

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor  
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, June 27, 2021**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 13/Proper 8/Year B**  
**First Reading: Lamentations 3:22-33**  
**Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15**  
**Gospel Reading: Mark 5:21-43**  
**Sermon Title: “Building Character”**

**Theme**

*Paul encourages the Corinthians to honor their commitment to participate in the collection his churches are organizing for the Christians in Jerusalem. He presents Jesus as an example of selfless stewardship and reminds them that Christians have received abundantly so that they can share abundantly.*

**Text**

<sup>7</sup>Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

<sup>8</sup>I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. <sup>9</sup>For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. <sup>10</sup>And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—<sup>11</sup>now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. <sup>12</sup>For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. <sup>13</sup>I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between <sup>14</sup>your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

<sup>15</sup>As it is written,

“The one who had much did not have too much,  
and the one who had little did not have too little.”

## Sermon

During June, I have been preaching a short sermon series based on the Readings from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. Along the way, I have intended to teach you a little bit about the apostle Paul the author of the two letters to the Corinthians; Corinth the city and its people; some surprising theories about the two letters that are in the New Testament; and some of the issues that Paul faced with the Christian fellowship at Corinth.

### Paul (Tentmaking PIC)

Paul had a rough way to go as the preeminent evangelist to the Gentiles of the 1<sup>st</sup>-Century. Paul was what we pastors call *bi-vocational*, meaning he often worked in the tent-making trade to supplement the expense of his ministry. However, this was not Paul's choice. He would have preferred that the Christian fellowships he ministered to paid him at least enough to cover his living expenses because every moment that he was working his second job was time that he was not preaching and teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

(Priest PIC) This is in stark contrast to Judaism that Paul and other Jews came from, where the priesthood was the ancestral rite of those who were from the tribe of Levi, which of course led to corruption. The priests were often among the wealthiest of the Jewish population. Since they were paid a salary from the Temple treasury funded by Temple taxes and offerings, it *did not appear to come directly* out of the hands of the Jewish worshipers. If and when Paul was paid, it more directly came from the people he ministered to, and that led to resentment. And rather than risk offending any of his followers, and giving them fodder to question his character, he just lived in poverty. I imagine he did look disheveled and wore tattered and mended clothes, which would have been in stark contrast to most of the Christian fellowship at Corinth.

### Corinth (Acrocorith/Aphrodite PIC)

I mentioned that Corinth was an important city where a lot of people were wealthy or got wealthy. Sometimes people that have a lot of wealth are resistant to being told what to do and how to behave by others, especially others who are beneath their social standing. We often see this in our society from people in public office, or celebrities, or the wealthy who think they are somehow immune to judgment by others. This is the dynamic we have between Paul and some of the Corinthians.

Paul brought discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ to them, and for some of them, especially for those who might have previously been pagan, he had asked too much and they resented him, the poor shaggy unkempt itinerant preacher.

In First Corinthians, Paul addressed several issues of sexuality. There was a large following of the cult of Aphrodite among the Gentiles in Corinth—her temple was atop the Acrocorinthus, and her worship involved temple prostitution. The city had so many prostitutes that well-known Greeks, including Plato, openly referred to prostitutes as “Corinthians.”

Although many natives of Corinth placed faith in Jesus, many were still influenced by their immoral surroundings, which promoted sexual immorality. In First Corinthians, Paul mentioned the problem of sexual sin in the Christian fellowship at Corinth – for example, an incestuous relationship between a man and his father's wife (1 Corinthians 5:1–2). God ultimately used this problem to bring about Paul’s inspired writing on sexual purity, marriage, and the virtue of remaining single (1 Corinthians 6—7). How do you think that was received? This is another illustration of Paul trying to build character into the Christian fellowship at Corinth.

### **The Letters**

Though Paul was often pushy and arrogant, demanding and irritating, he was perceptive enough to know that when he had pushed the Corinthians too far, emphasis on "too far."

Have you ever sent an email or text message to someone and their response was not what you expected? I have, and when I have inquired about the response they said, they thought my email or text was sharply worded or snarky or whatever, and so I re-read my original message and thought to myself, I can see how they might have misunderstood my tone. Text does not emote authentically and Paul had that same problem First Century style. No doubt, Paul might have been more effective or chosen a softer path to yield better results had he been there face to face. But because of the tension, he deliberately stayed away. But that tension didn't stop him from doing what he felt called to do.

This is the tension that was building as Paul wrote them again in the passage we have today from Second Corinthians 8, in a series concluding sermon entitled, “*Building Character.*” Let's get started.

