

The First Fruits

February 13, 2022

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²² Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

²³ Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴ But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵ Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶ Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

1st Corinthians 15: 12-20

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not

been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ — whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

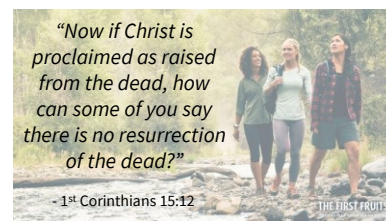


In our epistle reading today Paul focuses on the concept of resurrection. But resurrection, or even our life of faith, is not all about getting to heaven. While that is our goal, it is not all that matters. As we covered last week, we are being saved. We are works in progress. As we delve into the gospel passage, Luke also reminds us that how we live in this life matters. The blessings and woes that we hear from Jesus today reinforce the idea that how we live during this life impacts our eternal goal of heaven and it impacts the quality of our day-to-day life. As we prepare to walk through these scripture passages today, let us begin with a word of prayer...

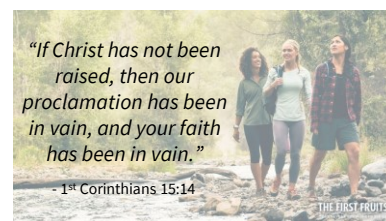
Turn with me to 1st Corinthians 15, beginning in verse 12. As we begin, let us be reminded that Paul is writing to a church to address certain issues within that church. Today's passage focuses in on the resurrection and how that affects the living out of the faith. Paul focuses in on Jesus as the example of living and loving in this world and as the example of dying and rising in the life to come. In this sense, Paul builds the case that new life is not an either/or but is a both/and.

Today's passage is a continuation of last week's teaching from Paul. We recall that in the opening verses of chapter 15 Paul detailed the good news that he proclaimed and that they received. It is the faith that they now stand firmly upon. Paul also reminded the Corinthian church and us that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, rose on the third day, and appeared to many as the risen Christ. These words from Paul lead into today's message to the church. Some in the church in Corinth are questioning the resurrection of the dead. They are not questioning whether or not Jesus was resurrected – that is not the dispute here. Some are questioning what resurrection means to their faith and, to a lesser degree, what it looks like for those who follow Jesus. As we continue next week into the latter verses of 1st Corinthians 15, we will delve into Paul's answer to these deeper questions. For this week, though, we focus in on what Christ's resurrection means for all who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

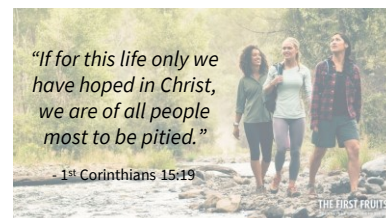
Connecting back into verse 4, Paul asks in verse 12, *"Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?"* Paul asks this



question from the belief that Jesus died and rose so that when a believer dies, they too will rise. For Paul, there was a connection here: because Jesus died and rose, we too will die and rise. This is an essential truth for Paul. That leads him to be so bold to state, *"If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain, and your faith has been in vain."* In terms of the eternal consequences, if there is no more to this life than this earthly body, than this time spent in this body, then our faith is truly in vain. In terms of the earthly consequences, Paul says in verse 17, then *"your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins."*

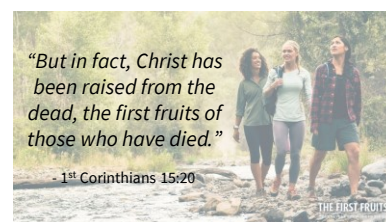


For Paul, one cannot separate the life of Jesus from the death and resurrection of Jesus. You cannot separate Jesus' victory over sin from Jesus' victory over the grave. If we do, our faith is futile, in vain, all for nothing because then we would remain forever trapped in our sins. Realizing the great sadness of separating these essential elements of faith in Jesus Christ, Paul laments in verse 19, *"If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."* For a believer, our hope in this life rests upon our belief in the life to come. These too are connected. Believing that one day we will all be raised to new life gives us great hope in the trials of this life. Believing that we are made new again over and over again in this life gives us hope in the day to day. If one separates these two truths – that Jesus gives us life now and gives us eternal life on day – then indeed we are a people to be most pitied.



Paul's closing argument states, *"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."*

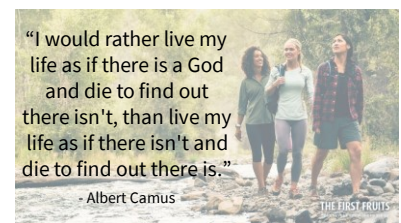
There is no argument in the Corinthian church concerning Jesus' resurrection – it is fact. Therefore, Paul says, believe too that all who call on Jesus as Lord and Savior will be resurrected to new life. By using the term "first fruits" Paul is drawing upon his Jewish background. For the Jews, a "first fruit" was the offering brought to God that represented the best that one had to offer. This idea of a first fruits connects all the way back to Cain and Abel, in Genesis 4, when Abel brought the first lambs born as a sign of his thanks and of his trust in God's provision. By giving the first-born lambs, Abel demonstrated great trust in God to continue to provide for him and his family. Since then, the practice of bringing the first and best has been viewed as the ideal way to honor and to give God our thanks.



