

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Our Consolation,
Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

Today we begin the second great series of our summer sermon series as we open Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Church he founded in the ancient Roman city of Corinth. Before we dig into God's Good News about consolation and consoling one another, there are a few background items you should know so our further exploration of this wonderful, but often overlooked book of the Bible, will make more sense.

So first, why Second Corinthians? Why not First Corinthians? As I said, Second Corinthians is a wonderful book. It's a letter or perhaps a combination of several letters to the Church in Corinth that Paul founded in about the year 50 AD. He was on his second missionary journey and ended up staying in Corinth for about 18 months while the church began to grow. Paul spent a lot of time and missionary effort getting the Corinthian Church up and running. So, naturally he had a vested interest in making sure they continued proclaiming the Gospel he had taught them over that time. Remember, there is no formal scriptures, especially any New Testament yet. They had the Jewish scriptures, but Paul's letters are the earliest Christian writings from the time after Jesus death and resurrection. In Paul's other letters he wrote about the problems his congregations were experiencing and imparted his advice to them. The letter we call Second

Corinthians is somewhat different from the other letters in that Paul talks much more about himself and his sufferings for the sake of spreading the Gospel message about Jesus Christ. In this letter we get to see his struggles and his insights much more than his other writings.

We should also keep in mind the Book of Second Corinthians is probably not a single letter, but rather a composite of letter fragments that have been edited together, most likely by one of the members of the Corinthian Church. Also, it's most certainly not the second letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. In fact, the book we call First Corinthians is most certainly not Paul's first letter either. In both First and Second Corinthians, there are references to other letters which have been lost in time.

Finally, by way of background, the city of Corinth is a very ancient city. Historical evidence shows the site was inhabited as far back as 3000 years BC. The city was destroyed in 146 BC when the Romans burned the city to the ground. Julius Caesar rebuilt it about 100 years later in 44 BC, largely on the backs of Jewish slaves. During Jesus' and Paul's day, Corinth was a large Roman city and the capital city of the Roman Province of Achaia. Corinth was a gateway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea. Because of its strategic location it was an important site for trade. Ships would dock on one side of the city, unload their merchandise and carry it overland to the opposite side and reload

it onto another ship for transport to the final destination. Because of this, there was a lot of travel through Corinth and many people from all over the world ended up staying and making a life in Corinth. There's a lot of commentary about the immorality, especially the sexual immorality of the Corinthians. That was one of the problems Paul addressed in First Corinthians. Immorality isn't so important an issue in the second book. In Second Corinthians, Paul is much more concerned with the internal relations within the church.

By the time Paul wrote this letter, he had been concerned about the church he spent so much effort starting for many years. There is evidence Paul made a visit to Corinth that didn't turn out well. By his visit he actually made the situation worse. After that visit he sent a letter that unfortunately no longer exists, but Paul refers to it in Second Corinthians and is known as the Letter of Tears. We don't know the final outcome of Paul's relationship with the congregation at Corinth, nor do we have a complete understanding of all the details of the various problems his letters address. Much of that has been lost in history. Fortunately, our understanding of what Paul was saying to the Corinthians doesn't depend on a full and final solution to all the questions regarding the number of letters, the exact timing of the visits by Paul and his associates, or the specific details of the issues facing the Church addressed in the letters. We do get enough of the details to understand some very basic truths about how churches function from studying and

learning from this congregation of believers who caused Paul so much worry and grief and that's what makes a sermon series on Second Corinthians worth while for us or any modern day congregation.

For one thing the Corinthians were divided over basic tenants of their faith. When Paul called them out on beliefs and practices that were not in line with the Gospel, some in the congregation questioned his authority. While Paul was with them in the beginning for those 18 months, he was their source of information about Jesus Christ, the resurrection, and their salvation. After he left to start the church at Ephesus, other people, calling themselves "apostles," came and preached and taught a gospel that differed from what Paul had taught. This is why Paul begins this letter by reinforcing his calling as an Apostle by the will of God. He wasn't hired by a church committee or decided on his own he had the truth of the Gospel. He was called and appointed by the will of God.

When Paul left Corinth to continue spreading the Gospel in other cities there was a leadership and pastoral vacuum. Into that vacancy the people began to listen to other voices and many of them tried to bring their previous religious experiences and beliefs into the Church's mainline teaching. In today's church we try to overcome many of these issues through a rigorous call process and extensive seminary training. Before one can assume the role of Pastor in the Lutheran tradition, the call and will of God must be recognized in the life of the person

desiring to fill the role of Pastor. A congregation council who knows the person's background, character, and lifestyle must recommend that person for candidacy into the Ministry. After at least four long years of learning and constant evaluation, if God's call on the individual is still recognized by this committee of other Christ followers, only then is the person eligible for a call by a congregation. Once again, our Church relies on the call and will of God. If a potential congregation also recognizes the will of God and God's call on the person's life, only then can he or she be ordained as a Pastor.

The function of a pastor in our ELCA tradition helps ensure our preaching and teaching are consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and about Jesus Christ. I may not be a perfect leader, nor am I the best scholar when it comes to always having the right answer to deep mysteries of our faith, but I do know God has called me and I'm only here by God's grace. God has stepped in and has led me through some very sticky times. I know how Paul felt when the Church didn't recognize his authority. I left my first call feeling that way.

The time between leaving my first call and being called here at Trinity was pretty rough. For a while, I didn't have the consolation of a supportive congregation. Then one of my colleagues, Pastor Peter Kruse reached out and invited me to come to his Church. There, I found the kind of consolation Paul

describes in these verses from the opening chapter of Second Corinthians. We joined the Church that became Arise in Christ Lutheran Church, in Donnelsville.

The consolation we're capable of as a Church is something you can't get from any other organization. I owe a debt of gratitude to Pastor Peter Kruse and the good people of Arise in Christ. Without Pastor Peter reaching out to me when I was at my lowest and that congregation reaffirming my confidence in the Gospel, I most certainly would not be your pastor today. That kind of love is what sets the Church apart from all other manmade groups, societies or associations. We offer one thing you can't get anywhere else and that's judgment free acceptance and forgiveness. It's the kind of love God has for you and me. We call it agape love or love without condition. It's a love that says God has loved me and so I am free to love my neighbor. When we're the Church at its best we are God's house of love.

I thank God for calling me to this congregation. In this place I know we reach out to our neighbor in love. I've witnessed and been privileged to be a part of offering the kind of consolation Paul describes in these verses. May God continue to console us and may we continue to be a conduit of that love and consolation. May Trinity always be that loving place where people are encouraged and uplifted. May we continue to seek new opportunities to minister to and for people who need God's consolation. May agape, self-giving love always guide us in the way we treat each other and those around us. Amen.