

In a Mirror Dimly – Reflections on 1 Corinthians

Laura Brubacher (July 20, 2014)

I got an email from my mother this week in which she wrote:

“Just wanted to let you know: I think it’s great that you’re willing to take on the challenge of a Sunday morning talk/sermon. Your grandmother Yoder would be pleased”—now I should add since you don’t know my grandma Bessie Yoder, that during most of her 102 years of life, she regularly taught Sunday School and was often invited to give talks at all kinds of church-related gatherings, but her generation of women wasn’t given the opportunity to speak on a Sunday morning. My mother adds, “I suppose you might wonder at times this week why you volunteered. But if you do like Grandma did and have it prepared in advance, kept within the time limit and made applicable to life from your vantage point, I’m sure it will be fine.”

Thank you, Mom, yes, that basically covers it—how I’m feeling about doing this, and how I’m hoping I can say something that will strike a chord and have some relevance beyond myself. And of course I will try to keep within the time limit, and of course I prepared everything in advance—though certainly not to Grandma’s standards, considering the fact that I chose to skip church last Sunday in order to prepare for today, not to mention the fact that I was still working on what I would say through yesterday. Yesterday equals “in advance”, right?

Well, there are a couple things I’d like to try to cover this morning. I’ll let you know why I decided to volunteer to torment myself with preparing this talk and standing up in front of you to deliver it. Secondly, I’ll give a brief overview of the content of 1 Corinthians, and thirdly, I’ll give some personal reflections on a passage that’s meaningful to me.

Part I

So, firstly, at a worship committee meeting back in May, as we were planning the summer services, and particularly planning for Paul being away for six weeks, it was clear we were going to need to find people to speak. I thought I could probably help find a person or two to speak about Paul’s letters to the Christians of the early church in various places, but I also knew that I’ve always felt drawn to a particular passage in 1 Corinthians and maybe I could try to speak on

that. That passage is recorded in a small blank book that was given to me 25 years ago by my sister, which I decided to use to note some of my favorite quotations. At the time, in the late 80's, I was preparing to leave for a year in Germany, as part of the Inter-Menno Trainee Program, and in the mix of poems and quotes from some fiction and non-fiction I had been reading at the time, plopped in there near the beginning is this quote:

“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”

In a nutshell, we're all sort of trying to piece our existence together with the selective information that we take in and the limited experiences we have (rich as they may be, they are just a small piece)—and we need the community, in both small and large senses of the word, to help us make sense of how to live, what is important, etc. Rich as my little corner of the world at home at 1515 Saunders Cres is, or the Ann Arbor area, the country I happen to live in, and rich as the interactions I have and have had with people, they are so tiny in the broader scheme of things.

I think this, by the way, is why I've always been drawn to studying foreign languages, living abroad, and learning about other cultures. My job change a year ago has also proven to be a good fit with who I am and what I value. I'm working as the librarian at the University of Michigan Language Resource Center and am in charge of a small collection of language-learning materials that includes about 7,000 films from all over the world, in over 30 languages. Despite the fact that transitioning to a new job was quite a test for me last summer—and there's still much to learn—it works well for me to be in an environment that is focused on encouraging linguistic and cultural learning.

Part II.

To come back to the topic at hand, though, what can I tell you about 1 Corinthians? Many of you probably know the letter significantly better than I do, so this is an interesting position for me to be in. I have turned to a number of commentaries and have found a book on CD that has

been particularly useful for listening to in the car while driving some longer distances the past couple weeks.

I will readily admit that I'm not sure when I might have last read through Corinthians from start to finish, so it was intriguing to me to come across various passages that were familiar—some pleasantly, and some less pleasantly so. Starting with the less pleasantly familiar, I could certainly guarantee that I would keep within the time limit if I took heed of what is written in 1 Cor. 14: 34-35, that “women should keep silence in the churches... they are not permitted to speak... [and] if there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.”

But I guess I won't take heed of that, and I think I won't address this issue—though it certainly merits further attention. I'll just add that there are other passages in Paul's letters which indicate that women **were** accepted as active participants in the church (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:2-16). So there are contradictions within the text, and commentaries indicate that it is quite possible that Paul didn't write these verses about women keeping silent but that they were added by a scribe and inserted into the text that we read today.

As I mentioned earlier this morning, the letters to the Corinthians are thought to have been written in the 50s of the Common Era, which is prior to the writings of the Gospels. Paul had spent a good deal of time in Corinth – 18 months, acc. to Acts. After Paul leaves Corinth and moves on to Ephesus, he receives letters from some of the Corinthian Christians asking him about some “pressing theological and practical matters”... [Now, concerning some matters about which you have written...] Paul has also had visits from some of the Corinthians where he was staying in Ephesus. So, Paul is aware that there are some problems back in Corinth, and this letter is his response. As Richard Hays puts it (1997 p.1),

“When we read Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we are literally reading somebody else's mail. [...] No doubt the Corinthian Christians of Paul's day would have preferred that this correspondence not be broadcast to the ages, for it portrays them in an

unflattering light and divulges a number of things that they might well [...] wish to have kept private.”

So, what were the problems in the Corinthian community that Paul was responding to? The commentary I listened to on CD, by Bart Ehrman, suggests four basic problems.

One problem for the early church in Corinth was that major divisions developed within the community after Paul left. He has heard that some are pledging allegiance to Paul, others to Apollos, and yet others to Cephas. Some members are apparently even taking other members to court. Paul calls the Corinthians to unity and reminds them that they are one in Christ.

