

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 10, 2021)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing - Together!

(1 Corinthians)

Study #1

Sermon Series: Life-Changing Relationships

Nurturing relationships that help us follow Jesus.

Introduction: Plate spinning...

When someone tells you that they are *“juggling a lot of balls”* or that they are *“spinning a lot of plates”*, you know what they mean.

They mean that they have a lot going on. They have multiple assignments and responsibilities and tasks to get done.

They mean that they feel like a stage performer keeping plates spinning on wooden poles, constantly moving from plate to plate, desperately trying to keep the plates spinning lest they drop and break.

I watched a couple of YouTube videos of plate-spinners this week. They were three minutes of breathless, frantic, frenetic activity.

If you've never seen a plate-spinning act, you can picture it. It's entertaining, but in an uneasy sort of way, because as you picture it, you know how that plate-spinner feels - - because you have a lot going on in your life. You're spinning a lot of plates.

The list of the items you need to check off as “done” on any given day is long, and you find yourself running from thing to thing to thing. Lots of plates.

And the professional plate-spinner's got it easy. He races around a table set up to make it convenient to get to all the plates. There is nothing in his way.

You, on the other hand, have to deal with distractions that get in the way of your getting to the plates that you need to keep spinning lest they drop to the floor.

Physical ailments and breaking news and all manner of interruptions intrude on your plate-spinning.¹

We fear letting a plate drop and that's a legitimate fear. Nobody wants the mess of broken plates. But here's the thing. Not all plates are equally valuable. Some plates are more important than other plates.

We will often face the reality that we need to let one plate drop so that we can keep spinning the more important plate.

For the Christian and for the Christian community, there is one plate that must not drop.

For the last two thousand years, Jesus' followers have been tasked to lovingly carry out His Great Commission. Or as we say it around here, *“Take next steps with Jesus AND help others take their own next steps with Jesus.”* Make disciples.

We must obey Jesus' command to make disciples. That is the main thing.

And the church is to be that community that reminds each other to keep the main thing the main thing, regardless of distractions and disruptions.

We're living in a very distracting, disruptive season. As unnerving as that may be, it isn't unusual. Human History is marked by long seasons of upheaval interspersed with moments of calm.

¹ We can learn from the wisdom of comedian Jim Gaffigan, who now has five children, but said, when he and his wife only had four, *“You know what it's like having a fourth kid? Imagine you're drowning, then someone hands you a baby.”*

There's almost always a lot going on. And this morning, I want to encourage you by letting you hear the Apostle Paul urge a church where there was a lot going on to keep the main thing the main thing.

Life in a Distracting, Disruptive World

In the City of Corinth

Among the things going on during the season in which the Jesus movement began was Rome's oppression and its pervasive power. Rome kept the peace, but at the price of absolute control.

The conditions in the Empire made life tough for most. Tens of millions of people were enslaved, while plagues routinely spread through the population.

The Emperors (men such as Caligula and Nero) slaughtered multitudes at will, taxed mercilessly, and hosted gory games. Poverty was rampant. Persecution of Christians was common.

The city of Corinth in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) was impacted by all of this.

On the plus side, Corinth was perched on a high plateau and was unassailable by enemy armies. It boasted good harbors and was a prosperous city when Paul arrived on his second missionary journey.²

The city was populated by a small number of Jews and Asians, but was mostly made up of local Greeks, businessmen, and government officials from Rome.

By many measures, Corinth was a fine place. But it was a large city, with a large city's challenges. Corinth had "issues."

² Corinth's prosperity had declined in the face of market competition from Athens in the 5th century and was destroyed in 146 BC. The city lay in ruins for a century when Julius Caesar had it rebuilt in 46 BC. As a Roman colony, Corinth became the capital of the province of Achaia. It was at this time that Paul arrived.

Corinth was a favorite recreation and vacation spot for the mighty and the noble. Nero partied in Corinth. It was notorious as a place of wealth and indulgence.

To live "*as a Corinthian*" was code for living in luxury and immorality. As a seaport, it was a meeting place for many nationalities, and it offered all of the attendant vices.

Corinth had a reputation for vulgarity. When the philosopher, Plato, referred to a prostitute, he used the expression, "*Corinthian girl*." Aristophanes coined the word "*korinthiazomai*" meaning "*to fornicate*."

The temple to the goddess Aphrodite in Corinth was unique in Greece in that its one thousand priestesses were nothing more than religious prostitutes.

This is the city into which Paul walked in the spring of AD 51. Not surprisingly, the church that sprang up in Corinth from those who had believed Paul's message about Jesus in this city had "issues."

In the Church at Corinth

Commendation

Paul began his letter to them positively, with affirmation.

