

“Faith in Ordinary Time: Letters from Home”

1 Corinthians 1:1-9, 9:24-27

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

February 12, 2006 - 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

In an upstairs closet in our home, there is a box filled with letters that my parents wrote to each other in the early 1950s while they were engaged to be married. After my parents died, I became the custodian of those letters.

My mother was living at home with her parents in a small North Carolina town while my father was in the Army first at Fort Lewis in Washington State, and then at Fort Huachuca in Arizona. They wrote each other every day, counting down the weeks until they would be married, and so there are dozens and dozens of letters saved for posterity.

Now if you're a fan of romance novels, you might be interested in reading the passionately penned words between two twenty-somethings in love. But imagine if those two people were your parents. Nobody really wants to read love letters between one's parents. Too much information. Or so you'd think.

When I first brought home this box of letters, I wondered, “Should I even open them?” It felt like reading someone's diary. What if I learned some deep, dark family secret that I was never meant to discover?

Nevertheless I had to read them. They were part of my heritage.

The letters – whether from my mother to my father, or from my father to my mother – invariably start out so sweet that I felt a little sticky reading them. “My darling Barbara” or “My sweet, handsome Henry” . . . “I love you, love you, love you . . .” Ick.

After the mushy introductions, though, the rest of the letter was always fairly mundane. It seemed that not much happened at Ft. Huachuca. And even less happened in Mooresville, N.C.

From one of my mother's letters from home:

*My Dear Sweet, Handsome Henry . . . I love you, love you, love you.
I went to work today and it was fine. We ate leftover roast for dinner tonight, and then Mother went to Hazel's house to help her hem a dress for Gaile. Daddy killed a snake in the yard and Uncle Jim came over to take a look. But it wasn't a copperhead.
(Yawn.)*

Nothing terribly racy. In fact, nothing terribly interesting unless you enjoy hearing about canning peaches. Every once in a while, there might be mention of a family in town who had a baby, or an old friend who finally died. But not much happened in those ordinary days.

Of course, they were planning a wedding and so, in all those letters to and from home, they were looking ahead to an extraordinary day when my mother would wear white lace and my father would trade his uniform for a tuxedo and cake would be cut around my grandparents' dining room table. And the newlyweds would come to Washington, DC for a brief honeymoon, and have their photograph taken in front of the Washington Monument.

But that was all in the future for them. When they wrote most of those letters, Henry and Barbara wrote of their daily lives. And it was all very ordinary.

Paul was the apostle of Jesus who whose writing in the New Testament is in the form of letters. Paul wrote letters to the first Christians in Galatia and Philippi and Rome. He wrote at least three letters to the church in Corinth, one of which is lost.¹

Paul's hometown was Tarsus² located in southwestern Turkey about twelve miles from the Mediterranean Coast. It was located along the trade route between Europe and Israel and Egypt, and its primary claim to fame was that Paul – who was then known as “Saul” – grew up there. In young Saul's time, it was known as the place where Antony and Cleopatra met in the harbor on Cleopatra's royal barge.³

Saul left Tarsus as a young man to study Judaism in Jerusalem and it was on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus – while Saul was actively persecuting Christians – that he had a conversion experience that changed everything – including his name to “Paul.” From that point on, he lived “on the road” traveling from town to town, country to country, sharing the message of Christ.⁴

¹ 1 Corinthians 5:9 refers to a previous letter (before 1 Corinthians. See also <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/goodspeed/ch05.html>

² See <http://www.ancientroute.com/cities/Tarsus.htm> for more information about Tarsus. Scholars guess that Paul was born in about 10 AD. Tarsus had a rather large colony of Jews living there at the time drawn to the area because of its importance as a trade route.

³ In 41 BC.

⁴ Paul made three significant journeys and then traveled to Rome where most scholars believe he died a martyr's death. **Journey one:** To Antioch of Syria to Salamis through Cyprus to Paphos, from Perga to Antioch in Pisidia to Iconium to Lystra to Derbe, back to Lystra and Iconium and Antioch in Pisidia to Attalia to Antioch of Syria. **Journey two:** Through Syria and Cilicia to Derbe and Lystra, to Phrygia and Galatia, by Mysia to Troas through Samothracia and Neapolis to Philippi, through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica, to Berea, to Athens, to Corinth, to Senchrea, to Ephesus, to Caesarea (Syria) to Jerusalem, back up to Antioch. **Journey three:** Through Galatia and Phrygia to Ephesus, to Macedonia, to Greece, back to Macedonia and Philippi, to Troas, to Assos, to Mitylene by Chios, to Samos, Trogyllium, Miletus, to Cos, Rhodes, and Patara, to Tyre, to Ptolomais, to Caesarea to Jerusalem. **The Journey to Rome:** Antipatris to Caesarea to Sidon to Myra, to Cnidus to Fair Havens, past Crete and Claudia across Adriatic Sea to Melita (Malta) to Syracuse, to Rhegium to Puteoli to Rome. It is commonly believed that Paul died in Rome in about 64-67 AD.

Tarsus would always known as Paul's home town but he rarely went back after his conversion.⁵ As far as we know, Paul never sent any church letters from Tarsus. He would be the first to say that his home was with the LORD⁶.

He was probably in Ephesus where he lived for a year and a half⁷ when he wrote this letter to the Christians in Corinth.⁸ As I mentioned last Sunday, Paul was a master at being "all things to all people." He was sensitive to Jewish sensibilities when he was preaching to the Jews. He was sensitive to Gentile traditions when he was with the Gentiles.

