

Title: Sanctified in the Mess
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:1-3
Preacher: Eddie Bellis
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I have a confession to make. Whenever I open a letter, I usually skip the greeting. I know that's not polite. Someone has taken the time to write, "Dear So-and-So," and I immediately start looking for the good part. I want to know why they wrote. I want the news. I want the story. The greeting feels like the paperwork you have to get through before anything interesting happens.

Maybe that is why so many of us rush past the opening verses of Paul's letters. We assume they are little more than ancient formalities: sender, recipient, thanksgiving, grace, peace, and on to the important stuff. But every now and then, an opening greeting refuses to stay in its lane. The opening of First Corinthians is one of those greetings.

As we just read, this opening section is a little like opening a letter of recommendation and discovering that the person being recommended is someone you know very well, and not necessarily for all the reasons the writer seems to think.

Paul writes, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints..." If we know anything about Corinth, we almost want to interrupt him. "Excuse me, Paul. Are we talking about the same church?" Because Corinth is not exactly what most of us would call saint material.

This is the church that cannot seem to stop arguing with itself. The church with factions and rivalries. The church where people are taking one another to court. The church that turns the Lord's Supper into a lesson in social inequality. The church has enough conflict, confusion, and questionable decision-making to keep a Presbytery Administration Committee busy for decades.

If Corinth were applying for a church excellence award, it would not make the first cut. Yet Paul opens his letter as though he is writing to a congregation whose picture belongs in the church directory of heaven. He says, "To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus." Not, "To those who are trying very hard." Not, "To those who are making progress." Not, "To those who might someday become holy if they can finally get their act together." He says, "To those who are sanctified..."

Which leaves us wondering whether Paul has lost touch with reality, or whether he can see a reality the Corinthians themselves cannot. That is the question worth holding onto.

Before Paul says a single word about what is wrong with this church, he tells them who they are. Before correction comes identity. Before instruction comes grace. Before he addresses their failures, he reminds them that they belong to God. And that is a strange way to begin.

At least it is strange to people like us, who tend to assume that identity follows achievement. We hand out titles after the work is done. We call people successful after they succeed. We call people holy after they act holy. Yet, Paul does the opposite.

He speaks as though God's claim comes first and everything else follows. Which may be the most startling thing in this whole letter. Not that Corinth is a mess, because they are. We already know that.

Our greatest surprise is that God has not walked away from the mess. Our surprise is that God still calls it "the church of God." Our surprise is that Paul can look at a fractured and struggling community and see not only what it is, but also whose it is.

That tiny little phrase, "sanctified in Christ Jesus," carries the weight of the entire gospel. Because sanctified does not mean perfected, polished, or spiritually impressive. The word means set apart, claimed, and marked as belonging to God.

Friends, Paul is saying something radical. This messy, divided, struggling community already belongs to God. Not because they have become impressive disciples doing amazing things, solved their problems of budgets or buildings or people in the pews, or achieved some level of spiritual maturity.

They are sanctified because they belong to God, because Christ has claimed them. Christ did it, not any work they did or attribute they possessed. Paul's claim in his opening is important to note because their salvation is not rooted in their performance. Their sanctification is clearly rooted in Christ himself.

Notice what Paul does not say. Notice he does not say they are sanctified in their unity, nor are they sanctified in their morality. He is clear that they are not sanctified in their theological clarity. He roots their sanctification in Christ Jesus.

Yes, their brokenness and messy lives are real. But that mess is not ultimate. Yes, their sin is serious, but it is not sovereign. Truly, their confusion is visible, but it is not decisive. What is Paul's claim? Christ's presence is ultimate for them, and yes, for us too.

And that matters because Corinth is not merely an ancient congregation preserved in Scripture for our observation. Corinth is a mirror for us to see ourselves. The longer we read this letter, the more uncomfortable it becomes. Because we recognize ourselves.

We are not the first church to discover that following Jesus does not eliminate mess. Sometimes it simply reveals it. And every congregation has its own version of Corinth.

