

Paul's Anniversary Card to Us

Hespeler, January 18, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Anniversary Sunday

Isaiah 49:1-7, Psalm 40:1-11, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-42

One year ago, as you all know, we embarked on a strange new journey together. We took two Presbyterian congregations with different histories and different self-understandings, and we brought them together. And I know that there are two ways of looking at what we did.

Sameness or Change

One way to look at it is as an exercise in sameness. We can see it as one congregation that has just continued to do what it has always done and to be what it has always been, with the addition of some new people on one hand. And on the other, a congregation continuing to do and be what it has always done and been in a new place with some other people.

But the other way to look at it is as an exercise in change – to see it as the two former congregations ceasing to exist as they were to become a new thing together.

The reality, of course, is that it is a bit of a mix of both of those things. We obviously have not given up on all of our old traditions and ministries over the past year. In many ways, we have been doing our best to maintain and even enhance some of them. We have also not yet let go of some old identity markers such as names and structures.

Leading with Change

There is a lot of comfort in keeping things the same as much as possible. And, as the old proverb goes, we don't really want to throw out the baby with the bathwater. We don't want to let go of what was working and what was vital to our churches.

Nevertheless, I don't think it is helpful to understand what we did last year as an exercise in sameness. The change we have engaged in has to be more important than any continuity that we have brought along with us.

For, as much as we may have loved how we were as separate congregations before a year ago, the reality is that what we were doing was not working as well as it once did. The reality is that the church is going to have to change if it is going to remain relevant and meaningful in the future.

That is why we must see this as an opportunity, given to us by God, to reinvent ourselves. It's why we called what happened last year a marriage. That is why we call today our first anniversary.

Paul in Corinth

And that is what makes our reading this morning from the First Letter to the Corinthians so meaningful. The church in Corinth was a church that had been founded by the Apostle Paul. He just showed up one day preaching Jesus to them. A number of people responded and formed a church together.

And then Paul left, moving on to his next project. But the new church in Corinth had some problems after he left. And so, some time later, Paul heard about their struggles, and he sent them a card – this First Letter to the Corinthians – to help them sort some of this stuff out.

Now, we don't actually know how long after he had left that Paul wrote this letter, but I'm just going to say that it was exactly one year



later. I'm going to say that he sent it for their first anniversary because, you know what, I think that what Paul wrote to them may be exactly what we need to hear today.

Paul and Sosthenes

For example, let me start with the opening line of the letter. Actually, I have already misrepresented it to you because I said it was a letter from Paul to the church, but it was not. The letter actually starts by identifying the writers: **“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes.”**

So actually, it isn't a card from Paul; it is a card from Paul and Sosthenes. And we might say, “So what?” We don't know who Sosthenes was, and he is not even mentioned again in the letter. Well, we might not know who he was, but the Corinthians did. And the naming of this man at the top of this letter spoke volumes to them about how they had come to be a new church together.

Acts 18

Sosthenes' story is told in the eighteenth chapter of the Book of Acts. There we are told that, when Paul first came to Corinth, he actually caused them a fair bit of trouble. He showed up in the synagogue and started preaching about Jesus.

Now, the Synagogue in Corinth had many Jews in it. But they also had several Gentiles who weren't considered acceptable by the Jews, but they hung around because they found the Jewish idea of God intriguing. They also offered generous financial support.

Well, when Paul came along, he preached that even Gentiles could be acceptable to God because of Jesus. Not surprisingly, the Gentiles in the synagogue found that message very interesting. They began to leave the synagogue because of Paul. And they took their money with them.

Turmoil in the Synagogue

And do you know what the best way is to upset any religious institution? You disrupt their revenue stream! The synagogue erupted into anger and violence. Then Paul left and set up a new Jesus club in the home of a Gentile believer named Titius Justus *that was right next door* to the synagogue.

Things got worse for the synagogue when Crispus, a Jew and the elected leader of the synagogue, also left to join the movement next door.

That is when Sosthenes came into the story. He was elected the new synagogue leader. And he obviously tried to calm things down. He tried to find ways for the synagogue to peacefully coexist with their new neighbours. His success was limited, but Paul's little club grew over the next six months.

