

**2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10**    **Putting Second First: The Household of God**  
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I need to share an introduction to our scripture today...(that is, if you haven't been reading Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians lately.)

The Apostle Paul knew these people to whom he was writing- personally. This is at least his second letter to them. He had lived with them for nearly a year, some time before. (He may well have written up to eight letters to them, delivered by his assistants, Timothy and Titus.) The Corinthians had also written to him as well, seeking his advice. Chloe, a deacon of the church, was one author of one of the 'lost letters.' All this took place within a 5 or 6 year period, in the mid 50's-AD.

Most of 2 Corinthians is about what is going on inside the church, about their self-understanding; how they viewed themselves and each other, sorting it out, step by step; with questions of diet, understanding the sacraments, membership issues. What Paul brings to them is news as how they are seen in God's eyes, through the love of Jesus Christ who is with them and for them; and who, as part of the body of Christ on earth, they are members (hard as that is to fathom.)

This is something that we have in common with the Corinthians. We get all caught up with who we are & what we are about, and forget, dismiss and don't ever really think how we are seen in God's eyes. This, then, is what we have to hear about this morning.... Hear these words:

**It is God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.**

**So we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.**

**So death is at work in us, but life in you. Thus we do not lose heart.**

**For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.**

**For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.**

**So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord — for we walk by faith, not by sight.**

A couple of weeks ago I was in California for a preaching conference. Here's a little anecdote. Folks are kinda chatty out there- making light conversation, whenever, wherever... and as I got on a hotel elevator, a woman along with her husband were pulling this big tub of fruits and vegetables through the door as I held it open for them.

He explained that as they drove past a fruit stand they just had to pick some things up, natural foods, organic, you know... and then his wife says to me — “And you, you must be a Capricorn!” (I was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, with a baseball cap, by the way.)

I wanted to burst out laughing, really... what in the world does a Capricorn look like, and why does she need to tell me this?

But all I said was —“nope, I'm a Leo.”

How's that for introductions?

What that little exchange says to me is something about how we humans like to identify others, how we categorize, sort out, even pigeonhole people in order to know where we stand in relation to them. It's about knowing where we belong, who else is with us, and what that means for our living. Because where we stand in relation to others matters (or so we think), to confirm or deny our place in the world.

It has always been this way, and it's more involved than we think.

Just count of all the groups and organizations of which you are a part... your high school & College, neighborhood associations, professional associations, your political affiliation; just take a minute to think about all the ways you are connected to others in some organized way. How many cards do you have in your wallet that signal something of your belonging?

Of course some groups are more important than others, but the ties we have can be ways we identify who we are, and just as importantly, who others aren't.

We identify with those who have similarities with us in all kinds of ways... whether we carry an AARP card, were born in the same state, if we like the same kinds of foods, or music, or books.

And conversely, we distance ourselves, even ever so slightly, with those with whom we do not share similarities. It just happens.

We can easily be divided one from another- and especially as groups, by making our affiliations far more important than they really are. What is often missing from our 'who's in- and who's out' perspective of life is a framework, a context, a model for understanding who we are and whose we are, all of us, together.

It has been this way for millennia, people separated from one another, in all sorts of ways, at all sorts of levels.

I firmly believe that how we understand and treat others largely comes out of how we see ourselves. And when we are most honest with ourselves, we see ourselves as children of God; imperfect and sinful, all works in progress- all of us; but also forgiven, loved and redeemed in Christ. (More than a Leo, I 'self-identify'- as a Christian....)



Regardless of the masks we choose to wear and despite how much we might even convince ourselves that we are who we pretend to be, God loves us just as we really are, 'warts and all'.

It is with that in mind that we come to worship, and what our worship is really all about.

I've been thinking about what we do here each Sunday a little differently this week (having a week out of the pulpit, last week, does that to a preacher now & then.) [The Rev. Dr.

Jackie Taylor= our new General Presbyter of Baltimore Presbytery preach last Sunday.] I don't take what's in our bulletin for granted each week, and I don't use pre-packaged materials, (none of us do.)

Each portion of the service is prepared in accord with our Directory for Worship, (a Presbyterian Guide book), and prayerfully (for real.)

Why we do what we do is important for me... as a worship leader and as one who also worships on Sundays.

As much as anything, it all hinges on the scripture reading; what we sing, how we pray, what our confession and assurance is all about, as well, of course, as the bulletin cover image and accompanying quote as well....

I don't just include the scripture passage for the day because it's interesting. Scripture is made central, the focal point of our worship, so that in the middle of our own real lives, scripture can read us.

What I mean with that is as we read and re-read the passage, we can allow key words to jump out at us and speak to us in ways that we need to hear, letting them work their way into us, just as we need them.

I chose the words of preparation for worship just for this reason today. It was Saint Teresa of Avila, a contemplative Spanish mystic and historical contemporary of John Calvin, (though I'm sure they never met!) who penned these words: **“Why do you think you are ready to enter the gates of heaven when you have not tried to enter the depth of your own soul?”**

St. Teresa herself was a ‘prayer warrior’ of the first order, a reformer of the church in her own right. She was unafraid of unmasking the taken for granted ways of the church, and drilled down to the basics, of what God in Christ was saying to us, doing for us, and asking from us.

Some words that really have jumped out at me from Paul's letter are these: “that we are treasure in clay jars” (that's all we are, really); ‘that the life of Jesus can be carried in our bodies’ (which is God's doing far more than us...), ‘we do not lose heart’ (for as much as we might otherwise...), for ‘we walk by faith, not by sight’; (don't we all?)

May I tell you something else about me that you may not know? (Besides that I am not a Capricorn, but a Leo?)

I really like houseplants, and I take care of them pretty well. Most every morning I

remember to walk around my house with a spritzer- and spray each of them with a good dose of water... it's one of those little things that I just like to do in the morning, sharing a little life with another living things. But by the end of the week I realize that a spritz a day is likely not enough for good, big plants to live on, so I go around with my watering can, to give those plants who need it a good soaking.

When we come to church, we can allow our souls to be deeply soaked with the goodness of God.

We can give ourselves the freedom to acknowledge who we really are to ourselves, and maybe even others, if we like, and in that acknowledgment can allow ourselves to be forgiven and reclaimed by God, week after week after week. Some of us need it. (I know I do.)

As the apostle Paul addressed those good folks in Corinth, over and over again, the church is more than about believing. It is also about belonging—even when you don't particularly feel called to belong, you are part of Christ's body... just as you are, fully accepted, heartily welcomed, invited to serve and to share, in Jesus' way and name, Amen.