

The Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Hosea 2:16-20
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is kind and merciful.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 3:1-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	He willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 2:18-22

The 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B continues the Church's journey through Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, with a very important passage from Chapter 3 on Paul's self understanding, as what he calls a minister of the New Covenant. So let's take a look at the reading for today and ask ourselves, what exactly is new about the New Covenant, and what does this mean for who Paul is and who we are in Christ? 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 says this:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God, who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.¹

Okay, so if you recall here, Paul is writing this letter to the church at Corinth and he has a history, a relationship with them. This is his second epistle, and he is in

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

both the 1st and the 2nd epistle, dealing with, you know, some criticisms that people have levied against him in the church at Corinth, or at least others who are influencing the Corinthians have levied them against Paul. So there's a little bit of an *apologia*, there's a little bit of a defense of himself built into these early chapters of 2 Corinthians. And so in this case, Paul is talking about his Apostolic authority and he says, "are we beginning to commend ourselves again?" Because he doesn't like self commendation, right, having to speak for himself. And then he says something interesting, he says, "do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?" Here Paul is actually using a technical term to refer to certain epistles that were used in the Greco Roman world that would be given to an emissary or a representative of some higher authority in order to recommend them to someone else. So, for example, if you want an example from Paul's own epistles of this, if you go back to the Letter to the Romans, when Paul sends the epistle to the Roman church, with whom remember, he doesn't have any previous relationship, so this is kind of different than the Corinthians. He sends it with a letter carrier and her name is Phoebe. So in Roman 16:1-2 we read:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cen'chre-ae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well.

So you'll notice there, Phoebe is not only carrying the letter on Paul's behalf, but he is commending her to the church at Rome, to be received, to be welcomed, for them to show hospitality to her because she's been a co-worker with Paul. She's helped him in his work as well as others in their ministry. Okay, so I'd asked that we please not be too distracted by the fact that Paul refers to Phoebe as a deaconess. *Diakonos* is the Greek word there. It's sometimes translated minister or servant. That's a whole topic in itself. There are lots of books on deaconesses in the early Church that you could look into if you want to dive into that. The short short version, I mean the very short version, is that women who are called deaconesses in the early Church, as far as the earliest evidence outside the Bible that we have suggests, shows that they acted as what we would call an extraordinary minister of baptism. So they were deputed in order to baptize women in particular, because baptisms were done in the early Church without clothing, or at least with lesser clothing that would ordinarily be deemed appropriate in any other context. It was fitting that women would be deputed to be the extraordinary ministers of baptism for pagan converts to Christianity, for example. So women who did that kind of thing were called *diakonoi*. They were

called deaconesses or ministers.

That's a side note, but again, there are several books on this you could look into. For our purposes here, the point is that Phoebe, who is evidently a *diakonos*, a deacon, minister or servant (you can translate it all three ways) in the church at Cen'chre-ae, is being commended by Paul to the church at Rome as he sends her with his letter to the Romans. So that letter of recommendation, thankfully, actually, especially if you've gone to university, is something we do today. So we are kind of familiar with the idea. If you are applying for a graduate school or university, you'll have someone with more authority than you write a letter of recommendation on your behalf in order to commend you to whoever or whatever group or institution you are attempting to enter, or you're hoping will receive you in some way, shape, or form. So Paul here is using the same language to talk about himself with the church at Corinth if we go back to the reading for today. So Paul says:

...do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?

Well, no. He already has a relationship established with the church at Corinth, unlike the church at Rome. So he says:

You yourselves...

He takes the image and he says:

You yourselves...

Meaning you Corinthians

...are our letter of recommendation.

But this letter has been

written on your hearts...[to] show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

So it's very interesting here, Paul takes the idea of a letter of recommendation and says not only do I not need one, we already have a relationship, but you

yourselves are kind of my living letter of recommendation. You are the ones who testify to the grace of God that's working through me and in me as an Apostle of Christ, because you yourselves have become a letter from Christ that has been written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on your hearts. So this is a fascinating image where Paul is basically using a metaphor for the Corinthians that's different than a lot of the other metaphors we're familiar with from Paul. So Paul will frequently use metaphors to describe the mystery of the Church, right? So he'll talk about the Church as the Body of Christ, the Mystical Body of Christ. Or he'll describe the Church in Ephesians 5 as the Bride of Christ, or Christ as the Bridegroom, and the Church is the Bride. And those are pretty common and familiar. He will also use images of a building, for example, like the Church is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Here though, it's the only time I know of that he does it, but it's a very interesting one. It's the church as a living letter, as if Christ himself is writing certain words, and each of the Corinthians are part of this letter that Christ is authoring, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to be sent out, apparently to the world, in the sense of proclaiming the Gospel, right?