Here Paul is picking up on this idea, naming Christ as the “first fruits” – as the best that this world, the best that the flesh could ever offer to God. Paul is saying that there could be no better offer to God than the spotless, perfect lamb of God, Jesus Christ. There is also the element of continued provision in what Paul is saying. Paul sees Jesus as the first of many who will be raised to new life, to eternal glory. For Paul, Jesus represents both an example for us and a promise for us. Here he connects back to the both/and of the resurrection. Just as Christ lived a sacrificial life, we too are called to live sacrificially. Drawing upon the language of the love chapter, Paul is inviting the Corinthian church and all who believe in Jesus to live in “*this more excellent way*” – to live and love others as Jesus lived and loved. We do so not just for this life, but also for eternity. This is the both/and. Christ is the “first fruit” – the best we could be in this world and the promise of resurrection for all who believe.



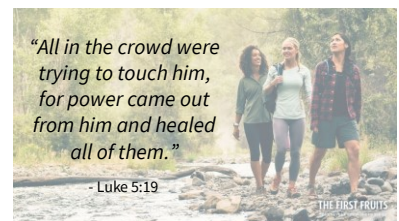
Again, Paul recognizes that without the both/and, then all is futile. Without the resurrection of the dead, we are back to square one: unredeemed, unsaved, pagan, alone, adrift in the world, and stuck in our sin. That would not be a very good place to be, would it? Even if it were so, following Christ makes a difference in this life, so I would still choose Christ. To quote French philosopher Albert Camus, “*I would rather live my life as if there is a God and die to find out there isn't, than live my life as if there isn't and die to find out there is.*” Following Christ matters in this life. Loving others and doing good and treating others with kindness and respect matters. Even the French moralist saw what the Romans of Paul’s day saw: that living a life of faith made a real, positive impact on this world and on its suffering and pain.



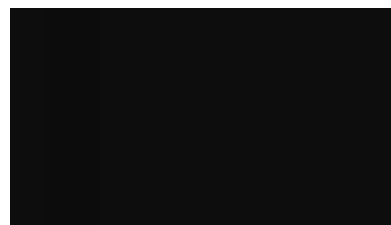
Paul, of course, firmly believed that God existed, and that Jesus was God incarnate, dwelling for a time on the earth, providing believers with the pattern to follow, further revealing God's love to humanity. What that means for the church and for us is, for Paul, the point of the resurrection that he drives home in our passage today. For Paul, the implication of the resurrection is that life matters, that this life matters, that these bodies matter, that we matter. There is a consistent theme running through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and it is, as we have said before: "love never ends". That thread runs through the understanding that we are "first fruits" of the faith, followers who emulate and practice what Jesus taught and lived out. "Love never ends" is not just a catchy phrase, it is the bedrock of our faith. Love is what makes Christ real in our lives and what leads us out to engage the world. Love is the ongoing message that we carry to the least and the lost, telling them over and over that they matter because they too are the beloved of God.



As we turn to Luke 6, this is the unspoken message that Jesus is communicating to the masses that are drawn to him. In verse 17 we see that a "*great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people*" had gathered to see and hear and be touched by Jesus. Large numbers of people came to Jesus to "*be healed of their diseases*" and to be cured of their "*unclean spirits.*" In verse 19 we read that "*all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.*" Envision that – all in the crowd pressing forward, pressing in on Jesus just to touch him, because power was coming out from him, healing all their diseases and illnesses. If that does not speak of love being poured forth, I do not know what does.



The people come to Jesus to receive what they need: healing, wholeness, restoration. Some who came were also seeking love and affirmation, to know they were worthy and valued, to be freed from the many voices telling them they were unclean or unworthy or both. The power of God in Jesus brought the least and the lost the healing, wholeness, and restoration that they needed to return to community, to return to life. It is no wonder that people were drawn to God's love being poured out.



Then, in verse 20, Jesus shifts gears as he begins to teach. In verse 20-26 we hear Luke's version of the Beatitudes. In these verses we find a series of blessings and woes – the blessings of a life of faith and the woes of a life pursuing the things of this world. In verses 20-23 Jesus shares some “*Blessed are...*” statements. Paraphrasing Jesus, we hear that the poor are blessed because theirs is the kingdom; blessed are the hungry for they will be filled; and, blessed are the persecuted, hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed because they will receive a great reward in heaven. In verses 24-26 Jesus says, “*But woe to...*” Woe to rich for they have already received their consolation. Woe to the full, for then you will hunger. Woe to those who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep in the day to come. There is great hope for those who are faithful.

