

Widen Your Hearts

I Samuel 17:41-47
II Corinthians 6:1-13

Many neighborhoods have private Facebook groups. Ours does. In a group for a San Jose, California neighborhood a woman—we'll call her Jan—posted that her neighbors were dealing drugs from their home. It was a lie. Jan had argued with them about their noisy pool parties stretching late into the night. Her neighbors, tired of her repeated calls and of her yelling at them from her driveway, had stopped speaking to her. She responded with the defamatory post about drug dealing. The police came to the neighbors' home. But after interviewing them at length, they walked across the yards and delivered a summons for Jan to appear in court. The specific charges against her were intimidation and harassment.

Intimidation and harassment perfectly describe far too much of what goes on in social media. On Facebook, Twitter and all the rest people say things they would **never** say face-to-face. And by the time their targets respond their reputations may have been permanently stained. I think the Apostle Paul would understand. We know from the Book of Acts that everywhere he went he faced people opposed to him personally, and to the Gospel he preached. They accused him of teaching falsehoods about God. They claimed he was breaking the Mosaic law. They insulted him. New Testament scholar Daniel Migliore has found references to Paul in ancient, non-Biblical manuscripts. Most are positive; some, however would make Jan the bad

neighbor blush at their obvious malice and dishonesty. One common accusation was that Paul was having sexual affairs with the young men he mentored. In his place and time, such an accusation could have serious, physical consequences.

Our passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians opens and closes with two teachings. But he makes them so brief we can almost miss seeing them. For the rest of the verses fairly crackle off the page. They contain his vigorous self-defense against people who have slandered him. "We put no obstacle in any one's way." "(N)o fault may be found with our ministry." He has endured afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, hard labor, hunger. He describes getting treated with dishonor and dishonesty. Yet he has not stopped. He calls his ministry true, well known, filled with joy, and "possessing everything", by which he means his spiritual riches far outweigh whatever cost he has had to pay to achieve them.

This determined persistence in the face of danger and hardship reminds me of William Seo. Hoping at one time to enter medical school, he enlisted in the Army in order to gain medic training and experience—and to benefit from the G.I. Bill's educational funding for veterans. But while serving in Afghanistan, he had a revelation akin to Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. Whereas Paul heard the voice of God telling him to preach the Gospel, William felt his heart go out to the Afghans. He felt compassion for their poverty. He believed God was telling him to change course in life. Now his mission would be to get seminary training so he could become a missionary to Afghanistan. He felt compelled to help the people there economically

and spiritually. He would train women to open their own home-based tailoring businesses, and he would share the Gospel by any means possible in a nation controlled by the Sharia law of Islam.

William has now graduated from seminary. In email correspondence last week he reiterated his determination to go to Afghanistan. Now many of you will know that President Biden has announced the near-complete withdrawal of our troops from that nation by this fall. We sent our first deployments there in October of 2001, just a month after the Twin Towers fell on 9/11. According to the Washington Post, by that more than 795,000 American soldiers have served in Afghanistan. More than 2,500 of them died there. And for what? Our troops did push out the Taliban, the extremist Muslim organization that had brutally run the place before we got there. They did severely limit the oppression of women. They did manage to install a somewhat legitimate government elected with less fraud than in lots of other places. But the Taliban have already returned. They are re-taking rural territory. According to a recent Pentagon briefing, they now surround most cities, giving a wider berth to those with U.S. bases in them. The obvious play is to wait until we leave and then drive right into wherever they wish to go.

William Seo knows all this. And he remains determined to go to Afghanistan. He is utterly convinced God has laid this calling upon him. He intends to continue empowering women. And he intends to continue trying to convert Afghans to Christianity. Under the Taliban, either can get him killed. Yet still he feels compelled to

go. No matter what our opinion of his judgment, we must stand in awe of his faith. He embodies each of the two important Pauline teachings we mentioned a few moments ago. William believes now is the day of salvation. And William has experienced the widening heart.

Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah, who heard God telling him, “I listened to you at the right time, on the day of salvation I helped you.” (Paul actually reverses each clause but we can cut him a little slack after all that hardship he has endured.) But while for Isaiah the prophecies would come true in the indeterminate future, Paul boldly states the time has arrived. “Behold, now is the day of salvation,” he tells the Corinthians. At the close of the previous chapter he writes of Christ, “being made sin” though “he knew no sin.” He nailed our sins with him to the cross that we might be reconciled to God. Since Christ has done this (past tense), now is the day of salvation. William Seo has an admirably evangelical faith. When I say “admirably evangelical” I refer to his theology, not to his practice of evangelism. Evangelical comes from the same root as Gospel. William believes Christ died for his sins and that so long as he believes in this he will rejoice on the day of salvation. In this carefully-defined sense I consider myself an evangelical, as well.

Paul’s other important teaching closes this passage. He writes, “...Corinthians, our heart is wide.” This is the sole instance in all his New Testament letters where he addresses his readers both with their geographic name and approvingly. He addresses the Galatians geographically but disapprovingly. He calls them foolish and

stubbornly determined to deny the grace of God with their slavish obedience of the Mosaic law as though that were how they could earn God's love. Other negative examples sprinkle Paul's letters. But here he expresses his affection—albeit also his condescension. “I speak as to children,” he writes, “widen your hearts also.” And that is the teaching we want to highlight. Widen your hearts.

Paul wants the Corinthians to increase their love, and to love an increased circle of people. He does make an exception in the following verses for unbelievers, with whom he feels believers should have no fellowship. This strikes us as odd and unloving. I do not counsel that we take this, or any verse literally. But he does write to an incredibly diverse set of churches. (Corinth, a very big city, by this time has numerous Christian churches and Paul writes with the knowledge his letter will be circulated among them all.) He wants the Jews and the Turks in them, the Greeks and the Romans, the rich and the poor, the educated and the unsophisticated all to love each other with the love of Christ. We too can use this encouragement. As I wrote these words I realized I have very little contact with local people outside our church. Among other things this means I have little contact with the poor, the uneducated, people who served in Afghanistan or those whose skin contains a great deal more melanin than mine.

I thought of the routes I tend to take to church, to the stores, to wherever I feel the need to go. What do Ohio Boulevard, Poplar and Fruitridge Sts., Indiana 46 and Interstate 70 have in common? They all pass through nicer areas. Is this

subconsciously my intent? Do I need to widen my heart? Indeed I do.

When William Seo did his tour in Afghanistan he felt his heart widen to its people. This became a part of the basis on which he decided God had called him to return. Do we hesitate to widen our hearts because we fear doing so could lead us into uncomfortable places? Because we have tried widening them in the past and all we got in return was heartache? Perhaps these and other dynamics give us perfectly understandable concern about trying again. Yet we ought not allow ourselves to stay in our careful little lanes. Widen your hearts, church.

Reflect the love of Christ on a wider circle of people. In our current five-year strategic plan we have set the goal of expanding the demographic of those who participate in the life of this congregation. The members of the task force that produced this recommendation meant more by this than that Central Presbyterian should get younger. We do hope to attract more young people, and specific tactics for doing so will hit the light of day in the coming weeks. We hope also to attract people of differing income levels and ethnicities. We believe doing so would bless them, and it would bless us.

Widen your hearts, church. By far the most common way people come into a church is after receiving an invitation to visit from somebody they know and trust. Whom might you invite, especially if they would expand our demographic? Let us make it our calling to offer the love of Christ to more and more people.