

Pastor's Message – 1/19/20
Isaiah 49:1-7 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

We both grew up in Milwaukee. We're both musical. He's older than I am – Steve Miller that is. I have received a lot of comments about my name over the years – especially from certain folks. But I wasn't actually named after Steve Miller of the Steve Miller band. My parents actually had the musician/comedian Steve Allen. And if my father had had his way, I wouldn't even have been named Steven.

Has that happened to any of you? Are you known now by the same name you were born with? Was your name always supposed to be what it is now?

Have you ever been to gender reveal party? I suspect that back when most of you were born, your gender wasn't even known before you were born. Gender reveal parties are a big thing now. Common party elements are colored silly string or cotton candy or confetti or Mardi Gras beads or colored balloons. In fact, colored balloons billowing out of boxes is one of the ways gender is revealed at these parties. Sometimes the balloons are pricked and explode into colored confetti or golf balls explode into colored dust or vehicles exhaust colored smoke – all to announce that a boy or a girl is to be born. Nowadays, we can know the gender of a baby before it is born.

Nonetheless, despite these advances, *science will never know us in the intimate ways that our Creator does.* Many centuries ago, a prophet writing in the voice of an unidentified servant of God acknowledged being *named* by God while still *in utero*. In that passage from Isaiah 49, the now-grown up individual declares his (or her) awareness of being born to play a crucial role in God's will. The LORD called me before my birth; from within the womb he called me by name I am like a sharp arrow in his quiver You are my servant my God has given me strength."

The idea of being named while still in the womb is not foreign to us, for many name their children before they were born. That's easier than ever in these days when we can know the gender of our offspring weeks before they emerge from the birth canal, but the servant is saying something more significant here. The prophet says that God knows all about us even before we are born.

Paul says much the same thing in his Letter to the Corinthians. He knows them; he knows who they are. He knows what they are capable of. "I am writing to God's church in Corinth, to you who have been called by

God to be his own holy people. " Holy, called and together. Those are the words he uses to describe his readers and hearers. Made holy, not by their own efforts, not by their own hand, but by Christ Jesus.

Called, as he is called, to be saints, to a way of living, a way of being. Together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. A part of something much bigger than themselves, bigger than their church, bigger than their collection of churches in Corinth, bigger than their egos and their divisions and their attitudes. And then he thanks God for them and for the gifts that God has given them.

He is grateful for the life they live in Christ. He gives thanks for the faithfulness of God at work in them. And this is evidenced by the reality that they are not lacking in any spiritual gift. What an incredible statement! You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, he says. It's a plural you. Paul is writing to the body – the whole church, not to individuals. And it is as a body that they will fulfill their calling. It is as a body that they will find their strength and the ability to be blameless. It is as a body that they will respond to the faithfulness of God. That is the only way they can respond to the faithfulness of God. I – you - may be lacking in all sorts of spiritual gifts, but we are not lacking in them. And, Paul argues, it is time to reclaim those gifts in the life and mission of the church.

That's not always how we respond to God's gifts. We sometimes, rather, say we don't have enough.

Why do we sometimes feel so acutely that so much is missing from our life, our family, our career, our community, our church?

If we really are "lacking in nothing," why do we feel like ... well, like this:

If I just had more time...

If I just had more money...

If I just had more power...

If I just had more confidence...

If I just had more influence...

Then I could really be something for God.

Our problem is not that we are lacking. Our problem is not that we need certain things that we just don't have. Our problem is that we have things that we don't know we have.

Paul tells us in our 1 Corinthians passage that we're "called to be saints" (v. 2). This can sound like more than we can possibly live up to, but

he goes on to say that God has given us his grace (v. 4), and enriched us in speech and knowledge (v. 5), and strengthened us (v. 6) so that we're not lacking in any spiritual gift (v. 7).

You and I may think of ourselves as too imperfect, too broken, to be of any use to God. But neither Peter nor Paul was perfect, and God was able to use them mightily.

Let's remember that there's reason to be satisfied with the church. Specifically, *Paul reminds the Corinthians of three reasons why he is so thankful for and satisfied with their church body*, despite its issues, reasons that apply to us as well. For Paul, the Corinthian church was still something to marvel over because it had three things: grace, gifts and a guarantee.

Let's start with *grace*. What makes a body of believers great is not the great things done by them, but the great mercy shown to them. The primary reason Paul was overjoyed with the church at Corinth is because of the gift of faith and the flood of forgiveness that has washed over them. "I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. (v. 4).

The incredible promise of the gospel is that no matter how messed up we were prior to meeting Jesus, once we're connected to the work of the cross, through belief and baptism, we're adopted as sons and daughters and made inheritors of his kingdom.

Not only did the church at Corinth have grace but it had gifts. Paul writes that the church was "... enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge -- even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you -- so that you are not lacking in any gift" (vv. 5-7a). Sure, every church is a filled with broken believers. But God promised that when the church is established by God's grace it's also gifted and equipped to be the church by the power of the Spirit.

Have you thought about the gifts that God has clearly given to your congregation? What are the ministries God has started and the needs God is meeting through your family of believers? Take note of these things, open your eyes to these things and you'll have reason to be satisfied and grateful.

God has, can and will make lemonade out of lemons. Just two weeks ago, although food was prepared and volunteers had been assembled, we were not able to serve the Community Table, but the Church came together for a wonderful meal of fellowship and worked together to "undecorate" the church after the Advent and Christmas seasons. When I came to this Church in July, there was great doubt that it was possible, but,

again last year, this Church has paid its apportionments in full. God always gives us enough of what we need to do the work God has for us.

Last, Paul found great joy in the struggling Corinthian church because of the bright and glorious future guaranteed to each and every dysfunctional but deeply loved church. Ultimately, Paul wrote, the church was waiting. "He will keep you strong to the end ... God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says," (vv. 8a, 9a).

Undergirding the life of each and every local church is the truth that, despite all of our imperfections, the end is not in doubt. The future is secure because Christ has promised that in the end, no matter what, he will return, he will resurrect, he will find us faultless, he will establish his kingdom, and until that day, he will keep his church alive.

Paul offers encouragement. Paul gives thanks for the church because they are not lacking any spiritual gift. Paul offers them the gift of confidence; he tells them that they have the tools needed to serve God and be the church. This young, inexperienced church may not know it, but they have the gifts and knowledge necessary to do their job, to preach the gospel. The love and power of God is within them, and that is enough.

You are not lacking, Paul announces. Go ahead and be the church, be the person God knows that you are.

We tell ourselves that someone else can do it better or assure ourselves that we will do this job or follow this calling once we've had more training. Or when we are older or wiser. Or when we have more time. There is always a reason not to act – the church budget is tight, we've been in a bull market for too long and there is bound to be a downturn, we are only a small congregation, our members are older or just busy.

Paul says, *You're right! You are not perfect or fully mature. But spiritual wisdom and spiritual muscle is just like any other kind of muscle – it will get stronger with us. Your spiritual gifts will grow.* Paul encourages us to dare to use what we have today.

Paul emphasizes that we are not lacking in spiritual gifts. Isaiah says that God has created us and gifted us not just for our own benefit, but for the good of the whole world. What we have to offer today is exactly what is needed. We are not lacking, because God's grace will rise to the occasion. Despite not always feeling strong or complete, we are told that God can work through anyone who is willing.

We have been chosen. We are not lacking. God's gifts are in us and can be used today. We can trust in God and God will not let us down.