

THE LOVE OF CHRIST URGES US ON

2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-20
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
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We are going to spend two more weeks on this theme, looking at two more cities in our summer sermon series called “The Early Church, Our Church.” This week we will be looking at Corinth. Next week we will wrap up our tour with Rome.

For our holidays this year, we were in North Vancouver house sitting for some friends that we got to know when I was studying at Regent College.

Every morning, for two weeks, my routine would look roughly the same:

1. Get up early, usually before anyone else in the house
2. Make a pot of coffee
3. Head out to the patio that looked over on to Indian Arm, a long fjord that extends up from Burrard Inlet and the Pacific ocean
4. Read the newspaper in the glorious calm of a sunny west coast morning.

Tough life ☺.

But each morning I would have the same experience of dissonance between the glorious, sunny peaceful morning in an upscale neighbourhood by the ocean that I was enjoying and the horrific events that were unfolding in places around the world.

As you know, it has been a very difficult summer to read the news.

Throughout our time on holidays, as I sat on the sunny patio looking out at the ocean, I would daily read about:

- The brutal (and ongoing) conflict in between Israel and Hamas that is having devastating consequences and horrific loss of life in Gaza
- The violence and unrest in Eastern Ukraine that seems to have the potential to bubble over into something much bigger and more frightening at any moment

- The Malaysian passenger airline that was believed to have been shot down by Russian separatists which killed all onboard
- The humanitarian crisis that is currently unfolding in Iraq as the Islamic State continues to forcibly claim territory in both Iraq and Syria, and the unspeakable atrocities that this group is perpetrating against women, children, and men along the way
- The devastating outbreak of Ebola in Guinea which threatens to spread further into Sierra Leone, Liberia, and other parts of West Africa
- Widespread famine in South Sudan as a result of eight months of violent conflict that has claimed over ten thousand lives and displaced at least one million people

I could go on, but perhaps you are now beginning to feel a bit like I would feel as I read the newspaper on vacation.

I would often put down the paper, stare out at the water, and think, *How can I sit here enjoying a wonderful vacation in a glorious, prosperous and peaceful city while so many people are suffering so terribly around the world?*

Maybe you're feeling the same right now. *How can we worship in our comfortable church sanctuary on a glorious summer day while we know that such awful things are taking place to human beings just like us all over the place?*

How are we supposed to function, how are we supposed to run and play and swim and hike and watch movies and roast marshmallows and paddle kayaks when children are being killed and starved?

How are we supposed to pray and sing and give thanks to God and sustain hope that he has a good plan for the world in light of all the awful things that are such a regular part of what we see each day in the news?

How are we supposed to believe in the power of love and peace and hope when their opposites—hatred, war, despair—seem to be such ever-present realities for so many people in so many places?

To be a person of faith in Jesus Christ is *and has always been* to be a person who is convinced that there is a reality beyond the one that we see in front of us—that the kingdom of God is real and growing and will one day be finally realized.

But sometimes it's not easy to sustain this conviction, is it?

How do we keep going? How do we keep believing, keep hoping, keep following, keep trusting the God of good news when there is so much bad news all around us?

Let's take a trip to our next city on our summer tour of first century cities and churches and see what we can learn about *keeping on* in our journey of faith, no matter what the external circumstances might look like.

Today's city is Corinth (see map)— a very significant and strategic city, like many of the cities we've visited thus far this summer.

Corinth was a 4000 year-old city by the time Paul arrived there. It had been conquered and destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC and lay in ruins for over a century. It was refounded in 44 BC as a colony for retired veterans of the Roman legion.

Corinth was a port city—a hub of economic activity, sexually permissive, full of upwardly mobile people, and plenty of ethnic, intellectual, and religious diversity.

And in this city, there was a fledgling church, founded by Paul, only a few decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Like all of the churches in the cities we've visited, the Corinthians were not perfect. Far from it.

A quick tour through 1 and 2 Corinthians—letters written to these two churches by Paul—and we see a laundry list of problems:

- Abuse and misunderstanding of spiritual gifts
- Incest and various other forms of sexual immorality
- Abuse and misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper
- Squabbles and factionalism over leadership
- Lawsuits between believers
- Confusion about what following Jesus means for Jewish and pagan ritual observances
- Rejection of Paul's authority and the embrace of false prophets
- Greed and other forms of social injustices

So, all in all, in Corinth we see a church full of confused sinners in a bustling city full of confused sinners.

Sound familiar?

Paul spends plenty of time addressing these specific issues, but in our text today—one of the most beautiful in all of Paul's letters, perhaps even the entire NT—he is thinking about the big picture.

