliation to God – where there was enmity and separation, now there is peace and unity. Listen to me: God has called you to be a peacemaker. And he has called his church to be an army of peacemakers. As Jesus said in **Matthew 5:9** – ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."***

Listen to me: in this divided and fractured world, we as the church have a tremendous opportunity to be salt and light, to show through our words and conduct how to bring about peace and unity. But we are going to have to figure out how to not become part of the problem. So this morning, let's look at how Paul

tried to work through his strained relationship with the Corinthian church and what we can learn from this passage:

¹² Now this is our boast: 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. 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. ¹⁵ Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you **might benefit twice**. ¹⁶ I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. ¹⁷ When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"? ¹⁸ 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. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us **to the glory of God**. ²¹ 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. ²³ I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. **2 Corinthians 2:1 - 13:13** So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. ² For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? ³ I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all **share my joy**. ⁴ For 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. ⁵ If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent-- not to put it too severely. ⁶ The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. ⁷ Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be **obedient in everything**. ¹⁰ If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven-- if there was anything to forgive-- I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. ¹² Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, ¹³ I still had no peace of

mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.

In 2:11, Paul references Satan, the adversary, and how they are not unaware of his schemes to destroy the church and the people God loves. In this passage, I see three schemes, three ways Satan works to divide and destroy the people of God. Or, if you prefer to leave Satan out of it, three ways we can do a pretty good job of destroying ourselves. Now, the focus of this passage, and my focus this morning, is primarily on our relationships as Christians. However, you will likely be able to find some principles that apply beyond the church.

1) Miscommunication, faulty assumptions, and suspicion of motives.

Paul begins with these words:

¹² Now this is our boast: 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. 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.

Sadly, Paul has to defend himself against accusations that he is not acting in sincerity or integrity. Boasting in this context is not self-glorification but confidence in what God is doing. He goes on to explain why he did not come when he said he would.

¹⁷ When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"? ¹⁸ But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No."

Remember that there are no phones, no way of communicating expediently the change in plans. And so there seems to be a lot of suspicion and assumptions on the part of the Corinthians as to why Paul did not come. But he gives them his reason:

¹ So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.

He knew that the visit would not go well because of the turmoil and opposition, so he wrote them a letter encouraging the church leaders to deal with the person who was causing the trouble.

⁹ The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.

And it sounds like the Corinthian church took his counsel and disciplined the offender to the point where Paul now calls for them to forgive him. This would have involved confronting him with his sin, and if necessary, removing him from the church community.

⁶ The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. ⁷ Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.

The first scheme Satan uses to divide the church is miscommunication, faulty assumptions, and suspicion of motives. The less you talk face-to-face, the more you begin to question motives and make assumptions about people, and they tend to be uncharitable. And that is how Satan gets a foothold. Consider this:

In a famous experiment from the 1950s, psychologists found that when a group of boys were randomly assigned to two teams and then isolated from each other, hostility between the two groups escalated to a perilous level. Conversely, when people from an in-group spend time with those from an out-group, dislike or mistrust declines. As the social psychologists Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp found in their [landmark survey](#) based on 515 empirical studies, prejudice and distrust are greatly reduced when groups get to know one another.

This happens all the time, even in the church. I remember one person having an issue because my wife did not say hi to them at the church picnic. Early on in my time as a pastor, our leadership had done such a poor job of communicating that we had to bring in an outside church mediator to help. The less you talk, the more you make assumptions and question people's motives and the more Satan divides the church.

What should we do in response? When you find yourself assuming things about someone, or being suspicious of their motives, go and talk to the person. Listen to them and seek clarification, and be charitable in your judgments. Don't assume the

worst of people. You may just find that your assumptions and suspicions were completely off track.

Remember what James says:

James 1:19-20 - My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Most of us need to hear this often. Be quick to listen and slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Be slow to type, and be slow to post. Instead, seek to understand before you seek to be understood. Seek to understand someone who believes differently than you do, someone who sees the world from a different perspective. Not so that you might argue with them, but so that you might love them better.

This is what Paul does when faced with the miscommunication and faulty assumptions of the Corinthians. First, he decides not to visit them, because he believes it will cause more hurt. And then, when he writes to them, he tries to clarify what has happened and remind them that he is a minister of Jesus, in whom yes is always yes. He reaffirms his love for them.

So the first of Satan's divisive schemes in the church that we see in 2 Corinthians 1-2 is miscommunication, faulty assumptions, and suspicion of motives. The second is:

2) Gossips and slanderers

In 2 Corinthians 1 & 2, we see Paul contending with an individual who was stirring people up through his slander against Paul. This, in conjunction with the "super-apostles" who were also throwing shade on Paul and his ministry, was causing all kinds of division in the church.

