

"With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility"  
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 28:16-20  
2 Corinthians 13:11-13

## Matthew 28

<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

## 2 Corinthians 13

<sup>11</sup>Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. <sup>12</sup>Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. <sup>13</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

### I. Introduction

I think that everyone knows that I may be the biggest comic book nerd in the church. That love of comic books began in the 1960s when I first started reading about the Fantastic Four, the Legion of Super Heroes, and the Justice League of America. My love for comic books was nurtured by watching what passed for super hero entertainment on the TV. So I'm going to guess that I'm not the only one who remembers iconic lines like "Same Bat-Time,

Same Bat-Channel" that closed the Batman serial back in the 1960s, or "Up, Up, and Away" from the George Reeves Superman TV shows, or the advertisement, "You'll believe a man can fly" for the first Superman movie starring Christopher Reeves.

(**slide2**) But perhaps the most famous line is one that wasn't originally spoken by a superhero at all. In the Spiderman universe, Peter Parker has a wise old uncle named Uncle Ben, who is murdered when Peter has the chance to stop a robber but doesn't. Why doesn't he stop the robber? Here, the comic book version and the movie versions differ. In the comic book (Amazing Fantasy #15, available online at [https://archive.org/details/Amazing\\_Fantasy\\_vol1\\_15\\_201607/page/n9/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Fantasy_vol1_15_201607/page/n9/mode/2up), accessed 2 June 2023) Spiderman is getting his first taste of fame and fortune. People are clamoring for his signature on a business contract, and he basically blows them off. When a thief comes running down the hall, being trailed by a policeman, Peter blows him off too, with the words "Sorry pal! That's **your** job! I'm **thru** being pushed around – by anyone! From now on I just look out for number one – that means – **me!**"

AS HIS FIRST TV SPECTACULAR ENDS, PETER PARKER BREATHES THE FIRST SWEET SCENT OF FAME AND SUCCESS!

I'M FROM **LIFE!** WE'LL PAY ANY PRICE FOR A PICTURE SPREAD!

SIGN WITH **ME!** I'LL PUT YOU IN THE MOVIES!

WAIT! WE WANT AN INTERVIEW!

SEE MY AGENT, BOYS! I'M BUSY!



WHEW! RID OF 'EM AT LAST!

HEY! WHAT'S GOIN' ON??



**STOP! THIEF! STOP HIM!** IF HE MAKES IT TO THE ELEVATOR, HE'LL GET AWAY!



**MADE IT!**



I'M SAFE NOW! THAT COP CAN NEVER GET DOWN TO THE LOBBY AS FAST AS I CAN IN THIS HIGH-SPEED EXPRESS ELEVATOR! LUCKY THAT GOON IN A COSTUME DIDN'T STOP ME!



WHAT'S **WITH** YOU, MISTER?? ALL YOU HADDA DO WAS TRIP HIM, OR HOLD HIM JUST FOR A MINUTE!



SORRY, PAL! THAT'S **YOUR** JOB! I'M **THRU** BEING PUSHED AROUND --BY ANYONE! FROM NOW ON I JUST LOOK OUT FOR NUMBER ONE --THAT MEANS--**ME!**







Of course, that decision would come back to haunt Peter a few pages later, when the thief he could have stopped is the man responsible for killing his beloved Uncle Ben. That comic book closes with the words, "[With great power there must also come great responsibility](#)," a saying that would eventually be attributed to Uncle Ben, and shortened to "With great power comes great responsibility." Nor is that phrase for sure the creation of the comic's author, Stan Lee. It may actually have originated with the French philosopher Voltaire.

**(slide3)** So why do I mention, again, one of the most famous and one of the most iconic lines in all of comic book history? Because last week, we celebrated Pentecost Sunday, widely celebrated in the Christian Church as its birthday, because on that day, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4). It is important to remember that this wasn't the first time that people were filled with the Holy Spirit in the history of salvation; we read about that quite a lot in the book of Judges, and even in John 20, we are told that "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be

with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (see, e.g., Michaels NICNT 1010-11 ["conferring on them the Spirit with his very breath ... Here the Spirit is both the evidence of resurrection—that is, that Jesus is alive—and the empowerment of the disciples to do what he has just sent them to do"]). But every time the Holy Spirit comes on to someone, that someone is endowed with power: power to prophecy, power to save the children of Israel, and the power to manifest spiritual gifts.