In our own life together, we are living through an interim season. Such seasons have a way of revealing things. Questions rise more easily than answers. We become more aware of places where trust is fragile. We notice old wounds that have not entirely healed. We feel the tension between honoring the past and embracing the future.

None of that means something is wrong. What this time reveals is that we are human. And we are not only shaped by our internal life together. We are shaped by the wider culture around us.

We live in a time when political identities often run deeper than Christian identities. We live in a world where disagreement quickly becomes suspicion, and suspicion quickly becomes contempt. We live in a culture that rewards outrage more than understanding and certainty more than humility. We do not leave that world outside when we enter the church. We carry it in with us.

Sometimes we discover that we have begun seeing one another through categories before we see one another through grace. That is why Paul's words remain so important. Remember Paul's words, "To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus."

Paul is not denying their mess. He is naming a deeper truth within the mess. Before we are divided by opinion, we are united in Christ. Before we are defined by preference, we are claimed by grace. Before we are anything else, we belong to God. Even when we do not fully look like it.

That is the upside-down nature of Paul's understanding of the gospel of Jesus. Most of us define people by their most visible failures.

God's view sees a different reality. God defines people by God's redeeming purpose. Paul looks at Corinth and sees a community that is still becoming what God has already declared it to be. They are holy, and they are still learning holiness. They are saints, and they are still learning how to live as saints. They are claimed, and they are still being transformed.

Perhaps that is one of the most hopeful truths in all of Scripture. God does not wait for the order to arrive before showing up. God shows up in the disorder. God does not wait for perfection before offering grace. God offers grace that creates transformation. God does not stand at the finish line waiting for us to arrive. God meets us in the middle of the journey.

Which means Paul is not simply describing Corinth. Truthfully, Paul is describing us. We, too, are people who disagree. We, too, wrestle with uncertainty. We, too, navigate change. We, too, wonder what faithfulness looks like in a complicated world. And we, too, hear this word spoken over us: "Sanctified in Christ." Not because we have everything figured out, but because Christ has not let go of us.

So what does that mean in practice? This means that we are not a gathering of the already perfected. We are a community of the continually formed. We are where repentance means not humiliation but realignment. We are a community where reconciliation is not optional but central. We are to listen as a spiritual discipline. We are to refuse contempt for others, and our unity is deeper than agreement.

Allow me to suggest what I think this opening means. I believe it means we cannot stand outside Corinth and critique it. Rather, we are inside it and living out Paul's promise amid our own messes.

The question is not, "How do we fix them?" The question is, "How do we live faithfully as God's people in the middle of our own complexity?" Paul never allows the Corinthians to forget two truths. We are deeply broken. And we are deeply loved.

The church loses its way whenever it abandons either one. If we remember only our brokenness, we become cynical. If we remember only our belovedness, we become complacent. The gospel insists on both.

Friends, we are deeply broken. Yet at the same time, we are deeply loved. So here is Paul's invitation in his greeting to the church in Corinth. Speak with grace when suspicion would be easier. Ask questions before drawing conclusions. Refuse to reduce one another to labels. Staying in a relationship with one another when withdrawal feels safer. Choose the slow work of unity over the quick satisfaction of being right.

Trust that Christ is still doing what Christ has always done. He is holding together a people who could never hold themselves together on their own. Because the church in Corinth did not receive a different gospel than we have received.

They received the same grace. They received the same Christ and calling as we do. Which means Paul's opening words are not merely a nice little tidy greeting to pass over. His words are a summons, promise, and a warning. They are also hopeful.

Paul says, "To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus..." May we live it is true. Not someday. Not when the church is settled. Not when every question is answered. Not when everyone agrees. May we live Paul's words now in Franklin, in this interim season, and in our divided times.

Paul is speaking a powerful word in his opener to a messy church made up of messy people. They are held together by a faithful Savior who is not finished with them. God is not finished with us yet either. Thanks be to God.