

Epiphany 3, 2009
Good Hope Lutheran Church
I Corinthians 7: 29 – 31

We are this day in the epistle lesson, St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 7. And we begin with prayer:

We thank you Father for this day, and we thank you even more for your promise that one day soon, Christ will again stand upon this earth, and all things shall be as you intend. Let that day come quickly, and may we be found faithful when it does, in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN

Kind of, odd advice, St. Paul offers us today, don't you think? Kind of a strange set of opinions, if you think about it at all. If you are married says Paul, well, pretend like you're single. If you're sad or mournful, don't, don't act like it, don't let on; and if you're happy or upbeat, don't act like that either! If you have dealings with the world, well better if you didn't, so act like you don't; and so forth. What kind of advice is this, and what are we to make of it?

But wait, there's more. All of 1st Corinthians 7 is written in this same vein, the entire chapter offers advice we don't quite know what to do with. In this chapter St. Paul speaks to couples who are thinking about getting married, ok. And he doesn't come right out and say it's wrong to get married. But he does say, if it was up to him, nobody would take the time to plan weddings anymore, nobody would bother with new marriages. What on earth? From odd to odder, what's Paul thinking about?

The key to the whole chapter is the last sentence in today's lesson. "For you must understand," Paul writes, "the present form of this world, is passing away." The present form of this world is passing away, see, this is the message Paul preached, this is the Good News he believed: Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, to live among us as one of us. He died, on a cross—this was the will of God, this was the eternal plan of the Father—Jesus died on a cross to forgive our sins, then rose from the dead to open for us, the way of everlasting life. And He will return. Jesus will be back one day soon, riding the clouds of heaven, judge of the living and the dead, His Kingdom to have no end, He will be back! And it

could be any day now, a week from Tuesday maybe at the latest. And if the Lord is coming back a week from Tuesday, well, why am I going to spend today being sad and mournful? What's to cry about, no matter what awful thing has happened to me, if the Lord is coming back in a week or two at the most—I don't need to be sad do I? I don't need to cry, I'm going to see the Lord! Or if something absolutely wonderful has happened to me today, well look, that's nice. It is. But if the Lord is coming back I'm going to have to face my Maker, so maybe I have more important, more spiritually urgent matters to attend to—like getting right with God? No time for a party, I have to get right with the Lord! And my business dealings and managing my possessions and yes even managing personal affairs—to get married or not to get married: Why am I going to spend all that time and effort dealing with any of that, if the return of the Lord Jesus Christ is at hand? Can't you see, there are simply more important things to do?—like confession, repentance, forgiving one another, being generous with one another—if the day of the Lord is THAT close. All those pious sounding things you say in church, suddenly are very important. And they may just be the only issues you have time for.

Well, let me just out and say it. Paul's calendar was a little bit off. He wrote this letter to the Corinthians in or about the year 50, and he may have been surprised to learn, that we'd be here reading his letter, 1,960 years later. So what appears "odd" to us in the text, is due simply to the fact that Jesus did not return as quickly as the early Christians had hoped. And in our lives now, 2000 years down the road still waiting, yes we are free to get married, yes we can have business dealings with the world, and if you're happy and you know it then your face will surely show it. Yes we can, we have to, and that's fine.

But I don't want to leave Paul behind too quickly. See, Paul believed he just might live to see Jesus return, so some of what he said sounds a little odd to us. Let me ask: Do any of us believe we're going to live to see the Lord return? Do any of us think today might be the day? And if you don't think you're going to have to face the Lord today—if nobody seems to think they're going to have to face the Lord today—then talk about odd! Look what life has become in this country,

look what is now normal for us! The way we speak, the way we act, the way we allow ourselves and our children to be, uh, “entertained.” The way we hoard possessions, the way we spend money basically on ourselves, the way we put on weight while the rest of the world is starving to death. The way we waste time, the way we neglect Bible study, the way we go through the motions of faith without ever really letting it touch our hearts or change our lives. The way we blend in with the world around us, the way we look and act like everybody else—you’re a Christian? Really? Who can tell? Most everything about us is just like everybody else, in a land in an age that is to put it mildly, going from odd to odder, who can tell we’re Christians? Paul believed he would see Christ return any day, so some of what he taught needs to be explained to us today, fine. We *don’t* seem to believe we’re going to have face Jesus anytime soon—and look what we’ve become! How you going to explain *that*? How are you going to explain yourself, the day the Lord does return? And He will. You know that. He will one day. What then?

The Good News of the Gospel remains, the Good News of the Gospel. Christ died to forgive you, then rose again to save you. He is with you now, to any who are open to Him, and He will be back maybe sooner than you think, to take His people home. You are one of His people—God loves you and Jesus died for you and you are one of His people. So live like it, and be ready for the day. In the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.