

Man of Letters

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 1:1-17

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on January 15, 2023

While the stories of Jesus' life in the four gospels are central to Christian faith and to the New Testament, twenty-three of the twenty-nine books of the New Testament are letters. Since the entire New Testament takes place in the first-century and we got deep into that context during Advent, we're going to keep going and look at letter-writing, transmission, and delivery at the time Paul and others were creating the documents that form most of the books in the New Testament.

So, let's dive in. This is one of those Sundays when I really wish I had screens in church to show you some famous paintings of Paul writing his letters. The one used in the Messenger on Friday and that will be the thumbnail for the YouTube video for this morning is by Valentin de Boulogne and dates to the mid-17th century. What this painting gets absolutely right is in the writing materials. First-century writers typically used a pen made from a reed cut into eight-to-ten-inch lengths with a split cut in the end that is re-cut as it's used. Same principle as sharpening a pencil.

Letters were written on sheets of papyrus, and then folded up accordion style and folded in half again. Then it was sealed with wax with the specific mark of the sender. If the letter was longer than one sheet, as most of Paul's were, the papyrus sheets were glued together at the bottom and rolled up into a scroll. Then it was the scroll that bore the wax seal.

Papyrus was only used for the final copy. Drafts of letters or anything else were put on parchment, which was more durable and could be washed off and re-used. In second Timothy 4:13, Paul asks Timothy to bring him his notebooks. Those were bound pages of parchment where he would have made notes while traveling or trying to work through a concept or response to an issue in one of the churches. From those notes in the parchment books, he wrote his letters.

In the Boulogne painting, you can see that Paul has a single-page letter, still folded but no longer sealed in front of him on the desk, he's referencing a bound notebook and writing on papyrus that will be bound on a scroll that is already begun and is there on the desk. That's all correct and strongly suggests that he is sending a long response to the one-page letter that lies folded, but opened in front of him.

But the desk in the painting is all wrong. Desks existed, but that's not where people especially people in the East, wrote letters; they wrote letters on their laps, which you can see Paul doing in paintings by Rembrandt and others. They wrote letters on their laps, even when they had perfectly serviceable desks, because nobody wrote letters by themselves.

At the very least there was a secretary, who had special training in the conventions of letter-writing, much as a secretary today knows the form for a business letter or other specific forms of correspondence. We know Paul used secretaries, since the book of Romans names one of them. Romans 16:22 says, "I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord."

It was Tertius and those like him who knew how to open and close the letter, who made sure everyone who sent greetings was named and that any recipient who needed to be acknowledged was. Tertius knew Paul's unique style, and could blend that with the conventions of opening and closing letters, just like any good secretary today can.

But it wasn't only secretaries who would have been present at the writing of a letter. Paul traveled with a team and wrote with a team who he bounced ideas off of and who even contributed to the content. Those people included at least Timothy, Titus, Silvanus, and Sosthenes, who is the person named here at the outset of 1 Corinthians. Going into a study, closing the door, and writing a letter at a desk by yourself is a very Western thing to do. It wasn't the culture of Paul or of the Bible more generally.

When someone is named at the start of a letter in the Bible, that indicates the person contributed in some way to the content. They are, in a sense, a co-author. Those named at the end of the letter are merely present and send greetings.

Very frequently, the person named as a contributor to the letter at the beginning is someone who knows the recipients. That is the case in 1 Corinthians. Paul is writing this letter to the church in Corinth from Ephesus. But when we first met this letter's co-author, Sosthenes, in Acts 18 he was not in Ephesus, but in Corinth.

Acts tells us that Paul spent a year and a half planting the church in Corinth. He began in the synagogue, became unwelcome there and then moved to a house next to the synagogue, where he continued teaching about Jesus. While in that house next door, the chief official of the synagogue, a man named Crispus, became a follower of Jesus and joined the budding church. So the synagogue needed a new chief official to replace Crispus, and Sosthenes got the job.

When the growing church in Corinth became viewed as a threat, Paul was brought before a tribunal. The Roman authority there responded that this was entirely a religious matter and they should deal with it themselves. So, they did; but instead of taking things out on Paul, who was too popular, they grabbed and beat up Sosthenes, indicating that he may have had sympathies for the followers of Jesus, even though he remained at the synagogue.

We have to fill in the blanks on the rest of Sosthenes story, but it isn't surprising to me that, once he'd been beaten to a pulp in Corinth, we find him in Ephesus with Paul, helping him respond to the many conflicts going on back in Corinth, a place Sosthenes knew well. So don't just gloss over his name. Spare a kind thought for Sosthenes.

But now, Sosthenes and Paul have worked up a response to the letter from the Corinthian church, the final papyrus pages are glued together, rolled up in a scroll, and sealed in wax with Paul's signet. How does it travel from Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey to Corinth in Greece? By courier, frequently a group of them for safety, especially when the journey was long and crossed borders. In this case, the fastest way from Ephesus to Corinth would have involved a ship crossing the Aegean Sea. That was 241 dangerous miles. If you went around on land, it was 1,072 miles.

The Romans did have a postal system, but that was only for official government business. Everyone else, from merchants to families to individuals on the move, had to find their own couriers. Paul had to find people he could trust in Ephesus who were both willing and able to make the trip.

But a courier couldn't be just anyone, because letters were not just handed from one person to another. During Advent we talked about literacy levels being low. You couldn't just depend on recipients being able to open and read a letter—especially not one from Paul.