2 Corinthians 5:14-20 is a “why” text, a “what’s it all about” text, a “here’s the reason why we keep going in a world where all that is bad sometimes threatens to overwhelm all that is good and leave us discouraged or despondent” text.

For Paul, the energy, the motivation, the driving force behind this life of faith is quite simply, *the love of Christ*.

The love of Christ urges us on, we read in verse 14.

When I hear this phrase, I think of the many hours I’ve spent at volleyball courts or swimming pools or soccer pitches, yelling myself hoarse.

I’m sure my kids don’t always appreciate my contribution to their athletic pursuits, but what am I doing? I’m *urging them on*.

I want them to be the best they can be. I want them to succeed, to achieve their goals. I want them to push past the pain and the inconvenience and the times when everything in them wants to give up so that they can experience the satisfaction and fulfillment that comes with accomplishing what you set out to do.

In the same way, in the life of faith we are *urged on* by the love of Christ.

The Greek word Paul uses is *sunechei*. I looked up this word and discovered that it has what scholars call a “broad semantic range” or a number of possible meanings.

It could mean “compels” or even “controls.”

It gives the picture of being pressed, squeezed, constrained—one definition even evoked the image of a cattle squeeze!

One of the ones I liked best was to be “held completely” by something.

And this something, Paul is eager to communicate to the church in Corinth, is *the love of Jesus Christ*.

The love that died for all so that those who love might no longer live for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them (v. 15).

The love that is giving birth to a new creation where the old things are passing away and everything is becoming new (v. 17).

The love that bore the weight of sin despite having committed no sin so that we might become the righteousness of God (v. 20).

The love that has reconciled the world to God, not counting our trespasses against us (v. 19).

The love that now makes its appeal to the world through *us!* The love that has turned us loose as ambassadors of Christ. The love that has entrusted us with the message of grace, peace, love and hope.

This is the love that urges us on. This is the love that cheers us on from the sidelines, the love that gives us boldness in place of timidity, courage instead of fear, patience instead of resignation, hope instead of despair.

Even when things don't look good. Even when the world groans under the weight of sin and suffering, whether in places around the world or in our own lives.

And, ***all this is from God***, as Paul reminds us in verse 18. We will never do enough or be enough or love enough to make God's will be done on earth as in heaven.

The love that urges us on, the love that is drawing people to freedom and salvation, the love that will one day be the final word on this earth and this story of which we are a part, is the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ.

So, given all this.

From now on, we regard no one from an earthly point of view.

We look at all human beings not as as potential theatres for the unfolding drama of the new creation, as dearly loved children of the living God.

We look at the world, too, through new creation lenses. We do not regard "the way things are" from a merely earthly point of view any longer. Because we are convinced that, the old things are passing away and that love is not just something that we happen to prefer, but is the final reality that is guiding our world to its destination, no matter what the newspaper might say.

And we do not give up because we are urged on by the love of Christ.

- to sustain hope in the now/not yet days in which we find ourselves
- to serve, to reconcile, to restore, to redeem, to proclaim the good news
- to lives of patience and virtue

Love is what motivates us, urges us on.

Love does not coerce and force. It is not the product of guilt or fear or power tactics. Beth and Helene were in the church earlier this week working on music for this morning and we talked briefly about the old revival preachers that would roll through town, sometimes frightening people into becoming Christians.

Love cannot be produced in this way.

Think about how absurd it would be to try to force love—to force your love upon someone else or to force them to love you. It's impossible.

Love cannot not forced. Even in the definitions above where we talked about how *sunerchei* could mean, “compel” or control,” the flavour of these words is not dominating or coercive.

Rather they convey the idea that love draws us in and catches us up completely!

N.T. Wright puts this beautifully in his commentary on this passage, and I close with his words:

The gospel is not just a mechanism for getting people saved. It is the announcement of a love that has changed the world, a love that therefore takes the people who find themselves loved like this and sends them off to live and work in a totally new way.

The energy to get up and go on as a Christian, as one who works for the gospel, therefore, comes not from a cold sense of duty, not from a fear of being punished if you don't do your bit, but from the warm-hearted response of love to the love which has reached *out*, reached *down*, and reached *you*.¹

As we head out into this new week and the rest of the summer, let's remember that we are being *urged on*—compelled, controlled, *held completely*—by the love of Christ.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Second Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2004), 62.

And let's also remember that this love is meant for *sharing*.

The love that urges us on is not intended simply to be a tool or a warm, comforting truth that helps us get through the hard times of life, although it is certainly these things.

We are to love in the manner that we have been loved. The love that urges us on is meant to spill over and out into our families, our churches and communities, our world.

Amen.