So on this Trinity Sunday, it's worth taking a moment to reflect on the responsibilities we all share as being filled, strengthened, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. And despite the Lectionary's record setting recommendation of a mere seven (!) verses from the New Testament, there is much for us to ponder.

## II Pivot to 2 Corinthians

(**slide4**) Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth was a contentious one. How contentious was it? So contentious that Paul ended up writing four different letters to the church: one referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:9 ("I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons"); the one we now know as First Corinthians; a third letter referenced in 2 Corinthians 2:3-4, 9 ("And I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice ... For I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears ... I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything"); and a fourth letter we know as Second Corinthians. These verses from 2 Corinthians suggest that Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth had taken a nosedive, which added an additional measure of complexity to the epistle. Now, Paul is not only addressing differences of opinions and improper behavior within the church; he is also trying to mend, repair, and salvage the relationship that he has with the church. Nor do we know if this

was a general uprising of the church's membership, or whether the leadership of the various house-churches were at the root of this broken relationship.

(slide5) In the context of this fractured relationship, then, Paul ends his letter with five exhortations to that broken church. The word translated "farewell" (χαίρετε) in verse 11 by the NRSV is almost certainly instead an exhortation to rejoice (e.g., NASB, NIV, NET, NJB, NAB; see also Omanson and Ellington, UBS Handbook 244; Harris, NIGTC 932; Thrall new ICC 905; Martin WBC 708; Furnish AB 581; Hughes old NICNT 486; Barnett new NICNT 615; Matera NTL 312; Witherington III, Socio-Rhetorical Commentary 474) that is followed by four additional imperatives. The call to "rejoice," then, sets the overall tone and specifies the expected attitude for these final few verses of Paul's letter.

(slide6) The next imperative, "put things in order" (καταρτίζεσθε), is the same word used by Matthew (4:21) and Mark (1:19) of fishermen "mending their nets." Thus the verb carries the connotation of "~~restore~~ *[restoring something] to a former condition*" (BDAG 526). Nor is that any kind of innovation. The same language is used in Ezra chapters 4(:12, 13, 16) and 5(:3, 9, 11) to describe the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and its temple. Hence, Paul is calling on the Corinthians church to think back to their earlier days as a congregation, days in which the animosity towards Paul and the toxic disagreements amongst themselves did not yet exist, and to work to bring the church back to those "good old days" (I follow here the majority of commentators in parsing καταρτίζεσθε as an active/middle voice imperative instead of a passive voice, meaning that the onus is on the Corinthian Christians themselves to effect the restoration that Paul is calling them to do; see, e.g., Omanson and Ellington, UBS Handbook 244 ["correct the wrong behavior"]; Martin WBC 709 ["we think that probably Paul is requiring some action on behalf of the Corinthians to rectify the situation"]; Matera NTL 312 ["mend their ways"]; Witherington III Socio-Rhetorical Commentary 474 ["amend their lives"]. Hughes old NICNT 486; Barnett new NICNT and Furnish AB 581 prefer the passive voice translation ["be perfected," "be restored," respectively]. Somewhat strangely, EDNT and BDAG parse the verbal form as passive voice but translate it with an active verb, "mend your ways"). Nor is that in any way strange or unusual. When I was in counseling over a

marriage that was breaking down, one of the questions I remember being asked was whether my wife and I could recall memories when the marriage was healthy instead of broken, times when being with each other was a source of joy instead of a source of misery. Being able to recall positive moments and memories meant that we had a chance at rekindling those feelings and rebuilding our relationship. That seems to be the kind of thing that Paul had in mind with his exhortation to "put things in order." It's not a command to rearrange your bookshelf or to organize the pots and pans in your kitchens. It's an invitation to mend our currently broken relationships with each other by thinking back to a time when the relationship was good and productive and positive, instead of focusing on the present feelings of hurt, distrust, or disagreement.

