

And I'd Like to Thank My Mom and Dad, and Sosthenes, and...

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

¹Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

It's lonely at the top. Ever hear that expression? It normally refers to leadership and how when you have to make a decision, especially one that's hard or unpopular, you very quickly realize that sometimes making the call you feel is right leaves you without a whole lot of friends.

One of the very best speeches last year was given by William Dersewicz to the cadets at West Point. It's entitled Solitude and Leadership and it is fantastic- it's easy to find on the web and I highly recommend it to you. What he says is very interesting. He says normally we think of leadership and solitude as being in opposition- leaders, after all, are people who are in contact with others. But what he's been finding is that more and more, the best and the brightest of our young people aren't being prepared to be leaders- they're being prepared to be conformists. More and more the way to advance, whether this means getting into top schools, or advancing up the corporate ladder, means jumping through all the normal hoops and not making waves. And what we wind up with are people at the top who may be excellent at what they do, but they lack

the ability to think critically. They get easily swept up in poor group decision making- see Wall Street's financial collapse. Those were the smartest folks in class- they make more money than you and I could ever dream of. And yet they drove us all over a cliff they didn't see coming- largely they were raised to bring home results- not question the system.

Dersewicz says true leadership requires the ability to think independently, though, to think for yourself. And this requires the ability to spend time alone with your thoughts to even know what it is you think. So far from being the opposite of leadership, he would say true leadership isn't possible without solitude. It has to be lonely at the top or you'll just get swept along with group think, in other words.

William and I have been reading these fantastic books his Aunt Liz got him for Christmas called The Mysterious Benedict Society. The all revolve around four very gifted children all talented in different ways. In the first book they have to come together to defeat a man, the dastardly Mr. Ledrotha Curtain, on the brink of taking over the world with his machine called The Whisperer that controls people's thoughts. One of the characters, Reynie, is gifted with the ability to lead- and much of the first novel centers on how difficult it is for Reynie to devise plans that he knows will endanger his friends. And this is the first time in his life that he's had friends. So, as a leader he knows what he has to do, but as a friend- well it's almost impossible for him to do it.

For Reynie Muldoon it is indeed lonely, extremely lonely, at the top.

And so often this is true- so often leadership does go hand in hand with loneliness. But not always.

This week I found myself reading and re-reading the text from Paul's letter to the First Corinthians. Now, of all the leaders in the Bible- Paul had to be the loneliest. Think about it. He starts off as a Jewish leader persecuting the Christian movement. And then he switches sides and bats for the other team? No one likes a traitor. For a long time Paul was a man without a country- his old friends hated him, and his new friends didn't trust him. So, he did what a lot of people would do in that situation- he went on the road. And once he started, he was non stop.

A while back I saw Charlie Rose interview Jim Collins, the guy who wrote Good to Great and a whole slew of other books on business- at one point Rose asks him about his apparently legendary schedule. And it's nuts. The guy writes constantly with one team of grad students to edit what he had already written and another to research for him on what he was planning to write. He sleeps like two hours a night. He runs marathons. He's on some kind of weird macrobiotic super diet- I mean I was waiting for him to leap over tall buildings in a single bound. Well, Paul makes this guy look like a couch potato!

Paul travels literally thousands of miles in a matter of years- most of it either on foot or on board a ship. He starts at least six church communities in his day- probably more. He survives beatings and Roman prisons. And all along the way he's writing constantly- he contributes more to the New Testament than any other single writer.

I mean if there is anybody who would know it is lonely at the top- it has to be Paul.

And yet, as I was poring over text this morning over and over this week, I saw something I have absolutely never noticed. In the very first line, in what scholars call the salutation, which is just the "Hi, it's me" part, he writes, "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will

of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to [you] the church of God that is in Corinth.” I, Paul, an apostle and our brother Sosthenes write to you the church in Corinth. Now, Paul an apostle writing to the Corinthians, I get that. That’s what I expect. But Paul and Sosthenes? WHAT???

