

Church Is Basically One Big Group Project

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 September 2026

Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0:00] At just about this time of year, 22 years ago, I found myself in a precarious situation.

I had just begun graduate school at American University. I had just moved from my home state of North Carolina to Washington, D.C. Oh, yes, hallelujah, okay, yes, I wasn't ready. Yes. And I was still kind of getting used to being here. It was the first time I'd ever had my own apartment.

I was getting used to taking the metro, and, you know, I was getting used to those occasions when I would be walking by alleys, and I would see rats darting across this unmistakable omen that I was at a different place, that I had moved to a big city. And looking back now, I completely realized that I had no idea what I was getting into. But I did have a little bit. I started to have a little bit of a sense of what I was up against, at least in my academic classes. And that happened because in that first semester, in two of my three classes, the professors opened the year by assigning group projects. Oh, oh, now, okay, I see that. That's it right there. If you've ever been a student in a classroom in many places in the world, you are likely to know the frustration of a group project.

On the face of it, it seems like it's going to be fun. You're no longer individually responsible for the finished product. If you're a kid, there might be these opportunities to visit the world of another student's home. And when you get older, you might get to have late night brainstorming sessions over pizza that's interrupted with gossip about whatever's going on on campus. But what almost always happens in reality? More often than not, group projects are experiences of stress. Because you alone don't have control over the final product. The effort you put in is often extremely uneven, with one or two people doing most of the work. You get paired with sometimes annoying people, or with people who go missing. You know, yep. Well, that September, I found myself in this precarious situation of having these two group projects on my plate. In the first class, I was paired with this really great guy, really lovely human, and somebody who would become my friend, honestly, throughout grad school. But I did not realize that he was having just some personal challenges and to cope. He essentially disappeared from campus life.

And I ended up doing the entire project by myself. He later resurfaced and profusely apologized, and it, but it did, he kind of scarred me. I was like, okay, is this what graduate school is going to be?

[3:24] And then at the same time, when it came to that other group project, I was developing more than friendly feelings for, of course, a straight woman in my group. And instead of a simple friendship emerging, as it did with my other partner, this group project would initiate me into the ups and downs of unrequited love for about the next five years of my life.

Now, as we begin a new sermon series today on the book or the letter to the Corinthians, the book of first Corinthians, I just want to say out loud what we probably have all felt at one time or another in our hearts. Church can often feel like a group project. It can feel precarious, like being among this random collection of people who just refuse to act the way you want them to.

They just, they just won't act right. It's like being in a community whose output you can't quality control. Right at the outset of this sermon series, I want to be clear that this is the exact experience that the apostle Paul is addressing as he writes the church of Corinth. An experience of the beauty and precarity, which is just a big word for the big feeling of vulnerability.

That is found in every single church. This year as a church, we've been on a journey. We've been circling the basic theme of re-enchantment.

Using the book of Jeremiah way back in January, we asked how to remain faithful in seasons of disorientation and how to allow our hearts of stone to become hearts of flesh, to become tender.

[5:25] How to survive the Fridays and Saturdays of our lives until Sunday comes. Then in our post-Easter service or series, we explored some of the things that we are invited to steward on the ordinary Mondays of our lives, such as our time and our privilege and our power, our community, our money.

And then over the summer, we used the lens of Afrofuturism to illuminate the parables of Jesus, to see what they might have to say to our congregation about imagination.

Once we have survived the wilderness and opened our hands in stewardship. Now, during our fall sermon series, we're going to camp out in this first letter to the church at Corinth to ask two simple questions.

First, what does the tenderness of re-enchantment look like in proximity to the messiness of other humans? Second, even as people who have re-enchanted hearts, open hands and reignited imaginations, how can we be faithful when we encounter the real issues of rivalry and status and church conflict?

Issues of faithful embodiment and sex and singleness and marriage and divorce and a host of other issues. And then a bonus question.

[7:03] What does the discipleship of Jesus look like in close proximity to other people that you didn't choose and you can't control? We're calling the series Hot Takes.

This is Anthony. Anthony's so good. I'm less cool. So this is a great, great title. They're calling it Hot Takes because the church at Corinth, it seemed to have these provocative ideas that stood to influence the greater body of emerging Christians.

And Paul kind of writes back to their hot takes with pastoral care and correction, drawing them back to their foundation in Jesus Christ. And to the mostly Gentile Corinthians, it might actually have seemed like Paul was the one who had the hot takes.