(slide7) The next exhortation, "listen to my appeal" (παρακαλεῖσθε). The NRSV's translation does not make clear that the verb in question is elsewhere translated by the words "I encourage you" or "I exhort you" or something like that. But figuring out what Paul is doing here is more than just a question of figuring out what English verb is the best translation here. What Paul is doing is exhorting the Corinthian Christians to listen to and implement the things he has already exhorted them to do. So in 2 Corinthians 2:8, Paul writes, "**I urge** (παρακαλῶ) you to reaffirm your love for him," that is for the one who has done wrong to Paul. In chapter 5 verse 20, he writes, "**we entreat** (παρακαλοῦντος δι' ἡμῶν) you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." And in chapter 6 verse 1, Paul says, "**we urge** (παρακαλοῦμεν) you also not to accept the grace of God in vain." All of these verses use the same verb that Paul is using in 2 Corinthians 13:11, and it is as if Paul is instructing the Corinthian Christians to do what he has previously urged, entreated, or exhorted them to do (see, e.g., Barnett new NICNT 616 [the imperative

παρακαλεῖσθε "relates to the various exhortations and encouragements the apostle has laid upon the Corinthians during the course of

his letter"; Thrall new ICC 907 ["Paul is urging the Corinthians to respond to the entreaties, explicit or implicit, conveyed by his letter"]; see, similarly, Harris NIGTC 933. The verb παρακαλέω occurs in 2 Corinthians at 1:4 [3x], 6; 2:7, 8; 5:20; 6:1; 7:6 [2x], 7, 13; 8:6; 9:5; 10:1; 12:8, 18; 13:11). Implied in this exhortation is the presumption that the Corinthian Christians are still teachable, are still open to being led by Paul, are still willing to reflect upon their behavior in the light of what Paul has already written in the epistle. It is easy to become complacent as the followers of Jesus. That's an attitude we need to do our best to avoid.

(**slide8**) Paul's next exhortation, "agree with one another (τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖτε)," is one that he uses elsewhere to talk about the unity of the church. Though the same phrase is translated differently, Paul uses this phrase in Romans 15:5 ("May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you *to live in harmony* [τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν] with one another"), in Philippians 2:2 ("*be of the same mind* [τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε], having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind [note the slightly different formulation, τὸ ἐν φρονοῦντες]), and in Philippians 4:2 ("I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche *to be of the same mind* [τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν] in the Lord"). To be clear: Paul isn't exhorting the Corinthian Christians to be in mental lock-step on every possible issue that might come up. Romans 14-15 are two chapters devoted to how Christians who disagree about what the Bible says and whether certain passages from the Bible should still be followed by the Roman Christians. Those two chapters are full of disagreements about the kind of food that Christians can and should eat, and whether Christians should honor certain special days on the religious calendar, both of which are taught explicitly in the Old Testament, which was the Bible of the first Christians. It is in that context of disagreement that Paul exhorts the Roman Christians to "live in harmony with one another." That's the sense that is being carried by the phrase in 2 Corinthians 13. Paul isn't talking about everyone having the same moral beliefs or the same religious beliefs or the same political



beliefs. Paul is talking instead about the Corinthians Christians all being on the same page, having the same goals, fostering the same kind of attitude - an attitude, he says in Philippians 2, that should mirror that of Christ, the Incarnate Son of God who came to serve, not to be served; who came to love, not to become a celebrity; who gave up everything, including his own life, so that others might be freed from the power of sin. That's what Paul is talking about in 2 Corinthians 13. I pointed out to Peter last Sunday that there is a loose board behind the pulpit that squeaks whenever I take a step backwards, and I know that in time, that loose board will become more looser, and the squeaks it makes will get more squeakier. We'll have to do something about that eventually. And different people may well have different ideas as to what the eventual something might be.

Well, if we can disagree over something like the best way to stop a loose board from squeaking, imagine all the other things we might disagree on. In the midst of all that disagreement, we are called to be of the same mind, to be of the same spirit, to not let our disagreements define us, but to figure out how to be a unified family of faith despite the different views and opinions within the church.

