

**Sunday Sermon**  
**June 17, 2018**  
**II Corinthians 6:1-13**  
**“A Plea From the Heart”**

### Introduction

“I’m speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection,” the Apostle Paul writes. “Open up your hearts, so that the grace of God is not in vain.”

Let me tell you this morning about four churches:

### The First Church

The first church was one to which my husband was called as pastor. When Bill met with the Pastor Nominating Committee, they told him they were looking for a pastor who could help them renovate and refurbish their church buildings. When he arrived, he saw what they were talking about. The only upgrade that had been made to the church buildings since 1948 was carpeting in the sanctuary.

And that carpet was really old—and ugly. It was a late 1960s shag carpet the color of green pea soup. Bill was curious about how that color was picked for sanctuary carpet. What he learned was that some 30 years earlier, a man in the church had decided that the sanctuary needed carpeting, so he went out, found the best deal he could find on carpet, and had it installed.

And since people felt they should be polite and nice, especially in church, nobody said anything to the man about it. But to each other they said, “Isn’t this carpet hideous?”

So Bill began the process of trying to help the church renovate their buildings. First they remodeled the bathrooms. Then they put in dropped ceilings in the education building. Then came time to work on the sanctuary.

When they pulled out the pea soup carpet they found that the flooring in the sanctuary was made with quarter-sawn pine, high-grade flooring. It was a beautiful floor. So Bill said, “Let’s not cover this up. Let’s refinish it and use it.” The Director of Music, of course, was thrilled.

But others were not. “We cannot do that,” some said. “We have always had carpet in the sanctuary.”

“Well, I am pretty sure not always,” my husband said, “at least not for the first 80 years.” “Well, we have had carpet as long as we can remember,” they said, “and if we take it out, our feet will get cold, and we may slip and fall.”

So to Bill’s disappointment, it was decided to put carpet back in the sanctuary. Then came the challenge of choosing a color. Turned out, Bill says, there was a member who offered to donate the carpet and pay for the installation. Only he wanted to pick the color, and he wanted Presbyterian blue carpet, a medium shade of blue about the shade of our pew bibles.

But some of the people said, “No, we have always had green carpet. It has to be green.”

Then others said, “No, we think it should be cathedral red, the color in most sanctuaries.” And, Bill says, the congregation spent a great deal of energy going back and forth, back and forth about the color of the carpet.

Really? Bill thought. All this over the color of the carpet? Bill and that church ended up journeying together for eight years. And over that time, the congregation came to see there are things bigger to confront than the color of carpet. They came to realize that being the church in the world is what is really important, and they began to open their hearts.

### The Second Church

The second church is the church of Corinth to which the Apostle Paul is writing. In that Corinthian church, there were divisions over what to believe, over how to live, over how to worship, over who was their leader. Some claimed to follow Peter, or Cephas, as he was called. Some claimed to follow Apollos, a great Greek orator. And some claimed to follow Paul.

And Paul says, “Really folks? You are arguing about who is the best preacher instead of focusing on the mission of Christ in the world? Stop dividing yourselves over things that are not important.

Find ways around your differences, be reconciled to one another, and learn what it means to be the body of Christ in the world. Open your hearts so that the grace of God is not in vain. Because, Paul says, if you do not love others you are rendering God’s grace in vain.

Perhaps no message is more needed today in these divided, hyper-partisan times. Too much is at stake these days for the church to look no different from the rest of the world.

Some of us imagine that the church of Jesus Christ has national boundaries. Or racial boundaries. Or ethnic boundaries, or even denominational boundaries. But it does not. The church of Jesus Christ is all of us.

So before we start lobbing accusations at one another, before we start knocking each other around in the same rough-and-tumble spirit that is animating our nation, we need to take a long, hard look at our Lord and ask if by our actions and words, we are rendering vain the grace of God in our midst. (see note)

### The Third Church

The third church is Emanuel AME, Charleston, SC. This week marked the third anniversary of the killing of nine brothers and sisters in Christ by a white supremacist as they were gathered for bible study.

That week after the shooter was arrested, we watched in amazement as family members spoke at his court appearance. We expected angry, hateful responses. We

were stunned when we heard the words, “I forgive you. May God have mercy on your soul.” “Hate won’t win,” one girl said. “My grandfather and the others died at the hands of hate. Everyone’s plea for your soul is proof they lived in love and their legacies live in love.”

“It isn’t all positive,” the current pastor Rev. Eric Manning admits. “Every once in a while,” he says, “it becomes difficult to think, even to stand, in this house of worship given the sheer weight of what happened.”

Arthur Hurd, whose wife was killed, was among those who did not share words of forgiveness in the aftermath as the others did. He says he is still not there. He feels he is moving in that direction, and yet some days, he says, it feels like trying to push a piano up a flight of stairs. Pastor Manning agrees, “There are still days where we stop and we have to step back, but,” Manning says, “there is always hope.” For love, for reconciliation.

### The Fourth Church

We come to the fourth church, and we are that church. The body of Christ today, in the world, in this community. In the past weeks, we have seen children taken from parents who were trying to secure a safer life for them in this country. This week we opened our church to allow young women whose ancestors immigrated from some of those same Central American countries to give them the opportunity through the Sweet and Savory Delights Bakery to learn skills and earn scholarship money toward furthering their education and bettering their futures.

I’m speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection,” Paul writes, “Open up your hearts, so that the grace of God is not in vain.” Do not focus on things not important. Now is the day of salvation. Now is the time to exhibit faithfulness, not simply through words, but through action. Now is the time to live as witnesses of God's new creation. Open up your hearts.

### Prayer

Father forgive us when we fall short in the kingdom of God. You call on us to love one another as Christ as loved us. Yet we speak words of hatred, we despise and reject each other, we label, we call each other names. Help us, O God. Cleanse our hearts and make us new. For the sake of our Lord’s kingdom on earth. Amen.

Note: Scott Hoezee, The Center for Excellence in Preaching, Stan Mast, resources from Calvin Theological Seminary: Comments & Observations, Textual Points, illustration ideas, 2015.  
[http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-7b-2/?type=lectionary\\_epistle](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-7b-2/?type=lectionary_epistle)