We’ve talked before about the fact that Paul most likely doesn’t actually write most of his letters by hand, but he uses a secretary known as an amanuensis. But still, the image I normally have in my head is Paul standing up, pacing, his faithful amanuensis hanging on his every word as he recites words that will eventually become scripture for millions. It’s Paul and Paul alone that I have in mind speaking. But not here. It’s not just Paul talking into the dictaphone anymore- no, it’s Paul hanging out with his good friend Sosthenes. And apparently, together they hash out this letter to the Corinthians.

Now, my first thought was how interesting is this? A loner like Paul including some guy in his writing process- this must be some guy. And I was prepared to tell you all that this moment was unique in Paul’s letters- and anything unique is normally really significant. And I was going to build the sermon around this guy Sosthenes. But then I thought, you know, before I tell you how unique this is, I’d probably just check, to make sure it doesn’t happen one other time. And this- this was a good idea.

With over half of Paul’s letters to communities, he gives others a by line with him. First Corinthians, Second Corinthians both cite Sosthenes. Phillipians he credits Timothy. And then First and Second Thessalonians he credits Timothy and this cat named Silvanus- also known as Silas in the Book of Acts. It turns out that most of the time Paul isn’t writing in some kind of hermetically sealed office- it’s just not just him and Jesus. It’s not lonely for him at the top- he’s there with friends.

But this is so counter to how we think of Paul. We don't think of Paul as being part of a community writing these letters together- we think of one guy. This is why we all say Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul's letter to the Philippians. It fits with how we think of leadership. But when you think about it, it makes perfect sense that Paul would act as he does.

His own model for leadership, Jesus- he was a community kind of leader, too, wasn't he. Near the very end of his life at the passover, John writes that Jesus took a towel that was wrapped around his waist, took a bowl of clean water, and bent down in front of Peter. He told him remove your shoes. And Peter, shocked, says absolutely not. There's no way you are going to wash my feet- it should be the other way around. Then, Jesus tells him, you haven't understood I think I've said and won't get all that is to come. I didn't come to be served- I came to serve.

It makes perfect sense- it's just not how we're used to thinking.

But we should. You may not think of yourself as a leader, but everyone of us is a leader in some part of our life. Whether you own a business, manage employees, teach students, care for patients, or run a household, or what have you, every single one of us in some capacity is a leader. And you know, if it's hard to step up and take responsibility when we've made a mistake as a leader- if there's anything harder than this it is giving others credit when they've done something great- especially when you could take it for yourself. It's so easy to think that if we give others credit, and lift up others up, then somehow it will take something away from us. Life if we say they are so great- it's like it somehow diminishes us.

But this is absolutely not true. It's absolutely not true- it's the opposite of true, actually. When you lift others up, when you see their accomplishments and sing their praises- no thinks less of you. No, all of you look stronger together.

PBS ran a series called Make Em laugh that was a kind of history of comedy in America. One of the most interesting moments to me was about Johnny Carson and what made him great. They said it wasn't his monologues, his signature golf swing, it wasn't his Carnac the magician. No, what made him great, and this is true if you go back and watch, was how he interviewed others and figured out ways to get them going to get them to shine. There are so many instances when Johnny, the leader, the star of the show, he would set up their joke, and then he would be the one laughing. He wasn't jealous of their laughter- he knew laughter was infectious. What made that show great was that he knew it wasn't all about him- it was about how all of them interacted together.

This is what Paul was like. He wasn't a one man show- a leader standing at the top of a lonely mountain. He was a man surrounded by community and who even managed to get over himself enough to give them credit. And it made people love him. It turns out Sosthenes was actually a pretty interesting guy. Most scholars agree that this Sosthenes is the same guy mentioned in the Book of Acts in the reading we heard for this morning. Apparently, when Paul traveled to Corinth, Sosthenes was a synagogue leader in town. And as always, wherever Paul went, trouble followed. After he spoke, the crowd in Corinth was looking for blood. They took Paul by the scruff of the neck and dragged him in front of Gallio, a Roman with the bad luck of being in charge of the town. And Gallio, with an almost audible sigh and rolling of his eyes tells

the mob that he really couldn't care less about their little theological controversy and refused to take their side and punish Paul. And we don't know whether Sosthenes had just been too kind to Paul or what, but with nowhere else to turn they take their anger out on him and beat the tar out of him. Now, a lot of people would have wised up at that point. They would have realized it's just safer to keep your head down and not get involved. But not Sosthenes- the next we hear of him he goes from the fire into the frying pan following Paul around, becoming beloved enough to be called brother, and then getting mentioned in not one letter but two. When you're like Paul, and you lift others up, and you give credit where credit is due- people don't just walk with you, they love you.