It's a letter written from Christ, delivered by Paul as the Apostle. And the material on the letter are the hearts of the Corinthians themselves. Because in antiquity, right? If you're going to write a letter, you know, we can just type it into a phone, or into a keyboard on a computer. But in antiquity, if you had to write a letter, you had to have materials. You had to have parchment of some kind, whether it was papyrus or made from the skin of an animal, and you had to have ink, right, both of which took time and effort and money to acquire. You also had to have the skill to even learn how to write with ink on parchment or on vellum or whatever it might be, like papyri. And so Paul is comparing the materials of composing a letter to the people who are in the church at Corinth. So, just kind of an interesting and beautiful image there that I don't think we often think of. In other words, that Christ continues to speak not just to the Church through the scriptures, or through the preaching of the Apostles, like Paul. He also speaks through the members of the Church to the world. They are living letters of Christ. Each person is kind of part of the tapestry of this missive that God is sending to the world through his Apostles. This letter from Christ. So anyway, just something worth meditating on. A very beautiful and powerful image.

And it's in that context that Paul, who was never one to miss an opportunity to mix metaphors or allude to the Old Testament all at the same time, does just that when he says that the letter that has been written by Christ was written:

not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

In those two passages, tablets of stone and tablets of human hearts, Paul is alluding to two passages in Jewish scripture. The first one, of course, the two tablets of stone in the book of Exodus 24, when God — also Exodus 19, when God comes down and in Exodus 20 gives the Ten Commandments — but in Exodus 24 when God has given the Decalogue, Moses is commanded to write down the words of God on the tablets of stone. You can see Exodus 24:12, as well as 31:18. If you look, I'll just go back there for a second since Paul's alluding to it. You can at least see it. In Exodus 24:12, God says to Moses:

Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tables of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.

And then again in Exodus 31:18, one of the things that makes the Ten Commandments unique, as it says:

And he gave to Moses, when he had made an end of speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.

Okay, so what's unique about the Decalogue is there are all kinds of laws in the books of Moses, but these ten are written with the finger of God. They're authored by God in a unique way. Paul here is alluding to the Decalogue as having been written by God on tablets of stone in Exodus 24, but now he applies it to the image of the human hearts of the Corinthians and he says now it's being written on human hearts. So the image here is that Christ himself is writing this letter with his finger, right? Like with the finger of God. But now it's being etched into the hearts of the Corinthians. And there, with that image of the heart, Paul's alluding to a second Old Testament passage, and that is Jeremiah 31, which is easily the most important passage for this particular text, because it's the prophecy of the New Covenant in the Old Testament. There are several prophecies in the books of Ezekiel and elsewhere that speak of a future covenant or an everlasting covenant, but they don't necessarily use the explicit language of a new covenant. Jeremiah 31 does, and he says that it will be written on the human heart. So here's where Paul is getting this image from Jeremiah 31:31:

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new

covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Okay. It is really hard to overestimate the importance of this passage for grasping the theology of St. Paul. You cannot understand the theology of St. Paul unless you understand that he sees himself as a minister of the New Covenant, right? That he is not just a converted Pharisee, he's not just a follower of Jesus, he's a minister of the New Covenant, which fulfills the prophecy of Jeremiah 31. In fact, this is so important, I actually wrote a book, along with my good friends Michael Barber and John Kincaid, called *Paul, a New Covenant Jew: Rethinking Pauline Theology*. One of the things we try to show in the book is that if you look at all of Paul's theology through the lens of the fact that he is a Jew, but he's not just any kind of Jew, he's a New Covenant Jew, then all of the apparent theological conundrums that often face readers of Paul begin to make sense. Because the paradox of Paul is, on the one hand, is deeply, deeply Jewish, and on the other hand, he's saying and doing things that are apparently discontinuous with early Judaism and with the Old Covenant. Like saying, you know, you don't have to be circumcised in order to be justified. That is one example. Any saying:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