A second problem pertains to important ethical issues. Some claimed that sex was wrong, even within marriage. Another hot topic had to do with whether a person should be free to eat meat that had been sacrificed to a pagan idol. Some said it was okay to eat this meat, because since the pagan idols didn't really exist, it didn't matter, i.e. because they themselves didn't believe in the pagan idols, it didn't matter. Others would say, however, regardless of whether the idols are real or not, if you eat of that meat, you're "participating in idolatry." Paul suggested a third option, essentially that it is important not to lead others astray or cause others to fall, so his preference would be for the Corinthians to not eat meat if they are in danger of leading others astray (even if those others are wrong in thinking that this is participation in idolatry).

Thirdly, there is mention of flagrant immoral acts, with men visiting prostitutes and a man living with his step-mother. Paul indicates that the single, celibate life is a good one—in fact, he wishes everyone could be as he is—but he concedes that it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. I think it's interesting that he writes, "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." It seems to show an inner struggle to be accepting of a way other than his way. Paul is indeed very human and imperfect.

Finally, there has been considerable chaos in the worship services and in communal meals. Some people are using their spiritual gifts to claim a sort of spiritual superiority and there is a natural tendency to want your particular gift to be the most important. Paul goes back and forth a bit on stating that all gifts are valuable but then suggests that prophesying is more valuable than speaking in tongues. Essentially, he tries to bring them back to the understanding that they are a community that is to work together, using their gifts, to build each other up, not to be jealously and haughtily parading their own importance.

Paul deals with all of these problems one by one as the letter unfolds, but Bart Ehrman would say that the climax comes in chapter 15, where Paul outlines the major problem that underlies all of the other issues that have arisen. Chapter 15, the first passage which Stan read this morning, is a summary of what Paul had taught the Corinthians while he was with them, and what they seem to have strayed from in his absence. Essentially, they are misunderstanding the nature of the future resurrection of the dead and this is the crucial problem that is leading to all the other tangible problems. Paul's central message is about the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that this is a bodily resurrection. In Ehrman's view, the problems that the Corinthians are facing stem from the fact that they believe they have already been saved and that they are already living an exalted life, in which the body no longer matters. They can do anything with their bodies because they have already moved beyond and into a new existence. So, Paul stresses the bodily resurrection that is yet to come, when Christ returns. He believes it will be an imminent return but it has not happened yet.

Part III

I want to move now into sharing with you some reflections on the passage that drew me to volunteering to talk about Corinthians. I'd just like to read it again in case anyone missed it the first time:

“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”

I’m drawn to this passage because it feels like a validation for me, and a validation of me. Sometimes I feel as if I’m adrift in a sea of people who are so self-assured and confident that they know the answers—American society tends to promote this kind of cockiness—and in this sea I’m happy to find connection with fellow swimmers who are not ultimately sure, who have questions, doubts, insecurities, can show weakness and be vulnerable. Not that I want to surround myself with fellow swimmers who are all just drowning in despair and uncertainty, but I appreciate it when people can utilize strength as well as acknowledge weakness, share what they know and do not know.

I’m not really too concerned about knowing what “face to face” means, but I do feel every day that I am seeing in a mirror dimly. Where does this awareness of only having partial understanding, of seeing in a mirror dimly, lead us or lead me? One clear answer for me is humility, the importance of listening to each other, of valuing and trying to understand another’s experience and perspective. I’m certainly not saying that I’m successful at living this answer, as there are plenty of people I would rather tune out and often do. But it’s something I come back to remind myself of regularly.

Because of my keen awareness of having only very partial understanding, there’s a temptation for me to hide in the shadows and not speak up. There’s often a good reason for my not speaking up, because I’m trying to digest what everyone else is saying and I don’t actually have anything to add to the conversation yet. But my hope is that I not hide my thoughts solely out of fear of them coming out in an imperfect and messy fashion.

There’s also a tendency for me to give up prematurely, to not necessarily think something through to the end, because the end is unattainable anyway, i.e. we can’t know it all anyway. Writing a talk, writing a paper, etc, these are things that I find interesting and want to do, but when it comes to actually pulling it together, I start to feel like I want someone to do that final work for me. It’s hard after all, and it feels like an impossible task to order all of these miscellaneous thoughts that are so partial anyway. The other side of what feels like giving up

prematurely, is that I often spend an inordinate amount of time gathering information, getting off on tangents, and discarding sections.

I think this is why I really appreciate it when I read something that speaks to me—words that articulate something I have felt but that I wasn't able to put my finger on. This leads me to the other aspect of the verse about seeing in a mirror dimly that really resonates with me. Most, if not all people, have a need to be understood, but I think if there's a spectrum of need in this regard, I'm pretty far to one end of it, and I find great comfort in the idea of being fully understood.

Some of my moments of greatest despair, especially while growing up, came when I realized that a close friend or family member had not understood me, or that there wasn't as complete a connection as I had imagined or hoped for. I gradually learned that no one can really understand me fully, even I don't understand myself fully, but God does what all of these wonderful people in my life can only do in part.

My hope for myself, and for everyone, is that we can embrace that which makes us who God has created us to be, share our gifts in a loving way that builds up rather than tearing down, learn from others who have different pieces of the puzzle, and accept that some pieces are beyond our grasp.