

Title:

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Jennifer Hasler

February 6, 2022: What is Most Important

1 Corinthians 15:1-11: Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you--unless you have come to believe in vain. 3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than *five hundred* brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Often one makes sure to mention the most important things at the end of a discussion. Often the most important items appear at the end of a story or at the end of a movie.

Today's passage comes from the end of 1 Corinthians, a book entirely about building a harmonious community. Paul writes about the most important aspect that brings the community together, the most important things.

Paul spent 18 months with this community likely 1-2 years before writing this letter. Many would remember times working with Paul over meals, making tents for the Roman military, or times just being in community. When Paul says he is reminding them about this good news,

Paul proclaimed
They all believed
They stand in it
The news that they are being saved.

They all know Paul's words are a shared experience.

This good news:

Jesus, who is known as Christ or Christos, the Greek form of the word Messiah, died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, and many others.

Everything changed when Jesus was resurrected.

Everything.

The entire world.

Their perspective of the whole world.

Jesus resurrection was not just a nice story or a nice legend to those hearing this letter. Jesus resurrection was not an event far in the past. To most hearing this letter, it was an event in their lifetime.

1 Corinthians is one of the oldest of all of our NT writings, written within 20 years of Jesus' resurrection. (as some of you might remember from Tuesday evening small group on the NT, where all are invited) Mark's gospel would be written likely 10 years later than this letter of Paul to Corinth. Remember Gospel means "Good News" and is the same word in Greek.

And Jesus' resurrection was not a simple event. At least 500 people saw the risen Jesus. Likely many more people saw Jesus. Most of those people are still alive, several of those individuals likely told the stories of how they were there when they saw the resurrected Jesus.

It would be hard to make up a story at this stage only 20 years out as so many people could simply provide witnesses to say something was incorrect. Twenty years was a short time 2000 years ago, as the pace of life did not have our fast and productive pace. And yet, if someone were to claim that 9/11 did not happen, an event roughly 20 years ago, many would strongly refute them based on eye-witness accounts. When a government tries to cover up an incident 30 years ago, like the Tiananmen Square Massacre, so many in the world strongly say otherwise, some from eye witness accounts. And the people in the Corinth area knew the accounts of several individuals, knew how the community expanded in roughly 10-15 years from a primarily a Jewish Judean movement to spread throughout the entire Roman Empire.

It was not just an event firmly placed in history, which it was, but something that transformed their lives and their surrounding community. It was something that transformed their day-to-day life, something that changed their day-to-day perspective to one of hope and purpose.

Part of the Corinthian church were Jewish, and yet, they identify first with this community, much like Paul, who was Jewish, identifies first with this community. Peter and all of the apostles were Jewish, and yet, they identified first with this community. As was discussed Friday evening small group (and yes, all are invited), identifying as Jewish was always primary. Throughout Jewish history, Jews would rather die than renounce being Jewish, rather die than fully assimilate into another culture such as Greek culture. The dietary laws are primarily a way to be a people set apart, a different culture. Even after the nation of Judea was conquered and exiled to Babylon, they retained their identity as a people. That sense of identity is so strong that we see a vibrant Jewish community today.

Many Jews would follow a teacher, known as a Rabbi, and even though that identity was very important, they were always Jewish first.

So what would have flipped the perspective that these individuals associate with this Jewish Rabbi first, and being Jewish second?

God broke in.

Jesus, that Rabbi, was resurrected from the dead. Not just revived, but resurrected into a physical form of glory.

No wonder this community was so important.

This community faced persecution. Paul knew about persecution because he was part of that persecution in Corinth at one point as well as was the subject of that persecution elsewhere. He and his community put themselves in the margins of society while still being very much part of the society. Being in the margins makes it essential for the community to stay together to survive and thrive.

And the community struggled to unite completely. In the first chapter of this letter, Paul starts off being shocked some people say they follow different teachers. In one way, this is not surprising, and yet, these divisions are completely unnecessary and are hurtful for the community.

Paul states “Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe”. It does not matter who you learned of the resurrection and then had faith in Christ. Everyone is all the same. Paul in fact lists himself as the least of those to whom Jesus appeared. Paul talks in the previous chapters (12-14) about different roles in the kingdom and that all are important. The community of this resurrected Jesus, where God broke in, is far more important than these secondary divisions.

Diversity creates a challenge to become community. This community at Corinth was incredibly diverse in ways that would remind us of our American diversity. Being part of this community of this resurrected Rabbi was likely the only thing they had in common. The people of the greater Corinthian church came from everywhere in the known world at that time. The small land region with the explicit city of Corinth on the east, and the related city of Cenchreae on the west, created a single multi-cultural, multi-ethnic metropolitan region with individuals from Rome, Gaul (France), Egypt, Morocco, Persia, and Ethiopia at any given time. This community had representatives from every economic class in the affluent city of Corinth, and this new Jesus community had individuals from each of these communities.

Creating coherent community from these diverse backgrounds was specifically Paul’s focus in writing his first letter to the greater community in Corinth. For Paul, being part of this community of this resurrected Rabbi was far more important than any of the differences, and he made the point as his conclusion of this important letter. And this letter illustrates how to handle struggles in similar multicultural communities.

Fortunately, we are far past any of the multi-cultural issues that Paul wrote about in his letter to Corinth nearly 2000 years ago.

And the very question is essential today.

There is the phrase that 11am on Sunday is the most segregated time in our country. Our churches seem to be tribal by a number of sub-cultures and sub-communities. We have movements that make us more and more tribal, a descent away from unity, both in the world and in the church. I imagine that Paul would not be happy by this situation.

Further, we are in a place where people no longer even feel like they can talk honestly about what they believe. A few years ago, a Cato institute study found that 62% of Americans “say the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe”. And the trend seems to be increasing across all demographics. Where ever you are on the political spectrum, it means we have many people who don’t quite connect with “Welcome home”. Nearly two-thirds of Americans are not allowed to be fully authentic in a space, or a congregation indirectly runs off individuals wanting to be part of the community. Two years of covid-19 isolation has only made things far far worse.

How can we still be the body of Christ together?

Paul understood these issues. And yet, what unites us? The amazing breaking in of God in history that Jesus was resurrected and lives today. That the kingdom of heaven has broken upon the earth, providing hope within this community where things are as they were always intended as well as life everlasting both now and in the life to come.

One of my seminary professors, LTJ, described a technique he used when having people deal with a difficult issue. Individuals would be around a number of tables and would rotate through a number of discussion groups. They were to introduce themselves with the question “how did you come to know the risen Jesus?” People would start by talking to people they knew, but after a few rotations, individuals were talking with those who were on opposite sides of an issue.

By starting with their experience of the risen Jesus, this aspect they had in common not only showed their humanity, but reminded everyone that no matter what particular difficult issue they are considering, they were reminded what was of most significant importance.

Everyone was a follower of the Risen Jesus.

In this community, we affirm our history, culture, and differences while realizing there is something far far greater that we have in common.

We follow this resurrected Rabbi.

We follow this event where God unmistakably broke into human history, making real history, and nothing was the same again.

This event changed human history forever. This year, 2022, marks the approximate number of years since the birth of Jesus. Who was this man that the history of Western Civilization is impossible to understand without understanding this event? It amazes us even now.

God broke into history.

For us, today, this is what is central.

Just imagine the witness to the world if the Church became the place of amazing community where people could be authentic AND have a wide range of opinions and no one is demonized, everyone has a voice, and all are welcome.

And amazing things would happen. Everywhere. And on this campus.

Thanks be to God.