“A Letter to the Covenanters”

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Ephesians 3:14-21

Sarah Wolf

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After I presided over my final communion at Baldwin Park last week and pretty much cried through the whole thing, I went to John’s office to propose a deal. I told him I’d write the sermon for today if he would deliver it so that I could hide behind the pulpit.

He did not accept my proposal, obviously.  But after some negotiations, we decided that I would preach and he would read the Scripture passages.

(Let me tell you that it can be frustrating when your Head of Staff was a lawyer in his former life as you will never win when negotiations are necessary.)

So here I am, preaching for the last time.

What to preach on?

I went to the lectionary passages for today.

They are as follows:

Psalm 79 - How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?

Hmmm, not for today.

Amos 8 - Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land…

That won’t work either.

Luke 16 - No slave can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Would rather not tackle that today.

And finally, Jeremiah 8: My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.

A little too on the nose there…eh, Holy Spirit?

In despair, I went to good old Facebook. I have been in a small group over the past few months for young clergy women discerning new calls. It has been an incredibly helpful group as many of these other women are having the same struggles that I’ve been having the past few months — the struggle between loving a current call and yet feeling called to a new one.

When I turned to this group last week, I searched “final sermon” and found a post in which someone crafted their own letter to their congregation in the style of Paul’s writings in the New Testament. Upon reading that, I immediately knew that this was how I wanted to finish my time in this pulpit.

Before I begin, we should talk about the contexts and the general structure of Pauline letters.

Whenever we read one of Paul’s letters, we should remember just that — they are letters. We are reading someone else’s mail. They are written for a specific reason — for encouragement, for guidance, even for a little bit of chastisement. They are written to answer specific questions that the churches have about how they should worship, how they should govern themselves, etc. While we can certainly find good guidance and advice for our own congregation, we should always keep that in mind.

As letters written during the early days of the Christian Church, they also follow a format that was familiar to that time that may seem a little different to us. These are not the “friendly letter” formats that we learn in grade school with a “Dear So and So” and the standard three paragraph body, and the “Sincerely, Sarah” at the end. There’s a bit more formality to them.

I recently saw an image floating around the internet of what appears to be a pastor at a fairly large church with a slide on a screen behind him that is titled “General Pauline Letter Outline.”

Underneath the title are the five components of most of the letters of Paul. They are:

1. Grace…as in…Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord Jesus Christ.
2. I thank God for you.
3. Hold fast to the gospel.
4. For the love of everything holy, stop being stupid.
5. Timothy says hi.

I will craft my letter to you in roughly the same way, with a few changes, of course. And please don’t spend the next few minutes worried about #4. I would never tell you that you were being stupid.  But I do want to model my letter after these components and so, without further ado, I present…Sarah’s letter to the good people of Covenant.

1. Grace:

Sarah, called to be a pastor for Christ Jesus by the will of God, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the discernment of the APNC four years ago, to the church of Covenant that is in Staunton, to those who consider it their congregation, who, with all other congregations throughout time and space have been called together to serve the Lord, with gratitude, imagination, and joy.  Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. I thank God for you:

And before I dive into this, I want to do a mini Greek lesson. When Paul says, “I thank God for you,” he is actually saying, “I thank God for y’all.” Y’all. One of my favorite words. So inclusive. John, I encourage you to try it out.

I give thanks to my God always for all y’all. Every single one of you. For the ways in which you respond to God’s call to love and serve God **daily**. For the many times you’ve been willing to try something new; for your sense of humor; for the times our vestibule is filled with donations for projects in Staunton and beyond; for the times you’ve come together to celebrate new births and new parents and to surround grieving friends and family at the end of a beloved life.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he says that they have been enriched in Christ, in speech and knowledge of every kind, so that they are not lacking in any spiritual gift. I believe this to be true of you as well, Covenant. This is a congregation with gifts — gifts for service, for teaching, for listening, for praying, for leading. You have been enriched in Christ. Use those gifts. Share them with each other and with the community.

