



Roanoke, Virginia
July 25, 2021

“Institutions”

I Corinthians 12:27-31
George C. Anderson

When Paul writes to the church in Corinth, he does so in a way that we today would call “consulting.” The Corinthian church he helped establish has become somewhat siloed; divided

- economically between rich and poor,
- racially between Jewish and Gentile,
- spiritually between the charismatic and those who don’t get speaking in tongues,
- strategically between those who think the church should emphasize education and those who think the church should be more prophetic,
- and philosophically between those who look to the church to do great things in the world and those who look to the church as a place of escape and comfort.

Of course, every community has affinity groups. It is naïve to think it would not. What Paul doesn’t like seeing, though, is that the groups have become a bit.... uh, *judge-y*. Each one has individuals who are guilty of their own sort of elitism. This is as true for those who feel they are the ones most discriminated against as it does for, say, the rich and super-spiritual.

Elitism is not everyone’s attitude in the Corinthian Church, but Paul is concerned that enough think this way to feel he needs to take on the consulting role. He reminds the Corinthian Christians not to despise what they have built. Remember the beauty and wonder, the power and purpose, of a community that was organized to know and spread God’s love. Each group has something to offer, and everyone has their own gifts. Glorious! If the church will only live by grace, the factions can hold each other accountable and the gifts of all can be put to good use in accomplishing the overall goal of growing into and sharing the good news of Jesus.

Our few verses from I Corinthians are just a sample of Paul’s consulting work. Listen for the Word of God that unites us despite our differences:



²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God!

Maybe some of you are thinking, “What do you mean saying ‘The Word of the Lord?’ and stopping there. Why didn’t you keep going? Paul was just about to talk about ‘a still more excellent way.’ What is it?”

I’m sorry, but my sermon isn’t about that. Paul takes 12 more chapters to present this more excellent way and doesn’t fully get to the point till in chapter 13 he makes it clear that the more excellent way is- spoiler alert- love...

God’s kind of selfless love show us in Jesus,
 love that is not like the way the factions of the Corinthian church have
 sometimes behaved,
love that is patient and kind,
 not jealous or boastful,
 not arrogant or rude,
love that does not insist on its own way but delights in what is true,
 even if it is someone else’s truth.
It is a love
 that believes,
 that hopes,
 that endures.

Maybe you’re ready for a good sermon about God’s love- after all, we need more love in this world, right?

But that is not what my sermon is about. My sermon isn’t about love. It is about organizing. My sermon is about the organization, boundaries, rules, and traditions that can keep a community like the Corinthian Church together and moving along so that it can better know and share God’s love. In a word, my sermon is about “institutions.”

Now don’t leave, that would be rude. Those of you online, don’t sign out. I know that “Institutions” is a word that can bring unpleasant things to mind:

rules,
regulations,
buildings,
red tape.



“Institutions” bring to mind the idea of conformity; even though conformity is the exact opposite of what Paul is arguing for when he does his consulting work to build the Corinthian Church.

“Impersonal” is something else that comes to mind, even though that is also not something Paul argues for. Paul wants to build a community of mutual caring. But it is true, though, that sometimes institutions can be more about organization than the people they organize. Jesus ran into this; those times when a system of Law, a religion, a government seemed to exist more for the *rules* rather than the people the rules are for; more for *buildings* than the programs and people within them; more for *traditions* than for those who inherited them.

When we hear the word, “Institutions,” we might think of something big and cumbersome, something that limits rather than frees us, something that doesn’t age well even as the world around us changes.

But, most of all, when we hear the word “Institutions,” we might think of something **boring**. Maybe, the first thing the word inspires is an immediate yawn.

I have been preaching sermons with one-word titles, and maybe I should have thought it through more before titling this one, “Institutions.” I didn’t worry about you who are here in the sanctuary or online because you didn’t know that was the title before you showed up. But what about those who might go to our *Sermon on the Mount* podcast looking for something besides *This American Life*, *Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me* and *Serial* to listen to in order to pass the time on a five-hour drive?

They see the titles of the sermons Elizabeth and Ben have preached.

- “Sheep Without a Shepherd,”
- “A Rose from Concrete,”
- “A Night of Unknowing.”

