

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Clay Jars: Letters of Reference”

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2 Corinthians 3:1-18

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Last week, as we celebrated World Communion Sunday, Dr. Darren Kennedy started us on what will be a series through part of one of Paul’s letters, 2 Corinthians. I was grateful for Dr. Kennedy’s willingness to kick off a series, even as a guest, and we’ll be continuing through 2 Corinthians as Paul describes some of the how and the why behind what the church is called to do.

The passage last week spoke of a “triumphal procession,” led by Christ, spreading in every place, describing the church as the “aroma of Christ.” What a powerful image, or a powerful smell I suppose in this case, to describe how Christ’s followers are called to spread and be known and bear witness to the covenant of the gospel. Paul continues in his letter, going into what it means to represent this new covenant. Let’s go to God’s Word together, 2 Corinthians 3:1-18.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are qualified of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our qualification is from God, who has made us qualified to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’s face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! Indeed, what once had glory has in this respect lost its glory because of the greater glory, for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory! Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with complete frankness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, the same veil is still there; it is not unveiled since in Christ it is set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds, but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Grace, your glory extends to the ends of the earth, and it is into every corner of our lives that your gospel lays claim. Help us to bear witness to this good news, not of our own strength, but of yours, not of our own qualities, but of yours, not of our own abilities, but of yours. Guide us, inspire us, and convict us by your Word, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

A graduate student once went into their professor’s office and asked for a letter of reference for a scholarship. The professor says, “Certainly. Could you leave me some details about your own academic record or

any other information you might like for me to include along with my own notes? When do you need it by, next week?"

The student, without a hint of embarrassment or apology in their voice, replies, "Um, what time is it? 3:30pm? The deadline is 5." The professor laughed, thinking the student was joking. But no. No joke. "Oh, you're serious? Well, that's not nearly enough notice. I'm afraid I just can't do it." The student, showing some frustration, then said, "Really? You can't just put it together right now? I mean you're already here working." "You don't understand, I can't just drop what I'm doing every time..."

"You could've already been writing it by now!"

The professor, annoyed, then said, "Tell you what, I *might* be able to get to it, but it'll be a short letter, and it'll be a brutally honest letter. Is that okay with you?" The student nodded. With that agreement, the student left.

The professor then turned to the computer, and on official university letterhead, wrote the following: "So-and-so has requested a letter of recommendation from me, 85 minutes before the application deadline. This is it." Guess who didn't get the scholarship.

The notion of "letters of reference" isn't necessarily universal, but gosh they're all over the place. Whether it's an academic setting, a professional setting, a social setting, it's pretty common, and the premise is as straightforward now as it was 2000 years ago. One person hopes to leverage the reputation or status of another person by asking them to vouch for their character, their record, their ability, or their potential so that they might get selected or hired or admitted for something. You know this. At one point or another, you've either asked for a letter of reference or been asked to write a letter of reference for something.

And Paul, as he continues in this letter to the Corinthian, wonders aloud whether he needs to get vouched for again and come up with some more letters of reference.

See it's important to remember as Paul continues in some lofty theological thought is that his relationship with this church has been fraught. Some bad blood apparently. That, in fact, is what the first two chapters of the letter are largely about: clearing the air. That's another sermon series right there about the practical side of conflict and reconciliation, but for us today, that's what's in the mix even as Paul goes into the how and the why of their purpose as Christ's church.

So when he asks, as chapter three opens, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we?" it's a nod toward the somewhat tender state that things are in, asking whether he should need to give some kind of bonafides as if he didn't know them at all.

But then he goes into something that feeds into the why and the how of their purpose of the church. He says, "You yourselves are our letter," as in, "You are our letter of recommendation, that which vouches for our reputation, our bonafides, is you." Then he continues on with that imagery, saying in v. 3, "And you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

The meaning here is powerful. To whom it may concern, hear the good news. Jesus is Lord, and the Lord lives, and through his death and resurrection you might live too. Need any proof? Need any bonafides? It's all in this letter, not a letter of paper and ink, but of the Spirit's work, seen in the lives of those who follow him. That's them. They're the letter, testimony to the truth of the good news of Jesus.

Now here's where it really starts to go against our instinct. Paul continues in v. 4: "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit." "Not that we are competent of ourselves." Now wait a minute. Shouldn't we think that if we, as Paul tells us, are letters of Christ, testimony vouching for the gospel, we should expect that we're pretty sharp, right? I mean, we're talking about the truth of the living, eternal God. If we're presenting that by the letter of our lives, so to speak, our lives must be pretty excellent, right? In a sense, sure, but not in the way we first think.

Paul, here, is subverting every instinct the Corinthians have about status, about merit. A letter of recommendation? Oh, well *my* letter is crisp and professional; it has everything the world would look for and value, every competence, every ability, every bit of pertinent experience that someone would look for. That's what we want to say, want to think. But Paul says, "Nah, we can't claim any competence of ourselves; our competence, our ability, the very qualities that testify to the truth of the gospel of Christ, they do not come from us."

