

January 15, 2014 – EKKLESIA Message
“Living - As Rich Saints” – Pastor David Lee

I Corinthians 1:1-9

¹*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,*

²*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:*

³*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

⁴*I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,*

⁵*for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—*

⁶*just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—*

⁷*so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

⁸*He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

⁹*God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Consider these headlines:

- 📄 Dallas pastor spends \$10.5 million on new house
- 📄 German Bishop pays 20,000 euro fine rather than contest perjury charge over \$30 million dollar mansion
- 📄 High church official released on \$250,000 bail - surrenders passport
- 📄 Bishop convicted of shielding pedophile pastor

Doesn't sound like there are a whole lot of saints among the leaders of the church in our world today.

Pope Francis, in his New Years address to the College of Cardinals (including his newly named Cardinals) admonished the highest leaders of the Roman Catholic Church:

- ◇ (to the newest Cardinals) do not waste money celebrating your elevation
- ◇ beware of “drifting downwards towards mediocrity”
- ◇ beware of becoming “a ponderous, bureaucratic customhouse”
- ◇ be “conscientious objectors” to gossip
- ◇ don't become a “smarmy” priest, or “priest-wheeler-dealers, priest-tycoons.”

Doesn't sound like Francis thinks his Cardinals are all that “saintly” either.

The passage for tonight, from I Corinthians 1, begins with Paul the Apostle referring to the church at Corinth as “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus - called to be saints.” What is a saint anyway? Is it someone who has had three miracles credited to his or her prayerful intervention? Is it someone who has first been declared “blessed?” Is it someone whose relics (bones) are venerated and enshrined? Well, not according to Scripture.

Paul the Apostle, to the Church in Rome, wrote to people “who are loved by God and called to be his holy people” (Romans 1:7); to “those who love him and are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). The author of Hebrews wrote, “Both the one who makes people holy and the ones who are made holy are of the same family” (Hebrews 2:11). And later (Hebrews 10:10) “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ,” and “He sanctified the people through his own blood,” (Hebrews 13). So, in the Bible, anyone who is a saint is someone who is:

- ◇ loved by God
- ◇ called to be holy people
- ◇ called according to God’s purpose
- ◇ welcomed into God’s holy family
- ◇ made holy by the sacrifice of Jesus suffering and death on the cross - by the shedding of Jesus’ own blood

John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist movement, wrote of saints, *“By the saints, I understand those who are holy or righteous in the judgment of God himself; those who are endowed with the faith that purifies the heart-that produces a good conscience; those who are grafted into the good olive-tree, the spiritual, invisible Church; those who are branches of the true vine, of whom Christ says, “I am the vine, ye are the branches;” those who so effectually know Christ, as by that knowledge to have escaped the pollutions of the world; those who see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and who have been made partakers of the Holy Ghost, of the witness and the fruits of the Spirit; those who live by faith in the Son of God; those who are sanctified by the blood of the covenant-those to whom all or any of these characters belong, I mean by the term saints.”*

When I was little, my grandmother would always send me out to play, or off to Sunday school, with the admonition, “Now you be a good little boy.” I think it was more hopeful than realistic. I was seldom a “good little boy.” But grandmother never gave up on her hopes and expectations for me. I think Paul the Apostle was approaching the Corinthian Ekklesia (body of Christ) with the same kind of hopeful expectation. They probably weren’t behaving as people called by God, loved by God, fully aware of the cost of that call and love. But Paul was hopeful. So it seems to me to be with Paul’s next assertion, that the Corinthians had been “enriched” by Jesus Christ. Ancient Corinth, a city that had been destroyed by the Romans in about 140 B.C., and rebuilt by order of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., was by Bible times a rich and culturally diverse metropolis. It was a city between two harbors, enormous wealth passing through it. Corinth was full of Romans, Greeks, and Jewish refugees from Rome. There was cultural, racial, and religious diversity, but most of all a lot of money. The Corinthians were people pursuing worldly riches.

The Jesus Christ that Paul preached was not interested in pursuing worldly riches. Jesus had "no place to lay his head," (Matthew 8:20). Jesus urged his followers not to store up "treasures on earth," (Matthew 6:19). Jesus called his followers to "deny yourself and take up (your) cross and follow me," (Matthew 16:24). Michael Gerson, writing in the Washington Post in August of 2008, asserted, "This has never made the best marketing message: What company would adopt the electric chair or the hangman's noose as its logo? Christianity has always dealt in hard truths - God is not a means to our own ends - suffering is unavoidable in lives bounded by mortality and often wrecked by failure." And yet we can tune into any religious program almost any day and hear TV preachers tell us that God wants us to have worldly riches. And they live lifestyles that bear witness to what they preach. Televangelist Kenneth Copeland makes no apologies for his private jet and lakeside mansion, or for his extensive business interests in ranching, oil, and media overseen by his direct family. Evangelist Joyce Meyer says, "I believe God wants us to have nice things." and Joel Osteen, pastor of one of the biggest congregations in the U.S. says, "I think God wants us to be prosperous - I think God wants us to be happy." Gerson continues in his post, ". . . in this odd faith where the poor in spirit are blessed, the highest ideal is suffering for others - though most of us do precious little of it - this model of spiritual leadership has nothing to do with conventional measures of success and influence."

So how are we "enriched" by our saving relationship with Jesus Christ? In the second chapter of Acts, Peter is preaching his Pentecost Day sermon when someone in the crowd asks, "What must we do to be saved?" Peter answers, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," (Acts 2:38). The promise of Jesus is a promise that we will be gifted. Paul says, "Not lacking in any Spiritual gift." The gifts of the Holy Spirit are the "riches" that Paul recommends to the Corinthian church. How do these gifts work? Are they going to make us celebrities, give us the "good life," give us our fifteen minutes of fame?

Paul writes in I Corinthians 12, ". . . the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." And in I Corinthians 14, Paul asserts, "Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church," and "Everything must be done so that the church may be built up," and in Ephesians 4, "equip . . . people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." Finally, everyone is promised at least one gift, "We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us," "If you . . . know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask for it," (Luke 11:13) So here is what we can expect from God's promise to gift us with riches that no one can take away, gifts of the Holy Spirit:

- ◇ for the building up of the body of Christ
- ◇ for the common good

◇ tailor made for each of us who are called according to God's purposes.

There will surely be some gifted for public needs - preachers, teachers, evangelists. But there will be just as many gifted for the less public needs of God's kingdom - helpers, givers, merciful servants.

Graham Greene wrote in his novel "The Power and the Glory," of one of the most strife-torn periods in Mexico's history, the 1930's, a time when priests were being rounded up, imprisoned, tortured, and even murdered. The lead character in the story had plenty of problems of his own (alcoholism and running away to save himself), but LOVE for another human being, a friend, who was dying, gave him the power to overcome his weakness and failing, and put himself in harms way to travel back into hostile territory to offer last rites to his dying friend. "The priest is driven by suffering and sin down to the level of his fellow men, until he is worthy to die for them. During this hard descent into sainthood, he finds that God's love is often different from what we expect. 'It would be enough to scare us -- God's love. It set fire to a bush in the desert, didn't it, and smashed open graves and set the dead walking in the dark. Oh, a man like me would run a mile to get away if he felt that love around.'"

Our invitation tonight is for us to forsake the endless pursuit of the things of this world, to embrace the riches that Christ promises us, to know that God's Spirit will equip us for just what we need for God's purposes, and that we will most certainly be led to a kind of sacrifice that might even cost us not just all our "stuff and things," but even our very lives. This is the way of Jesus. This must be our way, too, for this lost and hurting world all around us.