[1:2) To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling³

Those who made up the Corinthian church were "*saints*." Not in the way we may refer to saints today, as either long-dead Christians or especially moral people.

No, according to the Bible, to be a Christian is to be a "*saint*." A saint is someone who has been set apart for Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, you are a saint.

So, they were saints AND they were gifted by God.

³ To call someone a "*saint*" is to say that he or she belongs to God.

[1:4] I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, [5] that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge...[7] so that you are not lacking in any gift.

Among other things, the Corinthians were famous for their oratory.⁴ And, having been personally discipled by Paul for a year and a half (see Acts 18), they were well-versed in the Bible and in theology.

The church at Corinth was a great church, as is every church, filled with gifted saints. And the church at Corinth was, also like every church, a deeply flawed church.

In what follows in the remainder of this long letter, Paul lets us know that there are lots of things going on in this church. Situations to address. Problems to resolve.

Right off the bat, Paul raised the issue of divisions in the church into tribes and cliques.

Corrections

Tribalism / Divisions (1:10-17)

Jesus made it clear that His followers were to be known for servanthood, unity, and love. (See John 13:34-35)

In Corinth they were marked by party spirit. There was in the church a tribe dedicated to Paul, one to Apollos, one to Simon Peter (Cephas), and one to Christ, (clearly the more spiritual tribe). (1:12)

Each group claimed to be more spiritual than the others and members of each group boasted about who had baptized them.

In addition, the Christians in the church were “*carnal*.”⁵

⁴ Evidently, the Apostle Paul was not a gifted orator, maybe not even a great preacher. In Corinth, he was accused of an unimpressive personal presence and “*contemptible speech*” (2 Corinthians 10:10)

Carnality (2:14ff...)

The people in the church at Corinth were Christians in whom the Holy Spirit dwelt. There were problems, but the problem was NOT that they weren’t Christians. It’s that they were *immature* (3:1 - “*babes in Christ*”) and *carnal* (3:3 - “*fleshly*”).

They had not matured to the point that they should have in their walks with Jesus. Spiritually speaking, they hadn’t grown up.

The church also suffered due to their refusal to deal with immoral behavior.

Unaddressed Immorality (5:1-13)

There was a man in the church who was sleeping with his father’s wife (we believe it was his stepmother). We don’t know anything about the woman. We do know that the man was a Christian.

Yes, of course, we know that Christians do all sorts of stuff they shouldn’t do. And this “*saint*” shouldn’t have been involved in such a thing.

But Paul said that just as much a problem as the sin was that the church wasn’t doing anything about it.

There was no mourning over the sin. They didn’t reprove the man for his sin. They didn’t discipline him. Instead, for some reason, they boasted about it.

Paul continues and lists another problem.

Lawsuits (6:1-8)

When we who follow Jesus have disagreements with each other, we are to find ways to love each other, despite differences. We are to work things out.

⁵ The problem was not that they were “*natural*.” “*Natural*” is the term Paul used to refer to people who don’t believe in Jesus. The “*natural*” lacks the Spirit of God.

That would apply to all kinds of disagreements and disputes. The point is not that we always agree, but that we always love, and we always strive to protect the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.

In Corinth, this hope of loving unity had been crushed because, when one church member had a grievance against another church member, he would skip the hard work of “working things out” and simply file a lawsuit in the secular court of the day. That’s terrible.

Paul goes on to say that the impact of the city’s idolatry on the church was also terrible.

Idolatry and Christian liberty (8:1- - 10:33)

The issue facing the Corinthian Christians was not whether to worship idols or not. They all knew to not do that.

The issue was whether it was OK to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

The problem was that some Christians, having been saved out of idolatry, would have been tempted to revert to idolatry if they saw another Christian eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. (Paul characterized these Christians as “*weak*”).

But other Christians (Paul calls these “*strong*”), knowing that there is no such thing as an idol, felt free to eat the tainted - and less expensive meat - saved money and used the extra cash to support missionaries.

Some of the “*strong*” Corinthian Christians were insensitively exercising their freedom by eating meat that was sacrificed to idols and making their “*weak*” brothers stumble.

Then, Communion, taking the Lord’s Supper, had become, not a time of worship and deep community in Jesus, but something ugly.

Lord’s supper abuses (11:17-34)

Last Sunday, you ate the bread and drank the cup in remembrance of Jesus, as Jack Biros led you. You remembered that Jesus gave Himself for you on the cross. The Corinthians did the same thing, but Paul had received disturbing reports about how Communion was observed in Corinth.

There, where the Lord’s Supper was a full meal (the *agape*), the wealthy came to church with a multi-course banquet. The poor had nothing to bring, so they fasted while the rich feasted.

