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2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As we are partnering, we beg you also not to receive the grace of God to no purpose.

For God says, “At the right time I listened to you, and on a day of salvation I helped you.”

See, now is the right time; see, now is the day of salvation!

We are giving no one an occasion for stumbling, in order that no fault may be found with the Ministry but in everything, we have presented ourselves as servants of God; by much endurance, by afflictions, distress, dire calamities, by beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, fasting; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, sincere love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;

in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. As impostors but truthful;

as ones who are unknown but known well; as dying, but see—we are alive; as chastised, but not killed; as ones who are made sorrowful, but always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, but possessing everything. Our mouth has been opened to you, Corinthians; our heart has been enlarged.

You are not being restricted by us, but only in your own hearts.

Moreover, this is the reward—I speak as to children—let your hearts be opened.

It is an honor and a privilege to be here with you all today! Here in this place of worship among all of you who have been supporting and praying for me and Ryan for all these years. Some of your faces have changed since we lived here in Irving, but one thing has remained constant.... your care and encouragement of us as we have sojourned on this path to ordination as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. You know, when I think back to April about our last visit, I only feel good warm feelings. You invited me to preach here for the first time, imperfect as it was it was a beautiful experience for me. We shared a meal with the Session and they gave me a chance to share my call story and how it has evolved over these last few years of seminary. It was a blessed day and I have fond memories of it!

Unfortunately for our friend Paul, things weren't so wonderful during his last visit to the church in Corinth. When we hear these lines from his letter to the Corinthians, we are being drawn into Paul's memories of a painful previous visit with the church in Corinth. You see, this epistle, second Corinthians is a complicated one. There are lots of theories about when and why Paul wrote certain parts of it, but one thing most everyone can agree on was that Paul's relationship with the Corinthians was complicated and messy.

Some of you may be familiar with the online networking site called Facebook. Well, for those of you who are not, Facebook is a site where people can connect and keep in touch and see how they are related to one another. When you set up your personal profile on Facebook you have the option to list your “relationship status.” In this category people usually list themselves as “married” or “single” or “engaged.” But, when love is on the rocks or hard to define, as it was with Paul and the Corinthians, you might see the “It's Complicated” relationship status.

All we have to do is look at the first line of this passage to see just how complicated their relationship was...Paul begins, “As we are partnering, we beg you not to receive God's grace to no purpose.” I don't know about you, but whenever there has been a partnership involved, it usually means things get complicated. The marriage partnership, cooperation between parents and children, business

partnerships, working together in church, partnering at the Presbytery level-all of these partnerships get messy at times.

But, all of these partnerships have merit, too, don't they? We work together to keep our households running smoothly, we cooperate with each other so our businesses and churches will flourish. We don't just partner with others for the heck of it, Lord knows things would be easier if one person was just in charge of everything, right? We partner with each other for a purpose. So, Paul says, "as we are partnering"....or in my words, "as we struggle to get through this relationship without losing our minds" we beg you not to receive God's grace to no purpose.

Let us not forget how entwined Paul and the Corinthians were. After all, Paul founded the church in Corinth. He had labored and taught and preached and nurtured these Corinthians in the faith. They were family to Paul, a family formed through blood, sweat and tears...they were his beloved spiritual children. But like most relationships that matter to us, the one between Paul and his beloved Corinthians had gotten complicated. Now, Paul had had a painful previous visit with this church. He had been wronged or at least had his feelings hurt and he had left Corinth in a huff. In the verses before today's passage, Paul had discussed how it is that God has graced us in the person of Jesus Christ and that, as God has reconciled us to God's self, we have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation with each other. And then our passage begins: Paul is begging, not just asking or suggesting, but begging his church family to recognize two things:

First of all, that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has reconciled us all to God. But also that this same grace has reconciled us to each other. Who knows, maybe Paul stewed over his painful last memories of Corinth, maybe he festered in resentment and regret for months before writing this letter. Maybe Paul had held his grudge so tightly that it crumbled in his hands until he realized that harboring that kind of resentment says only one thing: that God's grace has no purpose. I know I've held grudges, too, I've rationalized it all out that obviously grace has put me in a solid relationship with God....but these relationships, these families, these partnerships with people are just too messy for God's grace.

