**Sermon 3/31/19**

**1 Corinthians 1:4-13; 1 Corinthians 3:1-11**

It seemed like the last place to start a church.

Every large city has one pocket

       where prostitutes, strippers, gamblers, and drug dealers hang out,

       and tourists stroll by to gawk at the sights.

In New York, it is Times Square; in San Francisco, the North Beach district;

      in New Orleans, Bourbon Street; and in Las Vegas, it is virtually anywhere.

In the ancient world, the whole city of Corinth was known for that kind of lifestyle.

Romans made the Corinthians the butt of dirty jokes,

       and playwrights consistently portrayed them as drunken brawlers.

The Greek verb "to Corinthianize" meant to live shamelessly and immorally.

Everyone knew what the Corinthians worshiped:

           money and the kinky things it could buy.

Money flowed freely, for Corinth straddled

         one of the Roman empire's most vital trade routes.

When a ship wrecked nearby, salvage companies housed the hapless sailors

        at inflated prices, while they scrambled to auction off the ship's cargo.

The city was a sprawling open-air market, filled with slaves, Orientals, Jews,

        Greeks, Egyptians, sailors, athletes, gamblers, and charioteers.

Corinth had a population of 700,000, second only to Rome's.

And as the capital of a large province, the city hosted a parade

            of Roman diplomats and dignitaries.

For their religious ideal, the fun-loving Corinthians adopted Venus,

         the goddess of love.

A temple built in her honor employed more than 1,000 prostitutes.

Due to all these influences, Corinth loomed as the one city

        least likely to convert to the Christian faith.

What crazy cults and new religions did spring up there,

          quickly gave into the prevailing good-time atmosphere.

But Paul was eager to take on the Corinthians.

He knew its strategic importance:

       if the gospel could take root there, it could transplant anywhere –

       and probably would, considering Corinth's crossroads location.

Paul worked in Corinth for 18 months. To everyone's surprise,

         the church he founded became one of the largest in the first century.

But several years later he heard reports that the church,

         true to its city's heritage, had broken out in a series of spiritual ills.

The distressing news prompted the letter known as 1st Corinthians.

The tone of this letter differs drastically from the one which preceded it.

Romans was a carefully crafted letter explaining faith and salvation.

But his first letter to the Corinthians was dashed off in tears and anger.

One of Paul's longest letters, it covers the greatest variety of topics,

     partly because the Corinthians added bizarre new twists to ethical issues.

In it a riled-up apostle gave direct, forthright advice to a troubled local church.

Paul saw alarming trends at work, and he used his full literary powers

      to set its members on the right course.

He tried sarcasm, emotional pleas, autobiography, poetry, and lengthy arguments.

Converts were lining up behind various church leaders:

           Peter, who had walked and talked with Jesus on earth;

          Apollos, with his sophisticated, cultivated style;

          Paul, the famous missionary;

          and Christ himself.

Paul had no tolerance for that kind of hero worship.

He stressed vigorously that Corinthians belonged only to God,

          not to any human worker.

It is good for us to read and pay attention to Paul's letters to all the church he planted.

Humans have not changed very much down through the centuries.

We make many of the same mistakes as the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians,

          Ephesians, Philippians, and all the others.

The Corinthians broke into factions – those who followed Peter,

those who listened to Apollos, those who paid attention only to Paul.

And, if we are not careful, we might do the same.

It is easy to become more concerned about whether we are

        Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, or Methodists,

        then to remember we are all Christians, following Jesus Christ,

        united in our baptism,

        and sharing in the same communion with all his followers,

       in all places, and throughout all times,

       working together to share the Good News,

        throughout the world.

Paul told the Corinthians they began as little children, mere infants in Christ.

He taught them the basics of the Christian faith, what they could understand.

But he expected them to grow in their faith,

          and learn how God wanted them to live and serve others.

Instead they were behaving like unruly children.

He urged them to listen to Peter, and Apollos, and Paul himself.

But to remember they were all only servants of God who helped them to believe.

God gave them the task of planting and growing the gospel in the hearts of others.

Paul told the Corinthians he planted the seed of the gospel in their hearts.

Apollos continued the teaching, like watering seeds so they could grow.

And yet, to remember, only God can make those seeds of faith grow.

We all have a part in spreading the faith.

As we mature in our understanding and faith,

           we plant and water the seeds of faith in the lives of others.

We are co-workers in God's kingdom.

It is not the one who plants, or the one who waters,

        who is at the center of this process, but God, who makes things grow.

It is not so important who does the planting, or who does the watering.

But it is important that someone does it!

Each of us has a part in helping people to experience

         God's love and peace, joy and forgiveness.

But if we are quarreling with each other, we accomplish little.

There was a man had several sons.

They didn't get along with each other.

Their constant bickering and fighting upset the father very much.

Often, but with no success, he urged them to live together in harmony.

One day he called them all together.

He gathered a bundle of sticks and tied them together.

Then he asked each one of them to try to break the sticks.

Each son tried as hard as he could,

          but none of them was able to break the bundle of sticks.

Then the father cut the cord which held the sticks together,

           and again asked them to break the sticks.

Separately they accomplished the task with the greatest of ease.

The loving father said "Remember, my sons, the power of unity!

        Bound together by brotherly love, you may defy almost every mortal danger.

        But separated and divided, you will fall prey to your enemies.

        Together you can accomplish almost anything.

        But alone you will often fail."

Paul urgently wanted the Corinthians, and all of us throughout the years,

        to stop behaving like unruly children, bickering and fighting with one another.

We are only young once, but we can be immature forever.

Sadly, the Christians in Corinth had a lot of growing up to do.

And if we are not watchful, we may fall into the same problems.

Paul insisted we all need to work together, building one another up in our faith.

When I was a child,

             I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

When I became an adult, I put childish ways behind me.

Let us always continue to grow in faith, understanding, and love,

          toward God, and one another.

AMEN