

August 16, 2018

Fifth in a six-part scriptural exploration of Presbytery Leadership



Epistle Lesson

II Corinthians 1:15-2:4

Confident of your welcome, I had originally planned two great visits with you—coming by on my way to Macedonia province, and then again on my return trip. Then we could have had a bon-voyage party as you sent me off to Judea. That was the plan.

Are you now going to accuse me of being flip with my promises because it didn't work out?

Now, are you ready for the real reason I didn't visit you in Corinth? As God is my witness, the only reason I didn't come was to spare you pain. I was being *considerate* of you, not indifferent, not manipulative. We're not in charge of how you live out the faith, looking over your shoulders, suspiciously critical. We're partners, working alongside you, joyfully expectant. I know that you stand by your own faith, not by ours. That's why I decided not to make another visit that could only be painful to both of us. If by merely showing up I would put you in an embarrassingly painful position, how would you then be free to cheer and refresh me?

That was my reason for writing a letter instead of coming—so I wouldn't have to spend a miserable time disappointing the very friends I had looked forward to cheering me up. I was convinced at the time I wrote it that what was best for me was also best for you. As it turned out, there was pain enough just in writing that letter, more tears than ink on the parchment. But I didn't write it to cause pain; I wrote it so you would know how much I care—oh, more than care—*love* you!

I have found that I best let a pastor know I am coming to visit before showing up. Seems that if I just show up folks make up some foreboding reason I might be there. They freeze up like a speeder seeing the state trooper lurking over the hilltop. I always ask for two minutes to frame my presence during the announcements. Otherwise people make stuff up. Better to be clear about being there to encourage and bless a church's ministry and beauty.

And then there are those churches boiling over with conflict, that I best stay away from. There are those churches in the slow boil of some conflict who turn the heat up higher for my benefit when I show up. Better to coach them from the edge. Better to encourage the conflicted parties to engage each other as Christians, listen, negotiate, and seek something closer to right relationship. Or better to send another skilled person over to them with the singular identity of mediator. For sure I could mediate their conflict, but I wear too many hats and they often have another hat they want me to wear in those circumstances.

Quite often a conflict will boil over, resulting in a pastoral termination and then comes the naïve remark, "We (as in YOU) should have intervened earlier." Of course, I know I had been coaching disgruntled elders to be direct with their pastors for years sometimes. I can't announce the coaching and cajoling in the settings that had positive affect. All people see is the heavy hand of the COM when the termination comes. I know I often had made coaching resources available to that pastor, who instead spurned the gift I offered. I know that I have been resisting the triangulation this naïve observer has imagined I should have just stepped into.

Paul may have had a more pressing need than to come to Corinth again. Paul might have even framed this response a bit less reactively. But the Corinthian anxiety need not be Paul's anxiety. Clearly, they think it should be the most important thing in Paul's life. "Why isn't he as anxious as we are!" Clearly enough they need help. They are discovering that living a faithful life apart from the Jewish rules cannot be as free floating as they had hoped. They are discovering that to deregulate their life together they also must simultaneously re-regulate it around a different set of core principles bubbling up for a revamped set of theological commitments. They are discovering that since the end of the world didn't get here as fast as we thought, we may need to rework our community rhythm and boundaries for life together with a future rather than without a future.

Also, Paul had one thing wrong. The purpose of the church is not to cheer and refresh him. It's not about him. Yet I know that need myself. I know that I have a need to visit a vital thriving church about once a month. I would waste away if I spent all my time in problem congregations. I have no right to expect that joy from a conflicted church, but I do pick one I know will bring me joy just to remember what the ones who bring me trouble can become. But don't expect joy and refreshment from Corinth. Go somewhere else and then bring that awareness of what a church can be back to Corinth so that they might glimpse a different way of being the people of God together. That they might understand that the church can be something other than the bag of cats they are right now. That they might set self aside and discover a truer self in shouldering a cross for those less advantaged, less powerful, less privileged and discover the face of Christ as they bear that cross.

Paul is correct that we Presbytery leaders prefer not to lord anything over the Corinthians in our charge, but instead work in partnership with them. To use the very helpful constructs of Transactional Analysis, Paul would like an "Adult-to-Adult" relationship. They are putting him in a position, however, where he must assume a "Parent-to-Child" relationship. If the congregation insists on acting like an unruly adolescent, there is little the Presbytery can do but to respond as a loving, but firm parent. We'd rather not. We'd rather have an Adult-to-Adult interaction. We can keep inviting the congregation's leaders to change the tone of their communication, but if they insist, in comes the COM, in comes the AC, in comes the imposition that occasions the opposition. "We would rather have an Adult-to-Adult conversation, but you are acting like children right now, so, like Paul, perhaps we will give you a moment to think about what kind of relationship you would like with your Presbytery."

Paul sounds a little disingenuous about why he is not showing up, but his professed note about "why" should always be operative in our own church visitations and contacts: "We're not in charge of how you live out the faith, looking over your shoulder, suspiciously critical. We're partners, working alongside you, joyfully expectant. I know that you stand by your own faith, not by ours." So, says Paul, the first Presbytery leader.

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