In the Old Testament reading for this week God speaks through Jeremiah. In this passage God speaks of curses and blessings, just as Jesus does in Luke 6. The passage speaks of trusting in God and of developing deep roots. In chapter 17, verses 7-8, God says, “*Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.*”



God reminds the people that when they develop deep roots of faith, then they are like that mighty tree planted by the water. In season and out of season, the tree draws nourishment from the water. God draws out this analogy, stating the tree's leaves remain green during the heat and that it still bears fruit during the drought. In Jeremiah 17 God is inviting the people of faith into a deeper relationship. That is what Jesus was inviting the people to as he taught them in Luke 6. God continues to invite you and me into a deeper relationship.

Each Sunday you are invited into an ever-deepening relationship with God. There are many ways that we can deepen our relationship: prayer, worship, study, fasting. Each Sunday you are invited to deepen your roots by spending time during the week with the GPS questions and by taking time to read through and meditating on the lectionary readings for the next week. There are ways to go deeper yet, to deepen your roots, your connection to Christ. Each day of the week I share a short online devotional that reflects on the lectionary readings for the week and connects them into the main ideas of the Sunday message. The web address for this devotional is listed in the bulletin next to the lectionary readings. As a means to deepening your roots, I encourage you to take a few minutes each day to engage the scriptures and the themes for each week.

On my journey of faith and in my role as pastor I have found this process of engaging often with the scriptures very helpful. Just to help you understand how taking the time to really engage helps to deepen our faith, let me share what I see happen almost every week as I work on the Sunday message. The culmination of this process is what I share each week in the Sunday message, but it begins early on Monday morning.

I begin the process by reading through the four lectionary readings and then I spend a little time thinking through how these passages could connect into the theme and main ideas for the following Sunday's message. Each morning, including Monday, I then read one of the lectionary passages and a short devotional that connects to that passage. Then I reflect on it and write out my thoughts, which I share each day as a blog post on my web page and as a daily devotional on my Facebook page. During the day on Monday, I write most of the message. Then on Tuesday morning I gather with a few other United Methodist pastors and Kristin, and we discuss our thoughts for preaching on Sunday, which usually draws from the same lectionary readings for that week. These conversations usually spur some additional insights for the message, and I usually add them in on Tuesday as well as deciding on the GPS questions.

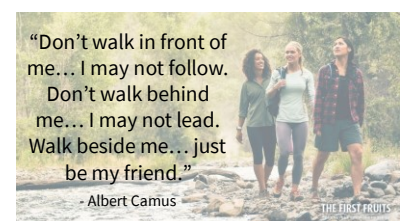
During the rest of the week, I will ponder the general theme and main points of the message over and over, especially as I read each day's passage and devotional. Sometimes this adds to the message as well. Then on Wednesday or Thursday I will record the message for the "Sermon by Phone" offering. This is always a revising process as well. This process is mostly editing and refining but once in a while a new nugget pops into my head and that becomes part of the Sunday message. Each of these steps are a part of the deepening of my faith and part of the ways I build up my connection to God each day. This may be more than you are willing to take on each day or week, but I wanted to share how investing time and effort deepens our roots of faith. Maybe for you, the process starts by spending time with the GPS questions this week. For others maybe it is that and spending time with the lectionary readings as preparation for next Sunday. For some maybe that is doing this and then reading and meditating on the daily devotionals. Simply put, the more time with God the better.

The more time we spend with God, the more we will develop our connections to God and the deeper our faith will become. These deep roots help us when life heats up and when we find ourselves in seasons that challenge us. Even though this life brings its share of suffering and pain, of poverty and hunger, of persecution and cost for following Jesus, we are encouraged to keep the faith, to honor God with our lives. In the resurrection to come, there is blessing beyond our earthly understanding. When we are willing to walk in Jesus' footsteps, to love as Jesus loved, to serve as Jesus served, we become an heir to abundant and promised blessings in the life to come. When we follow Jesus' example we will also be blessed in this life as well.

Combining the words of Paul and the words of Jesus, we hear the clear call to follow and live out Jesus' example of loving, humble service both for the here and now and for the day to come when we are made new again. As we seek to live sacrificially, we will share the love of God with all we meet. As we live God's love out loud in the world, we are also first fruits of the kingdom of God, bringing healing and wholeness and restoration to those we minister to and walk through life with. A life of faith is always lived in relationship, in connection with God and with one another.



To close I would like to share another Albert Camus quote that I came upon as I learned about this man. The spirit of the quote is captured in the background image for today's message. It speaks of the relationship that Jesus lived and practiced each day and it calls us to follow his pattern: "Don't walk in front of me... I may not follow.



Don't walk behind me... I may not lead. Walk beside me... just be my friend." As we seek to live as first fruits of the kingdom of God, may we walk beside those in need of God's love, healing, wholeness, and restoration. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. How has your experience of God's love led to growth in your faith and in the ways that you seek to live out that love as you minister to others?
- 2) *Pray*. Where is it challenging for you to love right now? Pray for the Spirit to work within your heart, allowing healing and restoration of relationship.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 5:12. What does this version of the beatitudes add to our version from Luke? How does this give you a more challenging look at faith?