I've seen this first hand. In my last year in seminary Melissa and I went with friends to a Covenant Network conference in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh was only about 6 hours away, and my family lived there. So we all hit the turnpike and drove through the rolling hills of Pennsylvania. The conference itself was amazing. As always they had a great line up of speakers and worship leaders. Linda Loving was one of the preachers- she was fabulous and incredible. Her sermon title was "Lift a Finger". And she explained that the conference leaders had told her they needed a title several months out. One of her best friends wrote her about a week before the conference to tell her he had been on pins and needles for weeks now wondering just which finger she was referring to. That was kind of how the whole weekend went- just great people and great moments.

Well, the speaker I was most interested in hearing was the key note speaker- Tom Tewell. Tom Tewell was the pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, and he was always discussed

with a kind of awe. Our Seminary President once told us that if you were Tom Tewell you could walk into a church and make every change you wanted in the first year. BUT, if you were anybody else, you should suggest about one change a year.

My neighbor and my closest friend at Seminary, John Semmes, took the train up to Manhattan during the summer to work as one of Tom's interns. Only more incredible words- and John is about as catty as I am, so this is so small thing.

Well, before he spoke, I spotted Tom hanging around and made a beeline for him. And it was incredible. Seminarians are not exactly high on the totem pole in the church world- especially compared with the pastor of the largest Presbyterian church in New York City. But Tom took my hand in both of his and looked into my eyes. And when I told him my name he repeated it back- telling me how very good it was to meet me. And yes he knew John and loved him. And he told him how much he looked forward to getting to know me better and to feel free to contact him. And honestly, it was just a few minutes- but I felt absolutely bathed in welcome and kindness. I felt known and loved. Now, I'll admit to you that I have no idea whether this was just what guys like that do. You know, you don't get to that level without being able to schmooze. But it sure didn't feel like it to me.

So I was absolutely primed to hear him that night. The keynote speaker. He had the pride of place in the line up. He had the most time to talk. I was ready to hear just what this Tom Tewell was all about- to see what made him so great. Well, he got up to the pulpit. And he started talking. And it was great. But, I couldn't help but notice he didn't get up there alone. Up there with him was this younger guy with glasses. And just as I was wondering who IS this guy- Tom says that while he could go on and on, there really was a better person to talk to us that

night. He said that he brought his Elder, Doug Nave, with him, and that Doug was the one we really needed to hear.

And I'll tell you what- part of me was ready to feel very cheated and angry for about five seconds. I waited all that time to finally hear this guy, and then he brings some nobody and hands the floor over to HIM? But then I got it. I got it. I realized this was EXACTLY why people loved Tom Tewell. People didn't love him because he was an amazing speaker- which he was. They didn't love him because he raised millions upon millions of dollars- which he had. People didn't love him because he looked every bit the part of the big, important, downtown church pastor- which he did. They loved him, because he knew his ministry wasn't all about him. He knew when to speak and hold forth- and he knew when to hand the mic over to someone else. He knew how to give credit- how to bless others and build them up. This is what made him great. It's a moment I've never forgotten.

Beloved, none of us got to wherever we are this morning on our own. Every single one of us has been cared for, and supported. For some of us this is mainly through family. But for others it's more from the family you've had to find- through your work, your church, groups you're a part of. And some of us here this morning feel like you only the presence of God to count on most of the time.

But however we've been blessed, none of us got here alone. None of us. And this week, my prayer is that we take a page from Paul- open your eyes up and look around at all of the people around you who are part of your community- part of helping you be the person you are. And do what Paul did- lift them up. Build them up. Notice them when they help- and tell them

you appreciate them. Tell someone how grateful you are for them- how incredible their gifts are.

It won't diminish you. I promise. Just the opposite.

See, the thing about love- the more love you give away- the more you will find you have.

Amen.