

Sunday May 14th, 2017  
Easter IV and Mother's Day

2 Corinthians 13:5-13  
"Pop Quiz!"

I wonder if anyone can tell me what would happen, if the Simcoe Reformer was to publish in its paper this week, a story that a local farmer, while working up his field, happened to find a huge, solid gold nugget. I think we could safely assume that Simcoe would be inundated with would be miners trying to stake claims among the tobacco and asparagus spears. Soon every creek bed, and hillside for miles around would be tore up, all in the exhaustive search for the elusive metal.

Now, how would people feel if after a few months of this bedlam, that first gold nugget was finally assayed properly, and found out to be not gold at all, but pyrite, or fool's gold. I suspect, that as fast as the county was overrun by wealth seekers, it would empty out, leaving an awful mess behind. And the first question we all want to ask after the dust has settled is; why didn't someone check the original nugget in the first place.

But when it comes to the lure of finding a gold deposit, people throw all sanity to the wind. The slightest rumour can cause a cascading series of ridiculous and costly mistakes. Remember the Bre-ex fiasco. One such fooled person is none other than Sir Martin Frobisher, an intrepid English privateer, or better known as a government sanctioned pirate. He is also the one Frobisher Bay is named after. Sir Martin did the first mining in Canada. There is actually a national historical marker on the site of the mine where the remains of Frobisher's house are preserved.

While prospecting, Frobisher got really excited by a sparkly black rock he found on Kodlunarn Island in Nunavut during his first voyage to the New World. He got other people excited, too, and they gave him money for another voyage. He returned to Canada in 1577 and basically opened the first Canadian mine operated by a European, shipping back two hundred tons of ore. His sparkly rocks got the Queen's attention, and she sent him back in 1578 with lots of her money so he could get even more ore.

He shipped back 1,400 tonnes of raw ore that July and August. Shipwrecks claimed some of his cargo, but the rest made it to the smelters in Dartford England. Alas, it turned out that his lovely "black ore" was just amphibolite and pyroxenite, with biotite, pyrite, and mica making it all sparkly. In his defense, samples of his ore discovered and tested *did* have some gold in them: 5-14 parts per billion. In the end, the 1,400 tons of rocks did make very nice road gravel.

Before us today is a passage that causes a great divide among theologians, and it really all comes down to the words of verse 5 about examining yourself. "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless, indeed you fail to meet the test!" The intent here is much like I led us to think about today in terms of assaying metal. Is the valuable thing faith, true and pure in you?

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Is your faith golden, or counterfeit? Now the debate among theologians comes down to essentially this. And which ever position you take, affects how you see much of the scriptures and also your fellow human beings. Many scholars, including those of the Reformed tradition, also a group called Neo-Calvinists, believe that Paul in this passage is encouraging the Corinthians to examine their lives to see if they are truly believers.

On first read, many of you may have understand it that way as well. As an example of this self questioning we might ask; are the fruits of the spirit evident in our lives? Taking such a position means that one must think Paul wants us to embrace our doubts about whether we are saved or not. In other words, can we have any assurance, at any time, that we are saved individuals. This is a serious question, isn't it? How you answer this determines a great deal.

Sometimes the debate is couched in the truth of the phrase, "Once saved always saved." Specifically, the consequences of this passage are that one might believe that the Apostle Paul is undermining any sense of assurance the Corinthians might have had that they were members of Christ's body. I don't know about you, but such a prospect is frightening, but more than that it is fundamentally wrong.

If this is what we think Paul is saying to the Corinthians, and in turn us, then through this testing, we are to examine our lives. But here is the rub. If our examination of our spiritual lives is to reveal the status of our salvation, suddenly it has become something that we can evaluate, secure, and strengthen, by our own efforts. Do you see the problem? If you hold this position then you are promoting a works theology, which is everything Paul preached against, especially in his letter to the Romans.

If I am saved by grace, how in the world do I determine for myself if I am saved or not. I cannot do anything. I am at the complete mercy of God. God in Christ has saved me. I can do nothing to save myself or even evaluate my salvation. It is a transaction of grace. That's the gospel. End of story. Albeit a wonderful one.

I should also tell you that such a position, especially in the reformed tradition and also in many of our own Baptist churches, leads to a hyper-sensitivity to the perceived demands of holiness. There arises a fear that I might transgress God's holiness and threaten my status with God. At its worst, faithfulness to Jesus is equated with self-effort to keep to the straight and narrow, not out of love for Christ, but out of a lack of assurance in our status of salvation. That is why judgement arises, sometimes with great hostility.

Henri Nouwen in his wonderful little book called *Lifesigns*, writes these powerful words, "When we enter into the household of God, we come to realize that the fragmentation of humanity and its agony, grow from the false assumption that all human beings have to fight for their right to be appreciated and loved." (p. 34) John 10:9 reads, "I am the door, anyone who enters through me will be safe."

Nouwen goes on to point out that "all Christian actions-whether it is visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, or working for a more just and peaceful society-is

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a manifestation of the human solidarity revealed to us in the house of God. It is not an anxious human effort to create a better world. It is a confident expression of the truth that in Christ; death, evil, and destruction have been overcome.” (p. 35)

By condemning others, even when we misuse Paul's words to defend our actions, we think we are reinforcing our own status. Just like in the parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector in Luke 18 who went up to pray.

Many are in danger of standing off by themselves and praying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax-collector.” Our modern list would likely include some other groups the church seeks to marginalize. To hold to such a view of this passage, also means that the passage before us has been taken out of context. It has been proof-texted.