Others, taking the wine, took too much wine and actually got drunk - during Communion.⁶

In Corinth, the Christians also misused the wonderful gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual gifts and the way of love (12:1--14:40)

Jeff spoke about spiritual gifts over the past two Sundays and gave some great, helpful insight into that theme.

Paul had affirmed that the Corinthian Christians were “*gifted*” (1:7) by God. Tragically, these very gifted church members were abusing the gifts God had given them.

They honored people with the more spectacular gifts (like tongues and miracles) and under-appreciated the less showy gifts, without which no church thrives (like serving, helps, mercy).

All of that was going on in the church at the same time that Rome was oppressing them and the Corinthian social scene was tempting them.

⁶ [20] *Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, [21] for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. [22] What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.*

That's a lot! And it isn't all that different from our own experience in early 2021. There is a lot going on here and now, too.

In Our Culture and Church

In the big, broad world, there are lots of problems. Countries in Central and South America and in Africa are in turmoil, often in large measure due to political corruption. India is a powder keg.

Our Christian family suffers persecution in many places around the world.

Since March of 2020, COVID-19 has been an ever-present reality in our world. Its presence has brought broken health and death and has overwhelmed healthcare systems.

The response to it has disrupted worldwide supply chains, doubled worldwide starvation, prompted lockdowns, caused massive unemployment and financial uncertainty, and brought fundamental change to work, schools, churches, and homes.

Politics in the US increasingly divide us. Polarizing figures and issues have created a deep chasm between left and right.

There are racial tensions, riots in cities, the storming of our nation's capital, and the most contentious election season in US history - all of which, and more - is resulting in Americans not knowing how to talk to each other.

Staying informed about what is going on in the world involves spinning a plate or two.

So does figuring out how to think about all of it and what, if anything, we are to do about any of these larger-than-life issues.

Closer to home, we are spinning other plates.

I won't tell you that Northwest Community Church struggles with all the same issues that the church at Corinth did. I can tell you, though, that there are struggles.

Many people in our church are profoundly lonely. Some are in very poor health. Some struggle financially to make ends meet.

While all of us need growth in holiness, some of our friends wrestle with destructive patterns of addiction. Some marriages are strained to the breaking point.

Not surprisingly, decreased opportunities to interact have created relational distance in ours and every other church. What is the impact of 2020 on spiritual vitality? Only God knows.

The families we love - nuclear and extended - require lots of attention, care, love, and shepherding.

Jobs are wonderful things to have, and we who have them are grateful beyond words. Jobs take time, mental energy, physical output.

With so much going on in 2021, we're living in a moment ripe for plate-dropping. And some days are riper than others.

I felt this, personally, during this past week to a greater extent than I normally do.

The national news was disturbing, to say the least. Some events on the global scene grabbed my attention. A couple of issues in my personal and family life were front and center. Items involving our church - some purely administrative and some intensely personal - were inescapable.

I was conflicted, distracted, disturbed. I was in a wrestling match to stay centered on Jesus.

While struggling, I remembered (I believe it was the Lord who prompted me to remember it) Jesus' parable of the sower and the soils.

In this parable, the Lord was alerting His disciples to the reality that not all of those with whom they shared His message would bring a great harvest for God. He was also warning them of the need to care for the garden of their souls.

The parable likens the response of soil types to a good seed to the response of a person to the message of Jesus. Different soil / soul types respond differently.⁷

I was drawn to consider, especially, the third soil / soul in the parable. Jesus explained that some people will hear the message just fine. But the ***“the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word and it becomes unfruitful.”*** (Matthew 13:22)

Last week, I found it difficult to stay fixed and focused on Jesus’ message. In particular, the ***“the worry of the world”*** seemed to me to be overwhelming.

Recognizing a problem is sometimes the first and best step toward dealing with it. Putting a name to my own problem - ***“the worry of the world”*** - helped me a lot.

I saw that I was in danger of letting the message of Jesus get choked out because I was so focused on so many things circling around me, things over which I have virtually no control, issues about which I can make very little difference.

I was trending toward fruitlessness because I wasn’t giving focused attention to spinning the one plate that I must not let drop.

So, I turned to 1 Corinthians to see what Paul had to say to the Christians in that city who were facing many issues - personal, cultural, societal.

I am finding it helpful to see that he counseled these Christians and the church that was there to fix what they could between themselves and in the church.

Counsel to Struggling Churches

Fix This!

⁷ The fourth soil / soul produces a great harvest, the first soil / soul doesn’t do anything with the seed / message, and the second soil / soul falls away due to hard times. You’ll find this parable in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8.