## Sermon

Paul began this passage by sucking up to the Corinthians a bit. He acknowledged their high culture in writing,

<sup>7</sup>Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

The "generous undertaking" requires a little unpacking. You may recall, that right after the Resurrection, the remaining former disciples, now apostles, waited for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. And when it came upon them, they all started their ministries there before heading out to all corners of the world. So the very first post-Resurrection converts to Christianity were Jewish proselytes living in Jerusalem. That did not sit well with the Jewish religious authority, and so they continued their evil ways by persecuting the Christians. Eventually, they coerced the Romans to participate, and so, suffice it to say that being a Christian in First Century Jerusalem was difficult. Pre-conversion Saul persecuted these very Jerusalem Christians. In our Reading for today, post-conversion Paul was taking up a collection to help sustain the persecuted Jerusalem Christian fellowship at Jerusalem and wanted the Christian fellowship at Corinth to participate.

Paul wrote in verse eight, that he does not want to *command* them to make an offering to this cause, though he certainly felt it was his right to. No, he would rather make them aware of the need and *test the genuineness of their love*. And then he pulled out the big Jesus gun when he wrote,

<sup>9</sup>For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

What he wrote here is not untrue! It is not inappropriate! I have used the same kind of expression myself to remind us of the great cost that was born to win our salvation. How can we, after receiving all the blessings we have, and even our very life, and the promise of life eternal, quibble about giving back ten percent? But I digress.

In verses ten and following, Paul reminded the Corinthians that they had begun this work on this donation previously but progress on getting it done seems to have gotten waylaid, perhaps by all this other drama between himself and them.

That never happens to you, does it? You make a commitment to a thing and then you get your feelings hurt, or it doesn't go the way you think it should and so you just quit, sometimes without formally quitting. To be honest with you, this happens in the church all the time. Look at the Living Photo Directory in Crossroads and ask yourself, "I wonder what happened to so and so. I haven't seen them in a long time, even before COVID-19."

It is on this subject of "*Building Character*" that I would like to spend the rest of my sermon time.

Paul is absolutely correct when he wrote,

<sup>9</sup>For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

"But I'm not rich," you say. Reflecting on Paul's life we ascertain that he wasn't writing about *this life* or *material wealth* because he had little regard for either. We're all gonna die and none of us can take any of our wealth with us. Reminds me of a story that I am told is true.

A man died and asked his three closest friends to each make a show of generosity and place a monetary gift in his casket.

The first, the man's pastor, reluctantly put a hundred-dollar bill in the casket, saying that it was foolish because you can't take money to heaven.

The second, the man's doctor, reluctantly put a thousand dollar bill into the casket, saying that it would have been wiser to heed the doctor's advice and live better, and longer.

The third, the man's lawyer, scolded the other two for their pettiness and said he would, unreservedly, honor the man's wishes. As the doctor had multiplied the

pastor's contribution tenfold, the lawyer said he would do the same. He wrote a check for \$10,000, tossed it on top of the bills, and walked away with a smile.

Paul was writing the Christian fellowship at Corinth about their adoption as God's children and becoming heirs to the kingdom of God. Add the wealth of Bezos, Musk, Gates, Zuckerberg, and Buffett and it doesn't even begin to compare to the wealth of the Creator of the universe. That is what awaits us who call Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives. And if indeed we call Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives, then participating in his church on earth is what we should be doing. If indeed we call Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives, then participating in his church on earth is a demonstration of our Christian character. And while we are still on earth, we ought to use that time to build our character into the likeness of Christ.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

I know you have other interests.

I know you want your kids to have every opportunity to try things and pursue their interests.

I know you hope to have enough to enjoy your retirement years.

But, no one, least of all me, knocked on your door begging you to join Christ's church. You did that of your own free will in obedience to the call of the Holy Spirit. Somehow the Holy Spirit reached you and convinced you that, against logic and common sense, there is something bigger than you and this temporal life that is worth investing yourself in. And that investment ought to be building your character into the likeness of Christ. Do you feel like your character is building into Christ's likeness?

And just so we are clear about what I am talking about, I am *not* talking specifically about a financial commitment, or a time commitment, or a participation commitment – even though that is how we live out our lives of discipleship. I'm really just talking about *not* missing out on living a well-lived life of discipleship, serving Christ and his purposes, and the opportunity to hear those words said of us, "Well done good and faithful servant." This is what I mean by Christ-like character.

Paul was reminding the Corinthians of their commitments. To paraphrase him, he said, "*Do what you say, and say what you do.*" It is a testimony to your devotion to the LORD. It is a demonstration of your Christian character. Don't let anything rob you of the joy and reward of living in the kingdom of God, both now and forevermore.

### **Prayer**

God of grace and mercy, we give you thanks for the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, who when confronted by the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, repented and turned his life around to serve Christ's church, risking his own well-being, putting aside his personal ambition, and giving himself fully to the cause of Christ. Inspire us to build our character into the likeness of Jesus Christ also. We pray this in his name. Amen