

Psalm 147:1-11  
I Corinthians 9:16-23

“Sealed Orders”  
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We don't know precisely why the apostle Paul feels threatened by fellow Christians at the First Church of Corinth. However, we do know that someone has challenged Paul's authority. “What gives you the right to tell us how to conduct the church?” someone in Corinth appears to have asked Paul. It further appears there is some kind of “power play” going on, so the Corinthian church is having a crisis of authority. What? Church politics?

Mind you, Paul founded the church at Corinth. But Paul is no longer living there with the Corinthians, so they appear to have forgotten that he was their organizing leader. “Who gave you the right to tell us what to do?” someone must be asking – and it may be more than one person may be asking that question.

So in today's scripture from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is defending himself “by letter,” rather than by being physically present. At first he reminds them that he too is a “true apostle.” Since he was not one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus, and had likely not met Jesus of Nazareth, he was always putting forth the argument that he too was called to be an apostle, having been confronted and called by the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He also reminds them that they would not be a church if it were not for him. And yet Paul says that none of that gets to the heart of the matter. “... I have made no use of any of these rights,” says Paul (I Cor. 9:15).

Rather Paul's authority rests upon his external authorization. Paul says that he does what he does and says what he says because an obligation has been laid on him, and woe to him if he does NOT preach the gospel. The word “obligation” can also be translated as “necessity.” But either way the meaning is that this service he does for the Corinthians is not necessarily of his own free will; it is not necessarily his choice; he has been “entrusted with a commission.”

Paul is telling the Corinthians, in effect, that he does not work for them. He has been sent – (the word apostle means “one who is sent.”) Thus he has been sent and ordered to preach the gospel to them. Paul's words are not linked to congregational approval, a winning personality, or to his superior theological training. When it comes down to it, Paul's authority comes from God. He is not writing to the Corinthians because it gives him personal pleasure – rather, as he puts it, “an obligation has been laid on me.” Elsewhere Paul calls himself a “slave” of Christ: He is one whose neck is in a yoke; a burden has been placed on his back.

I expect this way of thinking sounds quite foreign to us. We live in a world that both values and teaches us that our lives are self-created through our own astute, free, and deliberate choices. In other words, “I choose, therefore I am,” and the choices I make formulate who I am. ‘Freedom of choice’ may well be our highest virtue – It’s the reason we have cable TV with 200 or more channels, or supermarkets with 20 varieties of lemons. It’s why we have so many makes and models of automobiles with far more options than we could ever use. The ‘good life’ is the life we fabricate for ourselves through our own good choices, and we all want to believe that ours is the good life BECAUSE of the choices we have made.

“How did you choose to marry your wife?” the marriage therapist asked a client in a private counseling session. “Well, I asked a dozen other women and they said ‘no.’ This was the only woman who gave me half a chance. So I just sort of married her.” What kind of marriage is that, we are left wondering. The most important steps in life are those we have freely chosen – at least, so our consumer driven economy and society tells us. No wonder that none of us can understand, much less accept an ‘arranged marriage,’ as still happens in so many other parts of the world.

But what if the life we are living is not all our own after all? What if, while we are busy making our own choices, God is also making choices? What if it’s not really up to us to decide what to do with our lives, but rather the direction of our lives is up to the God who created us?:

Ah... Paul, how did you decide to follow Christ? How did you choose to be a Christian? Did you always have a deep desire to travel to far-away places like Corinth? Were you really good at public speaking and therefore wanted to preach? Did you have an inclination to think theologically?

And to that Paul replies that he was just ‘minding his own business, proceeding down the Damascus road on a mission from the Jewish authorities to search out the people who were following this new heretical craze called “the Way” - when Jesus chose him! “There was a blinding light, a resounding voice ... and now I’m suddenly obligate,” he says.

So Paul is telling the squabbling Corinthians that, “I’m not here by my own power. Have you ever considered that I really didn’t want to come to Corinth in the first place.” “I’m under obligation. I have a commission and that’s why I am attempting to serve Christ by serving you!”

I know that we surmise we are here this morning because we think we chose to be here – that’s the North American way. We consider ourselves to be people

who have developed good habits, so most of us are here because going to church is a good habit; a few are here because mom or the spouse made us come; and few are here because we are searching for a bit of boost in our lives and thought we just might get it here.

But what if we are here this morning because GOD put us here? What if the work that we are doing, we are not really doing for ourselves? What if the life we are living is really not our own but is truly a gift from God. What if God is actually the Director and we are actors in the drama of God's plan of salvation? What if we are not the "rugged American individualists" - in charge of our own destinies - we believe we are?

We can all probably think of other Biblical personalities – starting with Abraham and Sarah and continuing through the reluctant prophets, and clueless disciples, as well as countless others who really didn't choose to work with God, but God was determined to work through them. That's Paul's defense of his ministry to and with the Corinthians: "I'm not writing you because I love the city of Corinth; I've been with you there, and now write to you because I'm under orders – I've been commissioned!"