The courier might have been a slave or hired hand or a friend or relative who was going to be traveling to the letter's destination. But the courier would be expected to either read it or, more likely, recite it from memory to the named recipients which, in this case, was the entire church in Corinth.

More than that, the ideal letter carrier personally knew at least the sender, and preferably both the sender and recipients. That made the transmission more reliable, both because the couriers themselves cared about those at both ends of the transaction, but also because the custom was not just to read or recite the letter, but to interpret its meaning and intent and stick around to answer any questions those who heard it might have.

Those who delivered Paul's letters had to know not only what was said, but what he was trying to say in order to deal with potential questions or misunderstandings. Good luck with that!

That fluid nature of oral letter delivery, recitation, and the potential for added information beyond the letter brings me back to 1 Corinthians, "Chloe's people," and why we even have the first six chapters of that book in the first place.

Paul didn't sit down one day in Ephesus and think, "Gee, I wonder how the folks in Corinth are doing. I think I'll write them a note." 1 Corinthians chapter 7 begins, "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote." Ding! Ding! They wrote him *first* and First Corinthians is Paul's *response*.

That original letter from Corinth to Paul didn't come in the mail. It came via a courier sent by the church; likely someone *from* the church, who was known to and trusted by Paul, and someone who was ready to answer any questions Paul had once they delivered it.

It appears from chapter 1 verse 11 that those who brought the first letter **from** the Corinthians were, "Chloe's people." Not Chloe herself, maybe servants, maybe family or close friends; but the mention of her name means Paul knew her and would trust the group she sent to reliably deliver the intended message.

Finally, "Chloe's people" found Paul in Ephesus and orally presented the content and questions from the church's letter. Then, since he could ask questions, and because it was entirely expected that the courier might give information beyond the pages of the letter they brought, "Chloe's people" let Paul know about other issues in the church at Corinth that the letter didn't mention. "It has been reported to me by 'Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you,'" Paul says. You can almost see the looks shared in Corinth when Paul's return courier said those words. He knows.

Those extra things are so troubling to Paul, that he spends the first six chapters of his response addressing them. Then, finally, at the start of chapter seven, he can move on to what they actually asked him about.

So, what got Paul so upset? What did Chloe's people divulge that made him devote almost half of his return letter to addressing it? In short, the congregation is experiencing divisions, with some feeling they are better than others because of who baptized them or whose teaching they follow.

But Paul's response makes it clear that the problem goes deeper than that. We understand that from verse 17 of the first chapter, the last verse that Joyce read earlier: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power."

Because we're reading that over two thousand years later, when we hear something about the power of the cross, we're filled with images of the cross associated with the military might of the Crusades or the various theologies of how, on the cross, Jesus defeated death, the devil, and/or sin.

But that's not what Paul means; and we know that because he contrasts the "power of the cross" with "eloquent wisdom." That phrase for "eloquent wisdom", *sophia logou*, in Greek, represented more than just a person who spoke well or wisely. It was indicative of overall status; implying wealth, power, and education among other things. I'm not sure we have the exact equivalent in English, but it might be something like describing a person as "refined" or "cultured."

By contrasting "eloquent wisdom" with the "power of the cross," Paul tells us what "power of the cross" means to him. It's about status, not theology. To be crucified was to be shamed. Literally hung up in public—usually naked and close to the ground, where people could come by and spit on you, mock you, and do whatever they wanted to you across the days it would take you to die there.

When Paul himself was executed by Rome around the year 64, he was beheaded. Peter was executed by Rome about the same time but was crucified. Why the difference? Paul had higher status. Paul was a Roman citizen and it was against the law to crucify a citizen of Rome. Crucifixion was for outsiders, for those of low status, for criminals, for the powerless. Crucifixion was for the "other." The cross was not for those who had "eloquent wisdom."

Right off the bat in his response to the various questions and conflicts at Corinth, Paul slams shut the idea that anyone who is part of the church of Jesus Christ is better than anyone else—either inside or outside the church. Jesus told his followers to take up their cross and follow him. He said those who wanted to be first should take the place usually assigned for the least and last.

To follow Jesus was not to disregard status, it was to deliberately accept the lowest status while living lives of love and compassion worthy of the highest calling. That inversion could, in time, transform the structures of human power so that, as the prophet Isaiah said, “They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.” That inversion, for Paul, is what he means by the “power of the cross,” which the one-upmanship of who-baptized-who going on in Corinth was undermining.

All the rest of this letter—the sections about spiritual gifts, one body and many members, and the best known chapter of all—the love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13—all reinforce this. First Corinthians 13 says it again in the first verse. “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Nothing, nothing, nothing. To strive to be associated with “eloquent wisdom,” with high status, refinement, wealth, and power is to empty the power of the cross, the power of love that, in its holiest form, seeks nothing at all for itself, but gives up everything, willingly, for the salvation of the world.

This weekend we remember another follower of Jesus who wrote long a long letter to the church from prison, as Paul would later do. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared Paul’s interpretation of the power of the cross, of the non-violent inversion of human power structures to save the world.

So, I will close with a portion of Dr. King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and simply leave you with the question he asks of the clergy and church representatives to whom he writes. It could easily have been written by Paul to the church in Corinth. From April 16, 1963:

“There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

“Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.”

“But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were “a colony of heaven,” called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be “astronomically intimidated.” By their effort and example, they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

“Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent--and often even vocal--sanction of things as they are.

“But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

“Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?”

Amen.