With respect to factions in the church, Paul told them that there should be no divisions among them. Jesus died for them. Not Apollos. Not Peter. They were baptized in the Name of Jesus, not Paul. He told them to live in unity. (1:10, 15-17)

When confronting their carnality and immaturity, he reminded them of the Judgment Seat of Christ where Jesus - their Savior - would bring to light and reward them - or not! - for what they have done in this life. (3:10-17) He called them to imitate him as they moved toward maturity in Jesus. (4:14-16)

You’ll remember that he brought up that uncomfortable matter of the man who was guilty of sexual sin. Paul didn’t bring it up so much to hammer that man, but to call the church to deal with it. He wrote, ***[5:7] Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump...*** They were to deal frontally with sin in the church.

Lawsuits filed by one believer in Jesus against another were inappropriate. Instead, he asks, ***[6:5]...is there not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brothers?*** He called them to work it out between themselves and to not take legal disputes to the secular courts.

That whole meat sacrificed to idols issue was a minefield. Christian liberty is tricky, and it can be difficult to choose whether to exercise freedom or not.

But Paul’s guidelines are clear:

[8:1] Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. So, the first thing? Love. The real issue isn’t food. It’s doing what is best for your brother.

The last thing? ***[10:31] Do all to the glory of God.***

He told them that their behavior at the Lord’s Supper was all wrong. They were to eat the bread and the cup in holiness and to share with those who didn’t have anything to eat.

With respect to everything going on at the church, Paul's message was, *"Fix what's broken between you and your Christian family. Address structural problems in the church."*

OK. Why?

So that the church will become a pleasant community in which to relax? So that the organization of the church will work like a well-oiled machine?

No!

He says to resolve glaring problems in the church and do what you can to bring about health in the church because a healthy church made up of healthy Christians dealing with each other in love moves Jesus' mission to the world forward.

It keeps the one plate that we must not drop spinning.

Why?

Imagine a church that is unified in Jesus and not fractured into cliques.

That church has standing to say to a lost world that the cross is the power of God that brings salvation, that ***[1:25] the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.***

Picture a church whose members are pursuing holiness. They deal with members of the church who are misbehaving, calling each other to obedience to Jesus. That commitment to faithfulness adorns their witness to the true beauty of life with Jesus to those who have yet to trust Him. (5:9-13)

Think of the testimony of a church where people peaceably and civilly work through differences. That church is providing a powerful witness to a watching world that personal rights are not as important as love. (6:7-8)

And we may have thought that the point of his instruction about adjusting whether we should eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols or not had only to do with the church. Don't offend a brother or sister in Christ.

Not at all.

In that section of the letter, Paul tells us that he routinely adjusted his behavior so as to not offend people with whom he was sharing the gospel.

[9:20] To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law...so that I might win those who are under the Law; [21] to those who are without law, as without law...so that I might win those who are without law. [22] To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may be all means save some. [23] I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.⁸

Paul kept the main thing the main thing - ***"I do all things for the sake of the gospel"*** - and urged the Corinthians and urges us to do the same.

There is certainly a great emotional and mental and social well-being benefit to having a healthy church. Unity and love within the church are valuable in and of themselves.

But beyond the internal benefit, doing the things that make for health in the church is what keeps us ***"on mission"*** for Jesus' Great Commission.

Conclusion:

⁸ Paul later summarized that section with a scenario likely to play out right there in Corinth. ***[10:27] If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. [28] But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you..."*** He had first applied the principle of not making someone to how Christians were to behave toward each. That is training for how they were to deal with outsiders.

Jesus calls you and every other Christian and us and every other church to make disciples. Yes, now. With all that is going on. In the middle of COVID-19 and political turmoil and life's busyness.

He didn't give an exception clause with the command to make disciples, as in, *"When it is convenient / if you are not opposed / when you have all the food you need / as long as you are feeling well..."*⁹

These are challenging times. Jesus' church was made for times like these.

If you are a part of Northwest or if you are watching and are a part of another church, I exhort you to take full advantage of the strength you will find when you nurture relationships with other Jesus-followers that help you follow Him.

Strive to make connections by any and all means available: in person, video chat, phone calls, text, email, snail mail. Whatever.

Don't wait for the other person to contact you. You - reach out first.

Turn the conversation to Jesus. Pray with each other. Urge each other to serve Jesus. Provoke each other to love and to good deeds.

Paul wrote to a church overwhelmed by problems that was in a city defined by sin and found itself in a culture marked by oppression.

In the letter he wrote is a call to that church to health SO THAT more and more people would believe in Jesus, more and more believers would grow as disciples of Jesus, more and more disciples would make more and more disciples.

THIS is the main thing.

⁹ On the Voice of the Martyrs daily prayer app, most days highlight the need to pray for Christians who are being faithful to evangelize and to make disciples despite serious opposition. Go to <https://www.persecution.com/praytoday/> to download the app.

And God has given us the gift of each other that we - together - would remind each other to keep the main thing the main thing.