1. Hold fast to the gospel:

In its simplest terms, “gospel” literally means “Good news.” When we talk about this good news, we speak about the good news of who Jesus was and what he did.

And what is the good news that we know? That the love of God in Jesus Christ is extended to every single person in creation. While we may appear to be a pretty homogenous bunch here at Covenant, there is a whole world beyond these walls filled with folks who look, believe, and love differently than we might. And God loves them exactly as much as God loves us. That knowledge — that God loves them just as much as us — should inform our ministry as we consider how we might respond to Christ’s call to feed his sheep, especially in light of today’s tendency to use children of God as political props. God loves every single person. Full stop.

1. For the love of everything holy, stop being stupid:

This is the one that I’m struggling the most with when it comes to the traditional Pauline format for his letters. Because…I don’t feel like I need to tell you that. If anything, I should say, “For the love of everything holy, *keep doing these good things.”*

I *could*spend this time of my letter explaining (yet again) why having name tags in worship has theological merits because God claims us and calls us by name and so we should strive to do the same as a way of honoring each person as a beloved child of God. I *could* spend my time talking about nametag. I *could*. But I won’t. ;)

Instead, I will carefully walk the line of speaking honestly with you about the need for everyone to be active participants in the Kingdom of God.

If there’s one theme that I’ve felt myself returning to time and time again in my sermons here, it’s that the same Jesus Christ who called the disciples and sent the apostles and sent his Holy Spirit to anoint the folks gathered at Pentecost so that they might spread Christ’s Church to the ends of the earth is the same Jesus Christ who calls us and sends us and sends the Holy Spirit to us today.

It is not enough that we gather in worship and remember the saving acts of God through Jesus Christ as told to us in the Bible. We also need to be sent out — to continue to do the work to which Christ has called us — whether that’s within our own congregation or in Staunton or the Valley or Virginia or world.

This congregation is wonderful at stepping up to answer a call for donations for food, hygiene products, or money. But as we say each week before we collect the offering, God has blessed us not only through our financial abilities, but also through our time and talents. Time is a precious commodity these days and it seems harder and harder to find it between our travels and activities. But we need you. Especially as Laura has moved back into classroom teaching and I move to Durham. We need you. Our children and youth need you.

One of my pet peeves is when people look at children and youth and say, “They are the future of the Church.” No. They are the “now.” We are not the same church without them. If you’ve got the time, please consider spending it with them during Sunday school or Covenant Kids or whenever we offer special programs for them.  Even if you feel that is not your particular gift, give up an hour of your time to one of these programs. Until a new associate pastor or whatever the next position will be, it is so important that you offer your time if you’ve got some.

Which brings me to…5. Timothy says hi:

I want to flip this to….say hi to Timothy.

During Paul’s ministry to the early churches, Timothy was a disciple of Paul’s and eventually a traveling companion and coworker. Timothy was a colleague of Paul’s and Paul expected the churches to welcome Timothy as they welcome Paul and to listen to him as Paul’s disciple and coworker.

So, dear Covenant, say hi to Timothy. Whoever steps into this pulpit next, is a colleague and coworker of John and me, for we believe as Presbyterians that we are a connectional church. Trust that whoever is called here next has been nudged by the same Holy Spirit who nudged me to check my junk mail folder almost five years ago. Know that they won’t be me. And that’s good! God has given them a unique set of gifts that God has been preparing Covenant to receive and vice versa. Change can be scary, but change can also be very good.

Whenever the new person comes, welcome them the way you welcomed me. Embrace their favorite quirky Bible stories as you have embraced mine. Love on them the way you have loved on me.

As Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, I pray that if you should doubt the road ahead, the process of finding a new person for Covenant, I pray that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through Christ’s spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

These things take time. And it’s good to take that time to trust and to pray and to know that God is with you here in Staunton and with me in Durham and is already at work laying the groundwork for the next chapter in Covenant’s life.

Now to God who by the power at work within [Covenant] is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we all can ask or imagine, to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

All praise be to God.

Amen.