(slide9) And if we can figure out how to do that, then the fifth commandment will follow almost as a matter of course: "live in peace (εἰρηνεύετε)" with one another. That command may remind you of the words of Jesus in Mark 9:50, "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace (εἰρηνεύετε) with one another." Or perhaps you recall it from Romans 12:8, where Paul writes, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably (εἰρηνεύοντες) with all," a command that is repeated in 1 Thessalonians 5:13, "Live in peace (εἰρηνεύετε) among yourselves." That might be the easiest

thing in the world to do when everyone in the church is of the same mind, when we all agree to take Paul's instructions to heart, when we think back before our current disagreements to the better times we had before our disagreements arose, and when we have an attitude full of joy and rejoicing.

**(slide10)** And what is the consequence of all this effort? "the God of love and peace (ὁ θεὸς τῆς ἀγάπης καὶ εἰρήνης ἔσται μεθ' ὑμῶν) shall be with you," according to the second half of verse 11. The God of love and peace isn't promised to us if we win every argument at church or if we play the "my way or the highway" card when someone does something differently than we would. The God of love and peace isn't promised to us if we serve on every committee that the church has or if we are the hardest working, "always there for everything" member of the church. The God of love and peace is with us if we have an attitude of rejoicing with each other, if we can all manage restore the broken relationships amongst us, if we can manage to be on the same page despite any disagreements we might have with each other, and if we can genuinely live in genuine peace with each other. I can't speak for anyone but me, but if the God of love and peace will be with me if I follow Paul's exhortations in this verse, that would make it all worthwhile for me.

### III. Pivot to Today

I think this the first time I have ever preached an entire sermon based on one verse out of the Bible. Partly, that's because the exhortations given by Paul are so weighty and so worth our continued reflection. But partly, that's because the church as a whole seems to have forgotten about Paul's counsel.

(slide11) On Saturday, I was alerted to a situation in Cleveland that involved a modern version of conflict in the church. A Roman Catholic priest was preaching during Mass a sermon in which he said, "Look at the Los Angeles Dodgers. Look what's happening. Defaming the name of Jesus Christ. Defaming the name of every Christian here on Earth. It just burns a hole in my heart, angers me and embitters me. And it should you" in reference to the Dodgers decision to give The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence their Community Hero Award for service to the LGBTQ community. One transgendered man took issue with the homily and interrupted the Mass and said, "queer and trans people also carry the Holy Spirit." So clearly there is some disagreement here, which is exactly the kind of situation Paul is addressing in Romans and 2 Corinthians, and so equally clearly this is an opportunity to put into action Paul's imperatives in this morning's passage, right? Except that I don't think that Paul would have supported what happened next: "I look up, and there's someone storming towards us from the church building .... "He did say that if he saw any of us (at the church,) he would shoot us" ([Bay Village church attendee fires back over priest's remarks at St. Raphael - cleveland.com](#), accessed 3 June 2023)

He would shoot us? That doesn't sound like living in peace with each other, being on the same page with each other, or mending relationships that are broken now but didn't used to be. That's not the kind of church I'd ever want to be a part of. And I rather doubt that's the kind of church that our God of love and peace wants to see as part of the kingdom of heaven, if for no other reason that it so damages the witness of other Christians and other churches that are trying to spread the gospel to all the peoples of the earth, making disciples of them and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus taught his disciples. What we do matters, not only to God but also the people who don't believe the gospel. I rather doubt that threatening to shoot a church

member over a disagreement over the status of queer and transgendered persons in the church doesn't do anything to move someone from the unbeliever column to the faithful disciple column.

So as we celebrate communion this morning, and when we leave this house of worship, let's take Paul's words to heart. Let's cultivate an attitude of joyful rejoicing, a habit of relationship mending, a willingness to follow the New Testament's imperatives and exhortations, a willingness to be on the same page with those who disagree with us, and a lifestyle of being at peace with everyone we meet. Because manifesting the presence of the God of love and peace within us is a way better witness to a lost and dying world that threatening to shoot the folks with whom we disagree. Hallelujah! And Amen.