They think, “Yes, any of those might be worth a listen.”

Or they might look at my one-word titles and think,

- I’ll listen to a sermon called “Happiness” because I want to be happy,
- or one called “Storms” because I’ve been going through a bit of a storm lately,
- or one called “Truth” because our country seems not to care anymore what is actually true.

But “Institutions?” “[I don’t want to fall asleep at the wheel. I’ll pass.](#)” (This might end up being the least downloaded *Sermon on the Mount* podcast ever)



I chose the title, however, because *it is boring*. What I want us to consider today is that sometimes the best news is boring news. I'll try not bore you with this sermon, but I am struck by how some of the best news about life together can be missed because it seems mundane, ordinary, "same-ole-same-ole." I am struck about how quickly we want to tear down institutions because of their obvious flaws and forget what great news is lost simply because the good they do has become so mundane.

In a way, I am playing off my sermon last Sunday. Last Sunday, I quoted Stephen Pinker who asked why so many of us don't even know the good news about how much progress is being made in our world-

news of poverty and war deaths dropping worldwide,
news of life expectancy, literacy and education rising worldwide.

In answering his own question, one reason he gives is that we humans are storytelling creatures. We tend to be fascinated with what is interesting; and what usually is more interesting is what we found shocking, worrisome, infuriating, and frightening. So, when a topic comes up, we tend to immediately remember the last bad thing we heard. And because we remember better how things can go wrong over how things go right, we start to feel that conditions are getting worse even when they are not. We even tend to be pessimistic about the world even as we are optimistic about our own personal futures.

That is what we do with institutions... even though progress in this world is impossible without them. Even though there often are good reasons to complain and bemoan institutions for when and where they fall short, we miss so much good news about what is accomplished because we have them. In fact, Pinker says, the answer as to why so much progress has been made the last few centuries is that with the rise of reason and science, focus and resources have shifted from trying to save the world one person at a time while letting government and businesses do their thing, to creating and building institutions that are organized to accomplish those things that are near and dear to the hearts of those who care about human well-being... near and dear even to the heart of Jesus, the one we follow here at Second Presbyterian.

That world illiteracy has increased from around 10% in 1800 to around 86% today is not because parents decided on their own, individually, to teach their children to read. That would have been a trick since the parents themselves were illiterate. It was because schools were organized. That the percentage of those who are on the verge of starvation has dropped so radically the past century is because of organized farming and distribution. That wars have decreased in the world so radically is because governments, for all their many flaws, have worked to avoid them. Major breakthroughs in health have happened because of institutions conducting research with funding from other institutions.

And yet, think about this, when it comes to health care, or education, or the government, have you heard and read more about what is right about them or more about what needs to be fixed? You can correct me, but my guess is more negative than positive. Taken too far, that leads to cynicism, to the claims that nothing has changed, and to the destructive impulse that we have



seen from both the right and the left to go ahead and tear down institutions because, “Why not? It can’t get worse.” (By the way, yes it can).

Of course, let’s not get carried away. Institutions do need to be held accountable, and they need critique, and sometimes, as we remember from the Old Testament prophets and from Jesus, hyperbolic criticism can serve a purpose. Institutions will stagnate if they don’t change, they will help less and perhaps harm more if they are not scrutinized as to whether they are achieving their purpose or simply trying to survive, and sometimes it takes some screeching to get people’s attention to a problem that needs to be fixed.

Let’s remember what institutions basically are. Boiled down, institutions are basically the necessary means by which a community achieves its shared purposes (and the purpose can be hateful rather than healing). In criticizing the institution that was the church in Corinth, Paul, the consultant, was not suggesting the church cease to be. He was asking the church how well it was achieving its purpose of sharing God’s love.

So, yes, sometimes God’s hand is often at work when more attention is given to what needs to be fixed than to what is going right. Sometimes there is a place for hyperbole and its virtue of being interesting by providing shock and inspiring even anger and fear, if it draws attention to what needs to be addressed.