The Danish Christian philosopher Kierkegaard said that each of us is born "with sealed orders." In other words, each of us is here for a purpose – for some direction that God has in mind for us. But that purpose is not immediately self-evident to us. Therefore each of us must search the scriptures, we are to be attentive to the leadings of the Holy Spirit, we must seek the guidance of the church if we are to find out what lies within our "sealed orders."

Add to that idea another noted theologian, Karl Barth, who on one occasion remarked that it is not up to us to raise critical questions of a biblical text. The biblical text is the means to question us. Every biblical text is a summons, said Barth - a vocation, a calling from God addressed to us. The text has authority to call, to command – and our job, related to the biblical text, is to be obedient to what we hear in the call of the text itself.

Having attended a couple of Presbyterian seminaries, I have received the finest education in Western biblical interpretative procedures. I was taught how to use the historical-critical methods of biblical hermeneutics. When confronting a biblical text, I therefore ask, "What was the original context for this passage of scripture? For what purpose was this text written? Is this text relevant to today's church or simply a relic from the long-dead past?" The men who attend our Bible study on Wednesdays will likely tell you that this is how I, as pastor, tend to approach and lead our studies. The women who attend the yearly overview of

their Presbyterian Women's study will note the same approach in my annual presentation to them.

There is certainly nothing wrong with that approach to scripture, for it is very informative and enlightening; but there are other approaches. I recently read that John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, although not a beneficiary of the historical-critical method of interpretation, took scripture very seriously. Wesley tended not to ask about historical context and other factors that might lie behind the text – those questions that I have been schooled to ask. Rather, Wesley kept his focus on “the world in front of the text,” as he put it. In other words, he allowed the biblical text to question him, rather than posing historical questions about the text. It was as if Wesley assumed not only that the Bible is God's word, but that the Bible is God's word FOR HIM. Thus he tended to ask not, “How can this text be changed and interpreted in order for it to be relevant to my life?” Rather, he asked, “How does my life need to be changed in order to be faithful to this text?”

Every text, therefore, is an invitation to transformation, because, for Wesley, it was the authority of the Bible, and not the authority of his own cultural situation that was the greatest authority. He assumed no authority over the Biblical texts; rather, he assumed that the biblical text had authority over him. Let me add, that our Wednesday Bible study does make use of Wesley's methodology, whether we are aware of it or not. A number of us who attend constantly raise the question before the group, “So how DO our lives need to be changed in order to be faithful to this passage?” Thus, we get the benefits of both approaches.

When I was in high school, I had my first male Sunday School teacher. Up to that point all my Sunday School teachers had been female, which was fine. But it was kind of exciting for an adolescent male like me and my best friend, Lee to have a male teacher – and what a teacher he turned out to be!

He was a salesman by trade, but he also had been a minor league baseball player with the Charlotte Hornets. He shared with us that he hadn't always been the best of Christians, and since he was half Native American, he hadn't had an easy time growing up.

He would use the written lessons, but then always managed to get “off topic” and tell us about some of his adventures traveling as a ball player. I'll always remember how he had the disgusting habit of chewing bubble gum and tobacco at the same time; hey, at least he didn't try to blow bubbles.

Sometimes he would relate some dilemma he had to face on a Monday morning as a businessman and salesman, then ask us, that as a Christian, what do

we think he should have done, or what would we have done. That class was wonderful! We had never been treated like adults before. Frankly, we had never been around an adult who was so honest about his limitations and so open about his mistakes. And he seemed eager to hear what we had to say. He provided us with lessons from the curriculum, the Bible and scripture – sure, but he also provided us with lesson on life.

Years later I was invited back for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that church, and my friend Lee, who had also become a Presbyterian minister, was there as well. At one gathering an older man came up to us and it was Bill Johnson, our old Sunday School teacher. Lee and I both thought this was a good time to tell him how much he meant to the formation of our faith journeys. “We’ll always remember your Sunday School class,” we told him.

“Yea, I’ll never be able to forget that either,” came his reply. “What do you mean by that?” I asked. “Well I hated those three years of teaching. I told the preacher that I had zero skills in teaching the Bible; but he “guilt-ted” me into it. He said I owed it to God and to him.” “And you kids ... all you wanted to do was impress the girls, and the girls wanted to flirt. It was awful!”

That little exchange taught me something important: Sometimes the best things we do for God are the things we don’t want to do. Sometimes God asks us to do things that are pleasant for us, and sometimes those things are unpleasant, and just plain work. Yet, sometimes we are to work for God, not for what we want, but because we believe it is what God wants.

Paul said he had an obligation; he was “under a commission.” Have you noticed we operate under ‘commissions’ here at Riverside too.

So why are we here? What right have WE to testify to Christ and his gospel? Because what Paul said of himself is true for all believers: we are to live as those “under sealed orders.”

If we have been baptized, we have been commissioned. And now we are to unseal those orders and go to work in the church and the world for our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.