

Title: "The Flow of Love"

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1 Corinthians 8:1-3

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Service Readings: Deut. 18:15-20, 1 Cor. 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28

God's love is seen in its clearest form on the cross. It is a love that came from heaven and rests upon us. And it is his love that he calls us to spread out into the world, by loving others and by growing disciples. But that flow stops when we turn inward and make decisions that benefit or please us. Instead, we are called to live selflessly in an effort to win others over to Jesus.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Imagine that you are a citizen of Corinth in the time of the early church. What would your life be like? What would your *day* be like? Undoubtably your hours would be spent making money or acquiring the daily necessities for your own life as well as for the lives of those who depended on you. If you were male, maybe you would be a fisherman or practice one of the trades of the day. And if you were female you would probably be caring for the house. But most likely there would be a task on your daily checklist that was identical to all the other citizens in the city. At some point during the day you would find yourself at the Peirene Fountain in the middle of the city to refresh your supply of water. Almost everyone would find themselves there regularly, maybe even daily, and for many of these citizens it was task that they welcomed, even looked forward to. This was the primary source of reliable freshwater for Corinth but it was the social center of the city. It is where people gathered and socialized, where they shared knowledge and news. And all that they collected: news, knowledge, and water, they brought home to be shared.

In Corinth there was also a Christian church, one that was experiencing problems. Much like the city fountain, this too was a place where people gathered and drew from the spiritual spring. What flowed from this, of course was not water, but God's grace. And it was pure. And it was reliable. And it was life-saving. But this fountain was also becoming polluted with puffed up knowledge and man-made rules and restrictions. It was dirtied with disagreements over doctrine and lifestyles. Divisive questions, opinions, and concerns over lawsuits, marriages, singleness, and food began to find its way into this church. The proclamation of God's grace was becoming mixed with these manmade contaminants, these manmade opinions and decisions and threatening to sicken all who gathered to refill their spiritual vessels.

Paul wanted to cleanse what was becoming muddy and polluted and so he wrote a letter. And it became a purifier of sorts. He wanted to remove everything that man was adding for none of it was necessary. What flowed from this fountain was complete in every way; it needed nothing added. For what flowed was God's grace that was earned by Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection. And what flowed was perfect and pure in every way. There was nothing more that was necessary.

And so he wrote:

8 Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ²If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

⁴Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹²Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

In our time today we too have a fountain. And from it flows the same grace that Paul was trying to protect in his time. And so this morning I ask you: Where in your life are you acting in a way that pollutes it for someone else? We may not be eating food sacrificed to idols, but there are plenty of things that we *are* doing that create stumbling blocks for the spiritually weak. For example, have you ever offered a sanitized version of your faith? Maybe you thought that a *real* Christian wouldn’t have this or that struggle. Or that a *real* Christian would *always* do this or that. Have you ever looked down on a so-called “new” Christian because they were just “too over-the-top for Jesus” and actually acting foolish and even.... dare you say it, *annoying*? None of those ring true for you? How about this? Have you ever found yourself talking about others, especially as it relates to a faith topic? I know of one church where the problem of God’s grace was to be found in the location of the sanctuary! The church decided to introduce an additional service that was *extremely* contemporary – you know, drums and dimmed lights – and host it in their gymnasium! “That isn’t *real* church,” some whispered, “that is for those Christians-in-name-only that just want to watch a weekly show.” You see? We can all point to examples like these. So, where are *you* contaminating what flows from this fountain?

This fountain. The church fountain. It has a name. And his name is Jesus. And from him springs the infinite love of God, made manifest in the sacrificial love of our Savior. His death on the cross, unfettered and overflowing, is the true source of God’s grace that flows from this fountain. And it is pure. And it is complete. And it is equally available to everyone. No one has more or less access than anyone else. No one has more or less right to God’s grace than anyone else. Through baptism, God calls us to this fountain where we gather around, thirsty and in need. We offer nothing, for we have nothing to offer. And yet we thirst; we thirst for his forgiveness and so we ask for just a drop upon our lips. And he responds, not with a drop, but with abundance. He overfills us with his forgiveness, his mercy, his grace. And then he sends us out into the world to splash upon others that which now overflows from within us.

But how quickly we seem to hoard his grace, trying desperately to save every drop for ourselves. Instead of serving others, we serve ourselves. Instead of forgiving others we hold it over them. Instead of limiting our freedoms for the sake of those who are weak, we exercise our freedom and create stumbling blocks for them to trip over. But why do we do this? We are baptized! We are forgiven! We have drank from God's fountain! Yet we still sin. And so we still thirst.

But God's fountain continues to be made available to us. Through his word, simple bread and wine become the true body and blood of Jesus our Savior. And it flows freely from this fountain to us as we gather around his table. His forgiveness overfills us once again. And once again he sends us out into the world to splash upon others that which now overflows from within is. We are to selflessly serve others by removing anything that could be a stumbling block for those who are thirsting for God's grace. We are to set aside our own ambitions and exchange them for the ambitions of God.

The people of Corinth understood the importance of the Peirene Fountain for their physical wellbeing, but they were beginning to forget about the importance of the spiritual fountain, and in doing so they were causing many to remain spiritually thirsty and even cut off from the grace that flowed from it. My prayer today is that you do not do the same. And so I challenge you with this: find where you are constructing a stumbling block for others and tear it down. Pave a path for them instead; a path that will lead them directly to the fountain of Jesus where they can drink from the grace that flows from it and where they too can be overfilled with the forgiveness and mercy that offers.

Let us pray.

Almighty God,
Your grace is a torrent, washing over us in the quiet of our hearts and the thunder of your actions. Help us to receive it not passively, but actively, letting it overflow into the world through acts of love and service. May our lives be a testament to your love, a language spoken in deeds, not just words.
In Jesus' name, Amen.