But today, I’m going to stand up for the exhausted parents of many a novel who are so readily criticized by their children for their impatience and their lack of understanding, of their resistance to change, their children’s unique gifts, but who day after day have worked to keep a roof over their children’s head, food on the family table, and their children safe from harm.

We’re in worship so let’s consider the institution of the church. In fact, let’s consider the institution of Second Presbyterian Church.

I realize that I’ve picked a bad example. While church denominations get plenty of withering critique these days, I realize that this is a congregation that is blessed with the overwhelming support of its members. My goodness, in hearing stories of other ministers who are in divided congregations, or who say that they can’t win for trying because everything that is tried is shot down by someone, I cannot tell you how thankful I am that I have the privilege of serving here with you. We ministers are spoiled. The work is hard, but the support is overwhelming. If I were serving as a church consultant, this sermon would be better given in another pulpit.

But I have multiple goals in preaching this sermon about boring good news. I want us to reflect on our need as members of the Roanoke community, as citizens of this country, and as members of the human race to think twice before giving up on, or turning against, the institutions that need reforming, but which are necessary if progress is to be made.

And then, because we live in a time when it is so popular to be derisive toward community efforts (like schools, governments, and religions) as a case study, I want to point to good news that is right in front of us here at Second.

Consider social justice. We hear that term and we think of protests and moments of memorial disruption. And to be clear, “good trouble” is part of what social justice requires. But, maybe the most significant and lasting transformation on behalf of justice and compassion is



something that is sort of boring to talk about because it is worked through the systems of institutions. (Yawn)

For instance, how about this for boring good news: this church *pays its bills*. Month by month, salaries and bills are paid so that programs of worship and education are possible where day by day, week by week, a community is maintained.

Much good comes of worship and education. But, I'll tell you what, let's move past that to what some of the most fierce critics of congregations have stressed, and that is that the church should be doing more for missions. Well, this congregation, like other congregations in Roanoke, pays its bills. Every single month, money is sent to institutions like the *Presbyterian Community Center*, *Family Promise*, and Habitat for Humanity to help all the ways they help families, which are institutions in themselves, get out of crisis, receive education, find and keep jobs and live viable lives.

Wake up, y'all, don't go to sleep. I know this is boring that hundreds of people live better lives because we pay our bills every month. That's not nearly as exciting as a story of someone pulling another from a burning car or leaving a big tip for a waitress who seems down on her luck, or speaking out at a community gathering about something that is wrong in the world. This is the boring stuff of what Paul is reminding the Corinthians, that the most life-affirming work that we can do, we can't do on our own. The body of Christ needs all the gifts of its members so that

not just in a crisis,
not just during a protest,
not just when it is exciting and fun,

and certainly

not just when it is about what my particular faction thinks is important,
but so that we can add value to our life together

day after day,
week after week,
month after month,
year after year,
century after century,

we can do the same ole, same ole good work of spreading the good news of Christ in an ongoing and ultimately world-changing way.

Or, let's think about the dramatic and exciting thing we are seeking to do through our Mission Build Campaign. That campaign is not an everyday, every year, or even an every generation kind of thing. We're helping build a hospital in the DR and a new facility for the Presbyterian Community Center. We are helping renovate two buildings, one to be a Leadership Institute at a seminary and another across the street to provide housing for the potentially homeless and a place for folks to remotely visit loved ones in prison. That stuff is not boring, it is about one of the most interesting things we've ever done.

But the most exciting news about what we are doing will end up being the boring good news of institutions that we might lose track of.



- We are building a hospital that month after month, year after year, will heal and repair bodies, mostly of the poor.
- We are creating a leadership institute at Union Seminary that month after month, year after year, will equip pastors for better ministry and have an impact on their churches.
- We are providing a house that month after month, year after year, will help heal families.
- We are building a facility so that month after month, year after year, even more families will be helped in many of the same ways they have been helped before.

We'll probably not even end up noticing what will come of it all. Same ole, same ole- this grinding, every day, unrelenting good news that over time just simply changes lives and the world.

I hope you hung in there with me with all this institutional stuff. I'll try to make things more interesting next week. Maybe, get you upset about an issue of the Gospel rather than this boring stuff about people with different gifts cooperating and organizing to get good work done even when we're not paying attention.