You know, that's just it. There are days when God's grace glows like a sunrise, touching everything in its path, making all things bright. Then there are days when the mess, and the trouble, and the yuck of life are all that can be seen. Where is grace on those days? You know, I always hated that old cliché "every cloud has a silver lining." Who cares about the silver lining, the cloud is still blocking out the blue sky. But, just because it's blocking out the blue sky, does that mean the blue sky doesn't still exist? And at the same time, am I not allowed to be grumpy about that cloud? Well, this letter from Paul to the Corinthians tells me that it is okay to be grumpy about the cloud. It's okay to lament the complicated and messy things of life and relationships because Paul also reminds us that "at the acceptable time, God has listened and helped us!"

As you heard before, Paul goes on in his letter to defend his ministry with the Corinthians...he must have been defending himself against some who were criticizing him or some who were competing with him. And then, he says, "we have opened our mouth to you, Corinthians, our hearts have been enlarged." In my words, Paul says, "I have told you the absolute truth from the bottom of my heart, Corinthians, I have forgiven the hurts of the past, and I am thankful for our relationship, messy and complicated as it is." Whatever painful things happened to him on their last visit, Paul had spoken frankly with them. It seems to me that Paul recognized that God's grace had purpose, even in the rift between him and his beloved Corinthians.

As some of you may know, I spent this summer as a hospice chaplain. And about a week ago I was sitting in a meeting with my team of nurses and other chaplains when one of them got on her soap box about a recent speech by one of the presidential candidates. I don't remember exactly what she said, but

I do remember that one of our other coworkers immediately got on her soap box, and a full-blown argument ensued. Before the tiff was over, both of my coworkers were hyperventilating and shooting daggers at each other. And as I read Paul's words to the Corinthians today, I have to wonder...what is the purpose of God's grace in this rift that has bubbled up in the hearts of my coworkers, this division that has rendered them unable to bear with one another. You know, we don't have to look far to see the markings of division in our denomination, in our nation, in our world. Division is everywhere. And these discussions that turn into arguments, these opinions that turn into soap boxes, they do matter, of course they do. But as we hear Paul's words to the Corinthians today, I believe there is a powerful and necessary word in it for us. Paul is talking about the purpose of God's grace. And what is that purpose? Well, in this passage, I think I can safely say that the purpose of grace is reconciliation with each other! Paul is talking about mutual forbearance, partnering so that we do not deny the reconciling purpose of God's grace.

Sisters and brothers, grace is big enough and strong enough to search out even the most protected resentments in our hearts, even in the most violent divisions. Now, this isn't to say that relationships and situations always work out peachy and rosy, but it is to say that grace has touched even the darkest places we imagine God couldn't possibly go. Let us not forget that when we recite the Apostle's Creed, we affirm that Jesus Christ descended into hell. Yes, friends, God's grace reaches even that far.

Last week one of the charter members of our church in Florida died. His nickname was Slats, and in one of the messages at his memorial service, his close friend stood up and told the story of how Slats always greeted people. Whenever someone asked him how he was doing, Slats always said, "I'm as close to perfect as I can be!"

I imagine that Slats was one of those that really understood how God's grace didn't disappear at his imperfect times, or when his life was complicated, or even if he was unsure about God's grace. God's grace has a purpose and it is up to us to receive it and know that purpose reaches far and wide, reaches deep inside of us and far away from us, God's grace is not selective, it's pervasive.

Paul saw and proclaimed to his beloved Corinthians that God's grace has a purpose today, here and now, in everything we do and say, and especially in who we choose to be with one another. Grace doesn't take a holiday when our friendships are in turmoil and we don't know where to turn. Grace doesn't stop at the doorsteps to our homes or the steps into this church. Grace isn't absent at AA meetings or PTA gatherings. Grace doesn't forfeit the difficult conference with your boss or the discussions between aging parents and their caregiver children. Grace doesn't shy away from death beds, or ICUs, or custody hearings. Grace doesn't skip Presbytery or General Assembly meetings or election days. Grace doesn't take a nap when wars rage or when suffering children cry out for help. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...this grace, my friends, has purposefully touched all things, all people, and all relationships.

So, sisters and brothers, today, as we are partnering, I pray that we might all receive God's grace into our lives, our relationships, our imperfections, and even if not especially in our messes we would rather keep hidden from God. I pray that we might all accept the purpose of God's grace in all that we have been, all that we are, and all that we are becoming. In the dark and dingy reaches of our resentments, in the sharp corners of the pain and misunderstanding between us, and even our most disastrous failures with one another, I pray that we might do just as Paul begged and receive God's grace in the fullness of it's purpose.

All thanks be to God.