You know, there are certain aspects of Paul's theology that can be very difficult to understand if you don't grasp the fact that he sees himself not as a minister of the Old Covenant, of Sinai, which is going to be ratified with the blood of bulls and goats in the Temple in Jerusalem, but with the New Vovenant, which is going to be ratified with the blood of a man, with the blood of Christ, and then celebrated in something radically different, which is going to be the Lord's Supper itself, that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians, for example. So Paul's deeply Jewish, but he's also doing and saying things that would have been

extraordinary and unprecedented among Jews of his day, like celebrating the Lord's Supper and talking about the body and blood of this man from Nazareth and identifying it with the Passover meal, for example.

Okay, that's a whole other story to get into, but what I want to show you here is that if you look at Jeremiah 31, notice a few things about this prophecy. Number one, it's not just any covenant, it's a new covenant. Number two, it's going to be different than the covenant with Israel at Sinai. That's really crucial. God says it will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers. The new things that Paul does in the New covenant are not just capricious innovations that Paul adopts in order to adapt the religion of Judaism to Gentiles in order to practically bring Gentiles in. No, the idea that there's going to be a new covenant that's different than the old covenant is an Old Testament teaching, not a New Testament innovation. The question is just whether this Jesus of Nazareth actually inaugurates the New Covenant. Third, unlike the Old Covenant, which is written on tablets of the Decalogue, this New Covenant law, Jeremiah himself says, or the Lord says through Jeremiah, will be written upon their hearts. So there's some kind of interiority to the New Covenant that's different than the Old Covenant. It's written on human hearts rather than on stone, and God says "I'm going to put my law within them." And this, fourth and finally, this new covenant is also going to be tied to intimacy with God, so that each person will be able to say "I know the Lord", and tied to the forgiveness of sins, "I will forgive their iniquity and their sin." So, "I will remember their sin no more." This New Covenant is going to be different. It's going to be interior. It's going to be animated and performed by God himself inside the human heart, and it's going to be tied to the forgiveness of sins and a new kind of knowledge of God.

So with all that in mind about Jeremiah 31, let's turn back to 2 Corinthians 3. If you look, I have a chart here to kind of layout further differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant in 2 Corinthians 3 and in Paul's language and understanding. There are a series of contrasts that Paul gives in the wider context of 2 Corinthians 3 that aren't in the lectionary today but will help you understand, again, the differences between the Old and New Covenant. So if you look on the chart, according to Paul, the Old Covenant is tied to the letter. The Greek word there is *gramma*. We get the word grammar from that in English, whereas the New Covenant is the covenant of the Spirit. It's tied to the spirit, *pneuma* in Greek. The Old Covenant, Paul will go on to say, is a ministry of death, whereas the New Covenant is a ministry of the Spirit. The Old Covenant is written on tablets of stone, whereas the New Covenant is written on tablets of human hearts. The Old Covenant, and this is important, had splendor. It is

splendid. It has beauty and power. But the New Covenant, as Paul said, must far exceed it in splendor. Let me pause here for a second. I just want to emphasize that one, because notice the difference between this and, say, a kind of Marcionite approach to the Old Testament, that would see the Old Testament as evil or wicked or coming from a different God or something like that. No, Paul does not denigrate the Old Covenant, right? It has its own splendor. But according to Paul, that splendor has been surpassed by the splendor of the New Covenant.