Verse five is part of a larger passage in which Paul is discussing his relationship with the Corinthian church. To say it was a rocky relationship would be an understatement. Sinful behaviour, divisive leadership, and bad theology was all rampant in the church. Paul had visited twice and now has wrote twice, and was planning to come a third time. The wording he uses is full of love and concern, but it reads like a parent coming back home to settle his children.

All in an effort to clean up the problems. However, the greatest hurdle before him was that several people, including some prominent leaders in the church questioned Paul's authority. They would ask time and time again, “How do we know God is speaking through Paul?” “Is he truly an apostle?” So, Paul's argument is essentially this, “If you are not sure that I am speaking on behalf of Christ, examine for yourself the evidence.” Test that hypothesis!

Is there evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in your midst? Are the things I have been writing and preaching about the body of Christ evident in your life together. Is not your life together as a church, proof enough of the veracity of my words? And that's the other corruption the often appears out of this passage. These words of Paul were not directed at individuals, but at the church as a whole. The church at Corinth was to examine itself together.

Taken on a corporate level this passage fits cleaner and smoother with all that Paul has written to the Corinthians. Remember, these letters were read to the church as a whole. The community would read these words, and then discern an appropriate response. So, is the church at Corinth genuine. If it was assayed, or examined what would they find? Is there evidence that the presence and love of Christ are present.

Not perfectly, and this is critical. The Corinthians still had some ways to go, and frankly don't we all. Even when gold is found, it is often mixed with other, less valuable material. It has to be refined. The dross has to be heated away. There will always be some impurities in the church, and we are painfully aware of this. The question is always, but is their value here.

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Is there evidence that Christ is truly at work here through his Spirit.

Are we in community with the triune God? And if we are, then we need to stop easing our anxiety over our status before God, by trying to make others seem less than we are. We have to stop thinking and certainly praying "Thank you God I am not like that person." We need to stop abusing others to assuage our own guilt and anxiety. We need to see ourselves more as one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.

The late Humourist Erma Bombeck was reflecting on the caricature of evangelicals and fundamentalist when she told a story about one particular Sunday in her church.

*In church, the other Sunday I was intent on a small child who was turning around smiling at everyone. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the hymnal, or rummaging through his mother's handbag. He was just smiling. Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theatre off Broadway said, "Stop grinning! You're in church!" With that, she gave him a belt and as tears rolled down his cheeks added, "That's better," and returned to her prayers.*

*Suddenly I was angry. It occurred to me the entire world is in tears, and if you're not, then you'd better get with it. I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The smiling God. The God who had to have a sense of humour to have created the likes of us...By tradition, one wears faith with the solemnity of a mourner, the gravity of a mask of tragedy, and the dedication of a Rotary badge.*

*What a fool I thought. Here was a woman sitting next to the only light left in our civilization-our only promise of infinity. If he couldn't smile in church, where was there left to go? (Taken from What's So Amazing About Grace by Phillip Yancey, p. 32) Where in deed?*

Lewis Smedes, a professor at Fuller Seminary makes a connection between shame and grace. He wrote, "Guilt was not my problem as I felt it. What I felt most often was a glob of unworthiness that I could not tie down to any concrete sins I was guilty of. What I needed more than pardon was a sense that God accepted me, owned me, held me, affirmed me, and would never let go of me even if he was not too impressed with what he had on his hands." (Shame and Grace)

Smedes goes on to expose the three most common sources of our crippling shame: secular culture, graceless religion, and unaccepting parents. Secular culture tells us a person must look good, feel good, and make good. Graceless religion tells us we must follow the letter of the rules, and failure is eternal rejection. Unaccepting parents- "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"-convinces us we will never meet their approval.

It might surprise you to learn that the disease anorexia is the direct product of ungrace: hold up the ideal of beautiful, skinny models, and teenage girls will starve themselves to death to reach that ideal.

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I think what Paul is getting at in this passage is that the Corinthians were in danger of a kind of spiritual anorexia, if I can call it that. Somehow, in an attempt to live up to what they perceived as the spiritual ideal, they narrowed their ideas about what being Christ's body truly is.

They ended up starving each other of the grace they all longed for. Piety replaced love. Judgment replaced compassion and assurance was only pronounced to a select few who were deemed worthy. We belong to a culture in which we are continually assessed and evaluated as to our worth and value to the society as a whole and that same vulgar tenancy has crept into the one place it should never be; the church of Christ.

“Test yourselves!” Paul says. When all the superficial dross of life is stripped away, what is left? “Is there gold in them, there pews?” I wonder. I asked in the beginning what would happen if a farmer discovered a gold nugget on his farm. People we agreed would do anything, at even the slightest rumour that something valuable might be present. People do ridiculous things for gold. I think people also do incredible things to find some grace.

And if they cannot find it here among God's people, where will they look? Henri Nouwen defines forgiveness as “love practiced among people who love poorly”. As God in Christ forgave me and welcomed me unconditionally, with all my flaws and foibles; can I not extend that same grace to others? Can I not step over my wounded heart that feels hurt, and feels wronged, and wants to stay in control, and seeks to put conditions between our acceptance of each other?

We all have a line in the sand. A line we would never cross to accept someone. And often we don't know where that line is until we stumble upon it or are confronted with it. In his book *The Jesus I never Knew* Phillip Yancey tells a haunting true story about a friend of his who works with the down and out population of Chicago. These are his words.

*A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter-two years old! - to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own for an entire night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit.*

*I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing, it made me legally liable- I'm required to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea what to say to this woman. At last I asked if she ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. “Church!” she cried. “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse.*

What is odd about this woman's response is that women like her fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about themselves, the more likely they were to see Jesus as a refuge. Why is that not the case for the church? Let's test ourselves.

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Let's see if there is gold in this fellowship. And may God take what is here and refine it, purify it, and make it attractive to all who seek grace, forgiveness and love.