Roman Tribunal

But eventually, some of the Jews who really hated Paul couldn't take it any longer. They got organized and kidnapped Paul as if he were a Venezuelan dictator and dragged him before the local Roman tribunal, accusing him of violating Jewish law and tradition.

And what did the Roman official do? He did not care one bit about Jewish matters! He just told them to work it out among themselves. But, when Sosthenes stepped forward once again to try and do that, everyone started to beat him up while the official looked on and didn't stop them.

And yes, that is often what happens. We attack those who try to make peace because they show up the intolerance that is in us. As a result, when Paul left town, apparently so did Sosthenes. I mean, would you stick around after they treated you like that?

Why Does Sosthenes Sign?

But now, on what I've decided is their first anniversary, Paul sends this anniversary card to the church. What does it mean to them, do you suppose, when he asks Sosthenes to sign the card too?

Well, it certainly reminds them of just how chaotic and troubling their origin was. And maybe that is his intent. And I do believe that there is some wisdom in that for us. On this, our first anniversary, perhaps we too should give some thought about our own origins.

Our amalgamation was not, I am glad to say, marred by any violence. It was quite the opposite and felt very harmonious in the congregation. But it was also not ideal in some ways. It was rather rushed and there were some external authorities – some Roman officials and synagogue leaders – who I know caused people some grief and sparked some anger.

I think that Paul is writing us today to remind us of some of that turmoil. But he is doing it in a very particular way. He is drawing our attention to Sosthenes.

Paul Reminds Us

In Corinth, Sosthenes was someone who, for a time at least, was an opponent of the new church. He was part of the group of people who tried to resist Paul by lodging a formal complaint before the tribunal. He also suffered because of his resistance.

So, what is Sosthenes' signature on the card saying? It is Paul's way of reminding them of how far they have come since their tumultuous beginnings. He is letting them know that Sosthenes, the one-time resister, is now a fellow believer, part of the church and is a companion to Paul.

What is the anniversary card from Paul and Sosthenes saying to us today? It is reminding us of how far we have come together. It is reminding us that we have been able to put aside so much that distinguished us from each other in the past to become one together.

We are Sosthenes

We are all Sosthenes today. We may have had our doubts and our struggles. There were conflicting emotions that we brought into this thing and concern about the work that would be involved, but we marvel today at how far God has brought us. And we thank God for where God has called us to be.

Now, none of that means that we are done or that we don't have struggles ahead of us. There is still a lot of work to be done. We need to work at embracing our new identity. I think that we still have not quite got our minds around the notion that we are no longer a church whose ministry is defined by one location. We have work to do on the best long-term use of our property in Preston. There is a whole lot of change that still needs to be processed.

Prepared for the Future

But Paul is writing to us about that as well. Remember that the reason why Paul wrote this card to the Corinthians was because he knew that they were facing some difficult challenges. So, what he writes to them is very significant.

"You are not lacking in any gift," he writes to them, **"as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."**

Given all the trouble that the Corinthian church was having, this is quite a statement for Paul to make. But he really means it. God has given to them all the gifts that they need and will give them all the strengths that they need to meet the challenges that are ahead.

And, if Paul could say that to the troubled Corinthians, how much more would he say it to us? And how true it is of us? How much have seen it in the last year?

Gifts

That word, “gifts,” is a key word in the New Testament. It doesn’t mean what we usually mean when we use the word. It is not talking about material gifts, but things that are much more valuable. These are the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to individuals.

These gifts include various abilities, talents and traits that God uses to build up the church. In this very letter, Paul will speak of gifts such as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, powerful deeds, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues. (1 Corinthians 12:8-10) But this is not meant to be an exhaustive list, and there are many other ways that the Spirit equips individual believers.

And have we ever seen that in the past year! So many of you have stepped forward to share your gifts and abilities. We have discovered depths of talents and traits in so many of you, and you have contributed so much towards building this church over the past year.

Treasures to Discover

But Paul here reminds us that there are so many other treasures that are yet to be discovered. He reminds us of God’s promise to the church that God will provide what we need when we need it through the people that God calls to be part of our church. This is the promise that we must trust in. This is what we must remind ourselves of whenever we feel discouraged by all that still needs to be done or by how long change seems to be taking.

On our anniversary today, therefore, Paul and Sosthenes are sending us a beautiful card. The words inside are a blessing upon all of us. **“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**