

I've been here as your new pastor now for about 6 weeks and I feel like I'm getting to know you as a church and you're getting to know me. We've been slowly experiencing each other's strengths and challenges - getting to know our personalities. Yes, a church has a personality too.

For me, for instance, some of you might have noticed that I love animals. I'm a pet person. I love meeting your dogs when you visit with them here, or when I get to meet them in your homes. I have three cats right now, though we used to have a Vizsla dog who passed away. And in San Diego I volunteered for the Humane Society as a neonatal, kitten bottle feeder, which I absolutely loved.

You might be surprised to hear that my last congregation in Coronado used to allow dogs in their worship services - just small ones that sat with their owners in the back if they were quiet. Now I'm not suggesting we start doing that, but that was a part of THEIR church personality. It's the only church I've pastored that allowed that.

We've only been meeting in person again for 5 weeks, but you might be interested to know that we've had several new visitors already and quite a few who have returned to worship. So today I MIGHT not be as new as someone here or even watching online. I thought it would be fun to take a poll to find out who here today has been around Corona UMC the longest. You might be interested in this too, so be brave, turn and look around at each other as I ask -

If you are willing, raise your hand and keep it up if you've been around Corona UMC, in general, 5 years or more. Keep them up if you've been here 10 years or more. 20? 30?

Those of you who have been here 5 years or more, I have a special request, as you leave worship, look around and invite the Holy Spirit to help you notice someone you don't know very well and make an effort to speak to them. Ask them their name and get to know them. I've heard SO MANY comments that this is a welcoming and warm community. Let's continue to be known that way.

I mentioned that every church has its own personality - another trendy word for that would be "culture". Every church has its own culture. Well, today I'm beginning a 7 week sermon series on the

book of 1 Corinthians found in the New Testament, which is famously known as a church with a culture of division and disagreement. In this day and age, a church in disagreement doesn't sound very strange. You might be a long time church attender or maybe you are newer to "church", but the reality is, EVERY church has some division and disagreement. It's not possible to agree about everything all the time and, honestly, it's not healthy. The question is, how do we not harm one another as we have different opinions? How do we create harmony in diversity?

So today, and next Sunday, I get to introduce this book of I Corinthians to you, a letter written to a new group of believers in the city of Corinth, to THE CORINTHIANS. I'm also creating a Daily Bible Study Guide for you to go along with this series. I've included a copy as an insert in your bulletin and it will also be online on our website under "Sundays". I hope this will be an encouragement to you to make time 5 days of the week to read the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians between today and next Sunday and answer some questions about what you've read. I truly believe Bible reading and study changes our lives so PLEASE try this out.

Let me begin to describe this city of Corinth so we have some context, some background in this study. Imagine with me, as if you were looking at a map above me, a huge body of water - the Mediterranean Sea to be exact. On your bottom left and on your top right two land masses connected by a narrow stretch of land - an isthmus - and on the Southwest part of the isthmus is the small city of Corinth.

During Biblical times, a road ran over that isthmus, on which whole, smaller ships, fully loaded with cargo could be hauled and cargo of larger ships could be hauled in wagons. Goods traveled through Corinth over that road back and forth between Italy and Spain in the West and Egypt and Asia Minor in the East. Corinth was a major city of Greece - which is where Corinth is located. It had almost a million people, the majority of them were slaves. It was a hub of commercial goods and religious & ethnic diversity. There were lots of different kinds of people from many places.

Archaeologists have found evidence of more than two dozen temples, altars and shrines to various

gods. One even was “a temple for all the gods” in case they missed any. THIS letter to the Christians in Corinth was written around 55 AD, which means many Jewish people had also relocated there, because they were expelled by certain emperors in years prior.

Because of the great diversity of religion, those who had come to know about Jesus and accepted him as God and Savior, fought a big uphill battle refraining from the more socially acceptable, religious practices that were all around them.

In fact, with a population of largely serving class peoples, the biggest battle was not getting caught up in the practices and events that set apart the upper and serving classes. Said in a delicate way, one of those acceptable practices that proved one’s social class had to do with physical intimacy inside the temples. Another was attending large, extravagant banquets where meat sacrificed to certain gods were then cooked and served as the main course as a sign of devotion to a certain god.

As we’ll see in our study going forward, these newer Christians - in the process of figuring out how to be dedicated followers of Christ in a wide world full of different beliefs - had a very difficult time. And if we’re honest, whether we’ve known Christ as Savior a short or long time, we also have these same struggles in 2021.

Let’s look back at the beginning - verse one of 1st Corinthians and see what we can learn about Who God is and who God calls us to be.

We’re just going to look at the first verse again. I’m going to wet your appetite to come back for more. “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes.”

This phrase seems totally unremarkable. In fact, if you’ve read any of the other letters - also called epistles, which is the Greek word for letter - if you’ve ever read other New Testament letters, 1st Corinthians follows the same formula most others begin with - stating WHO is writing the letter.

However, anyone reading this letter in those days, who knew Paul at all, would have been shocked by his outrageous claim here. Paul, who used to be a Jewish leader - who hunted down, beat up, tortured and kill Christians - and enjoyed it - in this letter he calls himself an apostle - not only a disciple, a

follower, but an apostle, one who knew Jesus in human form - after Jesus had died!

“Paul” and “Apostle” is an oxymoron. Two things that don’t belong together. Like bittersweet. Or jumbo shrimp. Or walking dead. What two things don’t belong? Apostle and Paul.

But here we are - today, August 15, 2021, reading and studying together these words written about 2000 years ago. If they aren’t true, we shouldn’t even keep reading them. How is it possible that one person who did such evil things, could be transformed so completely to become an apostle?

There might be a few here who know about transformation? A radical change in one’s life leading them from one Way to an opposite Way. Did you know that’s what the early church was called? Before they were called a church they were called “The Way.”

Well, we do know how transformation like that occurs. Our God loves us so much that God took on flesh and became human - leaving behind some of God’s power - to live on the earth. Not only to live, but to die and then be raised from the dead - resurrected. The ONLY person proven to be resurrected by many proofs. And still today that God makes God’s self known to me and to you. Can you think of one experience this past week in your life where God made God’s self known to you? I’m guessing you can think of one. In fact, I’m guessing you can think of more than one. I know I can.

And just like the encounter that transformed the man called Saul so much that God gave him a new name, Paul, today also, God gives us a new name. Child of God. Daughters and Sons of the King, heirs with Christ Jesus. What does this one verse tell us about God? God is able to transform us completely and irrevocably. And calls us to live into our new identity as believers in Christ.

Are you a new person, a new creation in Christ Jesus? If yes, keep allowing yourself to be transformed with every breath you take. If not, this moment I invite you to say yes in your heart to transformation through Christ Jesus - God will hear you if you only ask it. Let’s pray together.