

“... gospel-rooted transformation tells the truth about our lives, it holds us accountable, and it is oriented around the kin-dom of God.”

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Gospel Unity

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who are married be as though they were not, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

When my first call drew to a close, we were ready to move out of the parsonage where we'd lived for several years and to a home nearer to the second church I had been serving, and which I'd be serving in an increased capacity. Unfortunately, the house we planned to rent was destroyed by the evicted tenants. They tore the tub surround off the wall, threw a rock in the sump pump, and left the house in shambles. So, we were between homes, and worrying. I was seven months pregnant - already giant and uncomfortable. We weighed our options: a hotel, a room here or there. Then something came up that was just right. I kid you not: it was a renovated chicken coop. It was owned by a truly special and beloved family - members of my congregation. They had renovated the coop as a safe place for their adult child to live after an accident. All four of their children had come home to the coop at one time or another following break ups or returning home after college or deployment. It had a kitchenette, a bedroom, and a tidy bathroom. A propane heater. It wasn't glamorous, but it was just right for us for a few weeks. It was cold: we were in the eye of a polar vortex, and the insulation was perhaps what one might expect in a renovated coop. And, one night, we caught seven mice with a single, unbaited trap - a byproduct of county living Matt and I were both familiar with. But those two weeks in the coop were utterly life changing for us. Every day, as the snow piled up to nearly two feet, the husband and wife would head out to work their side business plowing snow, and they'd leave a log on the fireplace in the main house, where Matt and I would go and warm up and work. Often, they left some soup on the stove. And once or twice, they invited us up for a delicious dinner. And they told us how important it was to them to be generous. And every night, Matt and I would cuddle up in the coop and say that this was exactly how we wanted to live our lives. We wanted to be able to be generous like that. I'd never seen what true generosity looked like until I met someone for whom generosity was a central pillar of their lives. Honestly, I think sometimes I give lip service to what I *wish* was central or what I think *ought* to be central. What we want for the center of our lives is often that which we can control or manipulate or achieve. But,

as Christians, we will find that the true center of our lives isn't that which we can control, but that which can transform our lives.

When St. Paul writes to the congregation in Corinth, things are not going well. He had founded the congregation and had stayed in Corinth for some time, despite opposition in the greater community. He was followed by other teachers, but when Corinth was left to their own devices, it seems conflicts emerged. The congregation was, apparently, notably diverse, and the cracks of conflict appeared along these lines - men against women, Jew against Gentile, rich and connected versus poor and, often, enslaved. The congregation wrote to Paul, asking for him to decide between them - to tell them who got it right. Paul writes back and takes up issue after to issue, but, instead of determining who was right or trying to convert people to one point of view or another, Paul appeals to unity. Right at the outset of the letter, he says "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." (1 Corinthians 1:10). And this mind and purpose, the basis of unity, is Christ, whose gospel is based not in being right nor in being powerful, but in the cross.

So, today, we've reached the part of the letter where Paul writes about marriage. And, honestly, it isn't his best work. He says several times that this is his opinion and not necessarily a "command of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:25b). And given how these central chapters of First Corinthians have been used over the years to justify slavery and oppress women, I sometimes wish he'd kept his opinions to himself...but that's *my* opinion! But the history of the church is contained in these letters, and we might yet find the gospel here, too. In these letters, we see that Paul is sure Christ will return soon, and that affects his teaching. We see it at the end of today's passage, "For the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:31b). If we read a bit further, however, we can see Paul's reason for his advice: "I want you to be free from anxieties," he writes (1 Corinthians 7:32a). It isn't that Paul is writing against marriage, or mourning, or joy, or having things, or dealing with the world. It is that he wants us to pay attention to our mindset. Have the worries and cares of life on earth distracted us from our central purpose? It is so easy to live for our job, for our family. But we're called to live for - and to and with and in - the gospel. And so, it isn't, how can I be faithful in my grief, but how is my grief an expression of my faith? It isn't what role does faith take in my marriage - or my singlehood, for that matter - but how is the gospel expressed in and through my most intimate relationships? It isn't some bogus idea that people of faith should be somber, but how do we express our joy in a way that is faithful, that invites people into this dance of faith, rather than shoving them aside? It isn't about avoiding the world, but loving it, as Christ does.

And that's actually really important. Over the last several days, we have heard cries to unite our country. And I am so tired of division. But I don't want a false unity. I don't want people to agree with their face while harboring resentment in their hearts. I don't want the kind of "agree to disagree" which supports the status quo and leaves the

marginalized squeezed at the edges. I want the kind of unity that Bible talks about: unity that calls us all to a transformation rooted in the gospel.

This gospel-rooted transformation tells the truth about our lives, it holds us accountable, and it is oriented around the kin-dom of God.

When St. Paul writes today, he asks the Corinthians to be truthful about their lives: it doesn't benefit us to pretend our lives are something they are not. I remember being asked as a kid what I'd grab from my house if it were on fire. I always told people what I thought they wanted to hear: of course, I'd grab my Bible and my family pictures. Obviously, the idea of a burning-down house is a ridiculous thought experiment with little grounding in reality. And it probably isn't an honest assessment of my own life. Is God always central? No. I still have a long way to grow. But more than that, the kind of transformation that is being worked in our lives also calls us to talk about the systems in which we're complicit, and the concerns we haven't raised, and the conversation we haven't had. None of us is without sin. All of us are still becoming who we are in Christ. We should be honest about that.

Because only if we are honest can we hold ourselves accountable for wrongs committed. I have been listening to *The Book of Joy* by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Both of them have discussed the importance of accountability in the peacemaking work they do. Accountability isn't about punishment, but about restoration. Only when we are given a change to make amends and repair hurts can we see transformation in ourselves and our communities.

Finally, we have to remember that this is God's work. When we participate in this work, we will know we are working with God if what we do seems to look like the kin-dom God. We know that we are being transformed by the gospel, and our neighbor's lives are being transformed by the gospel, and our community is being transformed by the gospel if people are being set free, if those who have been marginalized by society are restored to wholeness, if we are brought to new ways of seeing one another, if comfort is given, if people are housed and clothed and fed.

Beloved, may our lives be centered on the gospel and transformed for the sake of our neighbor.

Amen.