These hot takes, though, that were actually attempts to draw the church of Corinth back to the timeless truths found in Jesus. He begins his letter with some simple words.

You can turn to these. We're going to go to 1 Corinthians 1. I'm going to eventually read through 17, but we're going to take the passage kind of piece by piece. So we're going to start in 1 Corinthians 1 through 4.

[8:23] You can also go to [table.center](#) and follow along and find a host of other things. If you type that into your browser, that will help you kind of digest the sermon.

And there are three things that I want you to see in the opening verses we're considering today.

And that is who we are, what holds us together, and what threatens that.

Before we explore those, let's read these first four verses. Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

And our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those in every place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Okay, so a little bit of background.

[9:37] Paul is writing this letter to a mission community. He had established around 50 or 51 CE. Paul saw his vocation as preaching the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles and starting fellowships all around the Mediterranean world.

These communities of Christians, followers of Jesus. Acts 18, 11 lets us know that Paul stayed in Corinth, laying the foundations of the church for about 18 months before moving on, like a year and a half.

And the city of Corinth was an interesting place. It was located about 40 miles southwest of Athens. And it was wealthy. It was wealthy because it was this commercial hub that was located on an Isthmus that was kind of adjacent to two ports.

It was a Greek city that had been captured and destroyed by the Romans in 146 BCE. And then about 100 years later, it was refounded as a Roman colony.

Don't miss this. Many of the people who settled in this repopulated Corinth were former slaves because the city offered them opportunities for upward mobility that surrounding cities did not.

[10:57] For example, unlike in other cities in Corinth, former slaves could be elected to the position of chief magistrate of the city. In other words, in Corinth, you could improve your status.

That becomes important to this letter. It's also important to remember that Paul is writing to a group of Christians who worshipped in small house churches.

We live in a world that is kind of dominated by kind of the taste and styles of mega churches. So sometimes it's hard to remember that the first churches were very small.

They probably, you know, would have been maybe between 30 and 50 people because it was basically how many people you could fit in the house of a wealthy person that was in the community.

And all told, there were probably no more than a few of these churches in the entire city of Corinth. So you've probably got about 200 Christians in a city of about 50 to 100,000 people.

[12:00] This is a city that is surrounded by the worship of Roman gods. There would have been statues on many corners of the city.

And it's into that situation that Paul writes his concern is to deform the Corinthians from the culture around them and to reform them into the great story of God as revealed in Christ.

So that context in mind, let's return to that text, those first four verses that we just read. Starting with the first thing Paul wants the Corinthians to know.

Who they are. Paul opens his greeting to the church by essentially saying, I know who I am.

And I know who you are. He immediately takes us his first matter, the issue of identity. He is called to be an apostle and those in the church are called to be saints.

[13:07] Paul makes clear that they are claimed, that they are set apart. Like the vessels and the priests in a Jewish temple, they had this special assignment.

And that assignment is to lean intentionally into the belonging that God has initiated, which will bring them outside of themselves. Paul makes it clear that it is about more than just them.

But about, he says, all those in every place. I can't lose sight that they are part of this larger fellowship of Christians, even if it's just 200 of them in the city.

And the assignment that they have requires a response, calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, some of y'all know that I come from a church tradition that knows a little bit about call and response.

And that call and response, it wasn't always just limited to the church, the church that I went to. I could hear echoes of it in most parts of the world that I grew up in, even in the sporting events that I went to.

[14:29] Somebody would call out something like, give me a J. It wasn't exactly like that. It was more like this.

And if you know this version, I want you to go with me. Give me a J. J, you got your J. You got your J. Give me a J. You got your E. You got your E.

Give me a J. You got your S. You got your S. Give me a U. You got your U. Give me a S. S. You got your S. You got your S. What does that spell?

E. Okay. Thank you. I really wanted somebody to, like, do a little, but nobody stood up. Y'all said, I believe her doing that. All right. That's fine. Okay.

Okay. We had, like, a funky version of the call and response, right? I can't believe I did that. Hallelujah.

[15:22] Hallelujah. But when we did call and response, whether during morning church service or a Friday night basketball game, we did know that we were caught up into something larger.

Something that was communal. Something that was embodied. And Paul is reminding the Corinthians about how to think about themselves. They are those who have heard the claim of the good news, and the good news demands a response of discerning obedience.

Table church, you are those who are called to be saints. Not people of exceptional performance, but people of excellent love.

What will your embodied response be this week? What will you do intentionally? What will we intentionally do together on purpose?