And so it's not surprising that when writing this letter to the Corinthians, Paul would make cultural references that would be very familiar to the people of Corinth.

If Paul were writing today, for example, to the people of Turin, Italy he would probably refer to the 2006 Winter Olympic Games – the biggest thing to happen to Turin for a long time.⁹

But in the first century, the biggest thing for the Corinthians were the Isthmian Imperial Games. They were played every two years to the glory of the pagan gods and goddesses with events such as running and boxing. Paul uses those metaphors to speak of spiritual training.

*Run in such a way that you may win it.
Athletes . . . do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.
So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air.*

Because Paul was not one of the original twelve disciples, he often wrote words that supported his claim as a legitimate disciple of Jesus. His point was that while he was encouraging spiritual discipline in the Corinthians – a discipline not unlike that of an athlete – he was spiritually disciplining himself too. It was a part of a Christian's daily life – to train spiritually. Not to "run aimlessly." Not to spend our days merely "air boxing." That gets us nowhere in terms of our souls. Spiritual training, much like athletic training, is a daily responsibility.

How we live out our workaday lives day in and day out impacts our relationship with God and with each other.

- Are we flying out of control as if traveling down a broken luge track?

⁵ Paul was sent to Tarsus for safety's sake after returning to Jerusalem after his conversion. Acts 9:30.

⁶ See 2 Corinthians 5:1,8 which is about our heavenly home with God.

⁷ Acts 18:1-11

⁸ See 1 Corinthians 16:8 – "But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost . . ."

⁹ Turin has also been home to the Shroud of Turin since 1578. It's stored in a silver chest in the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist.

- Are we crashing into hazards at every turn?
- Are we racing against time, desperately trying to catch the person in front of us?
- Are we gracefully dancing with a holy partner who leads our steps and lifts us up?

Ordinary life can indeed be like an athletic competition, as can the spiritual life. Paul wrote this letter from his home-of-the-moment to remind those trying to follow Jesus that being a disciple involves discipline.¹⁰ Spiritual maturity doesn't just happen any more than world class athleticism.

And so he wrote these words which have become a part of our heritage as Christians. In this letter, written to ordinary people in ordinary times, Paul reminds us that we are looking toward an extraordinary day when we hope to be qualified to carry the name "disciple." It is a day each of us will face, although most of us don't like to think about it. It is the day we will die, the day we will face whatever comes after this life.

Marilynn Robinson wrote a book called *Gilead* about a Christian minister who wrote a long, Paul-like letter to his young son when he realized he – the father – was dying. The minister – John Ames – was 67 years old when he met and married his second wife with whom he would have this son. The boy was now about nine and John Ames knew that the day was coming when he would be go "to be with the Good Lord" and so he wrote down the things he wanted his boy to know and remember long after he was gone: the ordinary things, the special things, his heritage.

Actually it was more about the ordinary than not – about the shapes of gourds and the frustrations of dealing with difficult people, about holding hands and saying prayers. But the beauty of this book is that it becomes clear that faith is nourished in ordinary things. John Ames' home is Gilead – a mid-western town where he lived out his faith:

"I love the prairie!" he writes at the end of this letter to his son. *"So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything turn radiant at once, that word 'good' so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing. There may have been a more wonderful first moment 'when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy,' but for all I know to the contrary, they still do sing and shout and they certainly might well. . .*

¹⁰ The Greek word for "disciple" is *mathetes* which means student or pupil. The Greek work for "discipline" meaning "exercising self-control (found in 1 Corinthians 9:25) is *egkrateuomai*. It implies training with wholesome behavior, being temperate.

To me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned as this place is, as little regarded. I can't help imagining that you will leave sooner or later, and it's fine if you have done that, or you mean to do it.

*I'll pray that you grow up a brave man in a brave country. I will pray you find a way to be useful.*¹¹

Paul also wanted the hearers and readers of this letter to use their ordinary time well. Paul's hope was that we might be useful not merely for our own benefit but for the good of God's great plan. There was a message to proclaim! And that message was that God loves us with a passion that is beyond what we can imagine or deserve.

As we acknowledge Valentine's Day this week, we celebrate the ordinary and yet extraordinary experience of human love which occasionally offers a peek at divine love. For one old Presbyterian minister in Gilead, Iowa after years of spark-less and unremarkable living as a Christian, God indeed gave him a peek. This is what John Ames wrote to his son about meeting his son's mother:

...nothing had prepared me to find myself thinking day and night about a complete stranger, a woman much too young . . .

*I had never felt before that everything I thought I was amounted to the clothes on my back and the books on my shelves and the calendar I kept full of obligations waiting and obligations fulfilled. As I have said, it was a foretaste of death, at least of dying. And why should that seem strange? 'Passion' is the word we use after all.*¹²

Because of love, because of passion we live. In ordinary times. In extraordinary times. Paul reminds us that we have a part to play as well and it involves daily discipline much like that of an athlete.

Let us run life's race with a clear sense of direction and an eye on the day when we will receive an imperishable wreath, by God's grace. And in closing, I end with the words Paul's uses to finish this great letter: *My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus.*¹³

¹¹ From *Gilead* by Marilyn Robinson, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2004, page 246-247.

¹² *Ibid.* page 205.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 16:24