We want them to come from us. That's what the Corinthians want to. They may be a church gathered in the name of Christ, but there was trouble brewing. Divisions based on status, wealth, beliefs, even perceived levels of membership, based on qualifications. They want their competence to come from themselves. Why? Well, to the glory of God—that's the correct answer anyway—but in reality it's because they want some of the recognition. It'd be like a letter of recommendation, as in the actual letter, saying "Look at me! Look at how crisp and professional I am! Did you notice the fine cardstock I'm printed on? This ink won't smudge either. And by the way, if you look closely, there's an intricate watermark in me too." What Paul is saying is that any quality we, the "letters," might present, they are not of ourselves, but of God.

Imagine if you would that you're in a position of receiving letters of reference. Maybe you're hiring someone, or maybe you're in an admissions office at a school. You get lots of reference letters. Most of them look and sound the same. Crisp and professional. Nice letterhead on it. Solid cardstock. That sort of thing. They all run together and sound the same. But then one comes to your desk that doesn't look like the others. It's all crumpled up. It has a diagonal crease across it because it's been stuffed in a bag or folded into a pocket. Even has a coffee stain across it. You look at it and think, what an unprofessional mess this is. No way this could be anything of any worth. But then you start to look at what it says, and it speaks of the unique faithfulness and diligence and ingenuity of the person in question. And more than that, you start to think about the person offering it, and maybe you realize, oh, they're working two jobs to make ends meet. Their car broke down, so they're scrambling between stops on the bus route. They don't have a printer, so they went to the FedEx store and only had one copy. Then of that one copy their kids, right as they were heading out the door to catch the bus to come to you, spilled their coffee and crumpled up the paper. And you start to realize that this letter, with all its crease and bent edges and coffee stains, what looked like an unprofessional mess, was really a testimony to this dedicated, faithful person that was, in fact, exactly what you were looking for.

That's what the church is like, Paul is saying. That's the kind of "letter of recommendation" that followers of Jesus should be. It's not an invitation to be lazy or neglectful or slovenly. Let every disciple do their work individually and collectively as the church with excellence and integrity, but if we think that work should be a reflection of how sharp and competent we ourselves are, we've missed the point. The church, made competent to be ministers of a new covenant, is a crumpled, coffee-stained reference letter, one that someone else would be more likely to dismiss at first, but then says, "Well hold on a minute. Look what's going on here. How'd that happen?"

If your life was a letter, a letter of reference, what would it say? Just what would it recommend to the reader?

Now your first instinct is probably the same as mine. “Well gosh, I hope they don’t read *that* part of my life.” But that is somewhat the point. It’s not about the qualities that we ourselves bear, but rather in spite of them, and a testimony to the qualities of the God who sends you.

Paul gets into that a bit, even though it can be a bit hard to understand. The next few verses talk about glory and freedom, leading up to v. 12, “Since then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness.” Because of this hope, because of what God has done and is doing, our lives look a different way. There’s freedom there. But lest we think that freedom is license just to do what we want, we circle back to realize that we are to be a letter of reference not of ourselves, but of the one who sends us.

Some may remember the show “Parks and Rec.” One of my favorite characters in all of television is one on that show named Ron Swanson. Premise of the show if you don’t know it is a local parks and recreation department in a small city. The director of that department is Ron Swanson, who sees his primary role as to serve in government in order to actively limit the size of government. I’ll say that again. He works within government bureaucracy to limit government bureaucracy. Heart of gold sort of guy, though.

In one instance, he’s putting on a barbecue for his staff, but because he thinks not enough people look their food in the eye and consider the circle of life, he brings a live pig and intended to, you know, get the pig ready for the barbecue right there on the spot. Someone tells him, you know Ron, you’re not really going to do that, are you? You can’t do that. And he says, “Relax. I have a permit.” Hands over a piece of paper, a letter of reference if you will, that simply says, “I can do what I want. -Ron Swanson.”

Paul writes in v. 17, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,” but if we understand our freedom in a Ron Swanson, “I can do what I want” sort of way, if we think the letter of our lives, our commission to act with great boldness, is just license to do what we want, we miss the point there too.

But what if your life wasn’t just about what you wanted? What if the letter of your life said less about you, about your qualities, your competence, and more about the one who has saved you, who sends you, and who transforms you “into the same image from one degree of glory to another”?

If your life was a letter, what would it say? Would it say, “I can do what want, and that’s what I tried to do.” If we’re honest, that’s the content of a lot of life out there, just plain self-interest.

But what if the letter of your life was instead a crumpled up note with coffee stains, look at this mess, this unprofessional, broken mess, and yet saying the most profound things, not about you, but about the Lord, about this Jesus and who he is?

It might suggest that there’s a new power at work, a new order, a new covenant. And if a whole bunch of people started doing that, letting the letters of their lives say something like that, the world might take notice of this grand letter of reference and think, “Maybe there’s something to this Jesus who sends them.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.