One of the reasons that unity is so hard to achieve is because many of us are insecure, unsure about our value. **And one of the ways we see to convince ourselves of our value and worth is to put down other people.** Just look at the popularity of the supermarket tabloids and how they revel in shaming famous people. Satan can quickly do a lot of damage in a church through encouraging people to spread lies or gossip.

James 4:11-12 - *Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you-- who are you to judge your neighbor?*

I don't even know what the gossip is about me or my family, but I'm sure it's out there, as people are not always willing to bring it to your face to see if it's true. I am always willing to listen. But what is the solution?

The answer is first and foremost to find your value in Christ so that you will not be drawn to gossip and slander. Remember what Paul says in this passage:

²¹ *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*

We belong to Him. He died for us, He gave us His Spirit, and we will be with Him forever. Nothing can take that away from us. The more you find your value in what God thinks about you, the less you need to put down other people in order to feel valuable.

And the second solution is once again is face-to-face communication. If you hear something about another person, do not tell others, but go to that person. If someone does something you think is wrong, then speak the truth in love to them.

Ephesians 4:15 - *speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*

The third of Satan's divisive schemes in the church is:

3) Unforgiveness

In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul tells the church that after the person has been disciplined and has repented, that they need to forgive him so that Satan would not outwit them and bring division.

⁶ *The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. ⁷ Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ The*

reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. ¹⁰ *If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven-- if there was anything to forgive-- I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

Perhaps the most important element in unity is to be willing and able to forgive offenses. Even more important than good communication or listening skills or respect is to be willing to forgive a person who has offended you. After all, even with the best communication, we are inevitably going to offend others that we love, and without forgiveness, even the best relationships can fall apart. Remember what Jesus said about forgiveness:

Matthew 18:21-22 - *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

I don't know if you've noticed, but there is a crisis of forgiveness in our culture. We live in a cancel culture, where anyone can be shunned for life if they do something that offends our cultural sensitivities. I read all the time about people who apply for good jobs, but then the digging into their online past begins, and if they said something offensive, even 20 years ago, then they are canceled, fired before they even begin, even if have matured since then and confessed that it was wrong. The truth is that forgiveness is in short supply in our culture. It is much more of a witch hunt culture, where people are rewarded for calling out offensive behavior and feel better about themselves for publicly shaming and canceling people. But as frightening as this is, once again, **what an opportunity for the church to show a better way by being the fountain of grace and forgiveness!**

Remember what Jesus said:

Matthew 5:43-45 - *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

Now forgiveness is not condoning what someone has done, and it doesn't necessarily mean forgetting what someone has done or that there are no consequences for another person's actions. But it does entail a willingness to let go of an offense, to leave it in God's capable hands for judgment, and to treat the

other person with love again. It is to have compassion for an offender, not because they deserve it, but because God had compassion on you, forgiving your sins.

Luke 23:32-34 - *Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals-- one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

In 2 Corinthians 2, we see Paul making every effort at peacemaking and unity, to cut through the miscommunication, the faulty assumptions, and the suspicion of his motives. We see him not putting up with gossip and slander, but speaking the truth in love. And we see him emphasizing forgiveness, just as in Christ God has forgiven them.

Let me say this once again: **God has called you to be a peacemaker.** In this divided world in which we live, the church has the opportunity to shine like the stars in the sky, to be salt and light.

Ephesians 4:1-6 *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Being a peacemaker will mean speaking face-to-face, or over the phone if you have to in this climate. It means being quick to listen and slow to speak, and slow to become angry. And it means extending grace and forgiveness.

So can we consider how we might put the peacemaking spirit of Paul into practice in our lives? First and foremost, this peacemaking has to begin in the church. Jesus said:

Matthew 5:23-24 – *“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”*

Isn't that amazing? It seems that to God, unity is more important than your worship or offering. This must be a community full of grace, forgiveness, and unity.

Secondly, in your family. Husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, you are called to be a peacemaker in your home. Holding grudges and refusing to show grace is not consistent with being a follower of Christ. You say “Yes, but you don’t know my situation.” No, I don’t, and I am happy to listen to it. But I do know that God has everything that you need in order to show grace and love. Go deeper into the well of His grace. Remember:

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸Love never fails.

And lastly, as you interact with the world. Some of you need to stop. (slide) You know what I am talking about. You need to put a post-it note with James 1:19-20 on your computer – be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. If you can’t understand why someone could think the way they do, don’t argue with them on Facebook or Twitter. Call them up and have a conversation with them. Social media can be a wonderful thing, but it can also draw us into sin very easily and lead to terrible division. If you can’t control yourself, then get off of it, or at least fast from it for a week and see how you feel. Can I encourage you to ask the Lord for His opinion on your interaction with the world?

We have been given such an opportunity right now to be peacemakers. We can show a better way to communicate, to listen, to seek understanding and unity. We can be a community of love and unity, and act that way with others as well. Amen.