

## **Living as the Grace-filled Community**

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**1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

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“Houston we have a problem.” These famous words uttered by Commander Jim Lovell, astronaut on Apollo 13 are possibly the most chilling words in NASA history. The Apollo 13 crew was on its second day of travel to conduct a planned landing on the moon when there was an explosion in one of the oxygen tanks. Commander Lovell radioed Ground Control those fateful words. Realizing that the oxygen supplies had been compromised, everyone shifted gears to abort the mission and find a way to safely return all three astronauts to earth.

If you have watched the Movie Apollo 13 with Tom Hanks or read up on this event you may recall the secondary concern as the flight progressed was the rising CO2 levels in the cabin. There is a memorable scene from the movie where the NASA engineers gathered together all of the possible resources that the astronauts had at their disposal. The filters in the lunar module would provide additional filtration, but those filters were not compatible with the filtration system in the capsule, so the engineers needed to jerry-rig other parts to create a workable filtration system. In this memorable scene, the head engineer dumps a bunch of items out onto a table and says to the others “our mission is to fit this square intake system to work with this round filter and all we have to work with are the items on this table.”

Fortunately, that ingenuity paid off and they were able to give the astronauts enough purified air to make it back to earth. One of the inspiring things about that story for me is the ability for people to see the problem and commit themselves to finding a solution. It can be tempting to say it’s too hard or impossible, before even really giving it a real chance. Some may have wondered if there was someone to blame, but what good would that do except waste valuable time needed to find a solution. It was also a group effort, no one person possessed the knowledge needed, it was a collective effort.

Knowing it was impossible to intercept or rescue the crew from the crippled ship they were forced to find the solution within themselves and resources on the space module. It took some outside the box thinking by those engineers to find a workable solution, relay it to the astronauts who were able to assemble a workable filtration system and save them.

Each person brought a different perspective, gift and insight into a possible solution and every person was needed to make the rescue mission a success. I am sure there were many suggestions that didn't work out, but they stayed with it knowing lives were at stake. Even though the astronauts were far away up in space, they reached out for help and help responded.

Reaching out to others for support, guidance and aid can be a humbling experience. Our American culture is big on being self-sufficient, independent, and private about our struggles. Others may appear to have life all figured out or appear so self-sufficient, which can sometimes compound our own false sense of shame that somehow we are deficient. It can make it hard to find the strength to admit we need help. But today's readings remind us that in God's Grace-filled community God gives us all that we need within the body of Christ, within the Community of Grace.

Scholars that have studied the Corinthian letters say that there must have been a letter before our First Corinthians letter, we are reading from today. First Corinthians is actually Paul's response to a letter seeking help from Paul from the leaders of this struggling church. That lost letter was the Corinthian church saying to Paul "Houston we have a problem." And Paul responds with this letter. Now we don't have the first letter anymore, but we get a sense of its content by reading first Corinthians.

The church in Corinth, like many churches throughout the ages, is facing internal strife as people are looking to the church to meet their personal needs over the mission and purpose of the Gospel. Paul's letter tries to address their concerns and remind them of what it means to be a loving and successful church proclaiming the Good News.

Paul starts off his letter by praising the people and reminds them that they have been set apart, that's what sanctified means, set apart from the old life and are now part of the Kingdom of Grace. This kingdom of Grace was secured by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Paul injects a little humility into the mix by reminding them that it is because of Grace that they are called into community. The Corinthian church has a boastful pride problem that Paul addresses later, but here he simply reminds them that all that they have comes from God. "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." What we need to live a sanctified life comes through the Grace of God.

It would be like reminding the astronauts that their NASA training has equipped them to face this disaster and they are part of a wider body of people there to support them. In the end, even though the engineers supported the astronauts in finding a solution, all of the resources they needed they already possessed. God likewise has given us all that we need to be a community of Grace here. We may feel like we are lacking, but in reality, collectively with God's grace, we are lacking nothing.

Paul also reminds the church in Corinth that they are part of something greater than themselves. Collectively as the Body of Christ we are called to carry out the work of Christ to redeem the world. To bring healing and restoration and to see God's Kingdom of Grace spread throughout the world. To accomplish that we need be interdependent and function as a community, valuing all and seeking the good for all.

There is a collective "you" in Paul's opening words that is to remind the church that they are interconnected in their identity, gifts, and purpose in this world. The common denominator in all of this is Jesus Christ who provides all that we need. But it will take us to collectively come together and dumping all that we have out on the table to create a better community.

Today we tend to seek out a hero, a champion that wins the victory and maybe the church turned to Paul hoping he would swoop in and save the day, but in reality he reminds them that it is the community that is the true hero. For Apollo 13 it was everyone coming together to fulfill the vital goal of bringing three men back safely. Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day, remembering leader of the civil Rights movement. His work is inspirational, but he did not do it alone. He understood the power of the collective body, or as he calls it, the beloved community to bring about healing and restoration. To find a solution to our social ills. So in a moment we will hear the voices of women who shared in the struggle for the beloved community still today. But let me end with this final quote from Martin about the work forming of the beloved community.

“Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the ‘fight with fire’ method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love—which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one’s enemies—is the solution to the race problem.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957

Let us continue the work of creating the Beloved Community of Christ.