

Week 1 after Pentecost (June 11): 2 Cor 13:11-13

Second Corinthians 13 draws to a close a very sharply worded letter. Paul has been on the defense because of charges against him and he has been attacking those who have stirred up the Corinthians. The attacks have been personal as well as aimed at his position as the apostle to the Corinthians. He has made threats and pleaded with them. Even in this chapter he has told them that if they persist in this behavior, he will come with the power of God to set things in order. Yet within this fight, Paul continually argues that he has taken on hardship and weakness for their sake. He has patterned his life after the example of Jesus who put the good of others above his own good so much that he died for others. Paul says he takes on difficulties to strengthen them, but that he will do what is necessary to build them up.

It is after that final threat that this farewell appears. Paul calls them to live in love and peace because God is the God of love and peace. The guide for all Christian behavior is the character of God. Christians are to be loving because God is loving; Christians are to pursue peace because God is peace-seeking; Christians are to pursue justice (though that is not mentioned here) because God is just. These (and other) characteristics of God are to guide how we behave in the church and how we interact with the world around us.

As this letter demonstrates, being loving and seeking peace can sometimes demand opposing those things that oppose the will of God. When Paul saw a harmful way of understanding the Christian life taking hold at Corinth, he stood up firmly against it. He made the most powerful arguments he could muster and he took actions to reject those beliefs and what they led to in people's lives. He did not take this course just because he was angry (though he seems to have been angry). He took strong action against those who spoke in ways that harmed people and led people to act unjustly for two important reasons. The first is that it was the only course open to those who would reflect the character of God and the example of Jesus in their lives. Reflecting the character of God means that Christians must oppose those ideas and actions that violate God's character and so God's will. The second reason is that even using this ardent and extreme language that Paul uses to fight those who are harming the Corinthians is what had to be done for the good of the Corinthians. In the verse that precedes our reading Paul says he has this power of God for building them up not tearing them down. Even the harsh things Paul says to the Corinthians themselves had this goal of helping them grow in the faith. Reflecting the love of God demanded opposing views and actions that violate who God is.

While all of 2 Corinthians is addressed to church members, the demand that we act in accord with the character of God extends to all aspects of our lives. The call to shape our lives in this way should move us to speak of and act for the will of God in all arenas. Expressing that love and seeking that peace of God can demand vehement rejection of what we see around us. Such staunch resistance may not seem like expressions of love and searching for peace, but it can be if we constantly shape what we do and what we say with the character of God. Then we can know that we are wielding God's power for the ultimate good even of those we oppose by trying to help them see God's will.