So it's an understanding of the relationship between the old and new in which the old is good but the new is better, not that the old is bad and the new is good. Those are two different ways of approaching things, right? And that's a simplified understanding of it, but at least it gives you an idea of what Paul's talking about here. Okay, back to the chart. The Old Covenant, Paul talks about it as a ministry of condemnation. Think here, for example, if certain laws are broken, you'd be condemned, you could be put to death, like that's what it means by ministry of death. Whereas the New Covenant is a ministry of justification. And then finally, Paul describes the Old Covenant as having faded away and the New Covenant as permanent. And you can look at the verses there on the chart if you want to dig into that. It's all from 2 Corinthians 3. It's all in the fuller context of this chapter, which the Church itself doesn't give to us, but at least it gives a quote from it and you can kind of see the full effect of this. If you want, with that chart in mind, let us just read the next few verses in 2 Corinthians 3 and you will hear how this plays out in Paul's own theology. He says this, 2 Corinthians 3:7:

Now if the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such splendor that the Israelites could not look at Moses' face because of its brightness, fading as this was, will not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor? For if there was splendor in the dispensation of condemnation, the dispensation of righteousness [or justification] must far exceed it in splendor. Indeed, in this case, what once had splendor has come to have no splendor at all, because of the splendor that surpasses it. For if what faded away came with splendor, what is permanent must have much more splendor. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their

minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding^[b] the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Okay, now we could do a whole series of talks just on all those verses. They're very jam-packed. But for our purposes here, I just want to emphasize that Paul sees himself as a minister of the New Covenant who really is doing something novel, in the sense of new, in the kind of activity that he's engaged in, the kind of ministry he's engaged in with the Corinthians. Not because he's some kind of innovator, but because he sees himself and he sees Christ, ultimately, as fulfilling the prophecy of the New Covenant, that goes back to the book of Jeremiah. And you almost hear Paul here describing his own conversion as one in which when he turns to the Lord, as he says, when a person turns to the Lord, the veil over the eyes is lifted and a person is able to read the Old Covenant now in the light of the Spirit, and to see that fulfillment in Christ through the New Covenant. So, very powerful, very important passage from from St. Paul. Again, if you want to look into it a little bit more, you can check out our book on St. Paul entitled *Paul, a New Covenant Jew*, because it's actually stunning to me how many apparent difficulties and contradictions in Paul begin to just become clear if you will, just look at everything he's saying through the lens of him seeing himself as a Jew, right? So rooted in the Old Testament, rooted in the Scriptures, rooted in the traditions of his people, but as a Jew of the New covenant, as a New Covenant Jew, who recognizes that some things have been fulfilled, and because they've been fulfilled, certain things are going to be different. Other things are going to pass away and other things are going to take their place as part of this New Covenant spoken of in the book of Jeremiah.

All right, so with that in mind, we will just close here with a quote from one of the early Church Fathers, St. John Chrysostom, who wrote a beautiful series of homilies on 2 Corinthians. And he makes this distinction between the Old and New Covenants. Because people often wonder, what is *new* about the New Covenant? How do we how do we sum that up? Why does God add something new, or why does God inaugurate a new dispensation? And this is what St. John Chrysostom says:

The law was spiritual, but it did not bestow the Spirit. Moses had letters but not the Spirit, whereas we have been entrusted with the giving of the Spirit. Whence also in further completion of this contrast, he says, "For

the letter kills, but the spirit giveth life.” ...And what does this mean? In the Law, he that has sin is punished; here, he that has sins comes and is baptized and is made righteous, and being made righteous, he lives, being delivered from the death of sin. The Law, if it lay hold on a murderer, puts him to death; the Gospel, if it lay hold on a murderer, enlightens him and gives him life. And why do I instance a murderer? The Law laid hold on one that gathered sticks on a Sabbath day, and stoned him. (Num 15:32, 36) This is the meaning of, “the letter kills.”

This is the meaning of the letter kills. In other words, when Paul says the letter kills, he's talking about the penalties of physical death that were part of the Old Covenant, Chrysostom continues:

The Gospel takes hold on thousands of homicides and robbers, and baptizing delivers them from their former vices. This is the meaning of, “the Spirit giveth life.”²

Powerful images there. What Chrysostom is interpreting Paul to say is that the law was spiritual. In other words, inspired by the Spirit, animated by the spirit, but it doesn't bestow the gift of the Holy Spirit, that interior gift of the Holy Spirit that the Apostles themselves are going to receive at Pentecost and that people as members of the New Covenant will receive in their baptism, which actually has the power to transform them. And he gives the most extreme case, to transform someone who's a murderer into someone who's living a totally new life in Christ. So the interior and animating power of the Holy Spirit is really, according to Chrysostom following on Paul, what is ultimately new about the New Covenant.

² Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 6.2; in *NPNF1* 12:307