Paul then continues the letter with one of the lines he seems to always return to in some way in his letters. The line that lets us know what holds us together as a church.

[16:31] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It is grace that grounds and surrounds our life.

Grace that surrounds and grounds this community. That which is gift. That which is unearned.

And it is peace or what the ancient Israelites called shalom. That flourishing between things. In the electricity of how things relate to one another.

That's what the church is to aspire to. One thing that I sometimes think about as a leader of the preaching team here at the table.

Is what words we use in sermons. And what words we don't use as much. My sense is that the word justice comes up a lot.

[17 : 36] And the word grace comes up less often. What is a church like ours to do with the scandalous words such as grace?

As a church which cares about taking sides. Cares about structural equity. How do we take grace seriously?

How do we ensure that it's the foundation of our lives? What we don't earn. What we need from others consistently.

I don't know fully the answer to that question. It's something I think about a lot. But I do know. From the way that Paul pairs grace and peace over and over in his letters.

That he seems to believe that it is impossible to have the world of shalom apart from the presence of grace. So if we want the world of shalom in this community, in this city.

[18 : 48] How do we talk more about grace? All right. All right. Let's go a little bit further into the scriptures.

And I'm going to read the rest of Paul's opening. He starts with thanksgiving. And he foreshadows the main issue of the letter. This is verse 4.

God is faithful by whom you are called into the partnership of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement. That there be no divisions among you.

But that you be knit together in the same mind and same purpose. For it has been made clear to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you. My brothers and sisters, what I mean is that each of you says, I belong to Paul, or I belong to Apollos, or I belong to Cephas, or I belong to Christ.

[20 : 18] Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or are you baptized into the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius.

So that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I don't know whether I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel.

And not with eloquent wisdom, so the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. So from the final part of this letter, we learn crucial information that we need to understand the rest of the book. We learn what threatens all that holds them together. I'm not going to go deeply into this this week. We're going to talk more about that next week. But it's clear that Paul's gotten this report from this woman named Chloe, or the people from the household of this woman named Chloe.

Some people think those people were slaves. On the other extreme, some people think those people were members of her church. Whatever the case, it's clear that these people have reported these divisions.

[21 : 34] And that Paul wants them to be knit together. He uses the same words you use to knit together a fishing net, to mend it. Which is what disciples of Jesus would have done.

The first disciples were fishermen. And he foreshadows that there's some problems with this idea of gifts of rhetoric and knowledge. He kind of gives a hint at that. And he asks, basically, has Christ become a commodity?

Has Christ become something that you wear as a brand? Has Christ been divided? I'm going to talk more about that.

But I want to leave y'all with this. Because this is what fascinates me. And I was surprised that this is what jumped out at me this week. But it comes in verse 4. Before Paul goes into pastoral care, into pastoral correction, even as he hints that something is wrong, he gives thanks for the gifts of the church.

He, you know, in a moment when it's so easy to see what is wrong, Paul is careful to acknowledge the treasures of this messy group project.

[22 : 53] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic book, Life Together, puts the need for gratitude like this. If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even when there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith and difficulty.

If on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, when we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the

measure and riches which are there for us, all in Jesus Christ, what may appear weak and trifling to us, what may appear, what may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God. Paul gives thanks for the weak and trifling, great and glorious thing that is the Corinthian church. Maybe he knew that, you know, what so many books on romantic relationships and partners tell us, which is that unexpressed appreciation for someone that you love is a very little help to the relationship or to that partner.

And you are my partners in Christ. So I'm going to go first. I give thanks to you because of the grace God has given you to be clear-eyed and still hopeful.

You see how much the American church has become entangled with the pursuit of power. And yet you have not given up on this group project.

[24:33] I give thanks that you are a community of energy and optimism and that so many of you are younger than me, so many of you are much, much younger than me and have many years to lead the church forward.

I give thanks that we are a church of single people and families, married people and divorced people and children and folks heading toward retirement.

I give thanks maybe most of all because of your flexibility as we pursue Jesus together. There is so much good to name here, so much grace to emphasize.

And I pray that as we wrestle for the next several weeks with this letter, as we interact with Paul in our variety of ways, I pray that we would let appreciation ground us.

I'm going to guess that some of the topics we talk about in this series, we're not going to all probably agree on. It's really going to be fun. So we want to stay grounded in that appreciation.

[25:42] Church, y'all, does sometimes feel like a group project. It's a lot of people who are not going to be in this series, precarious and frustrating. But as I look back on those two group projects I was assigned in that September 22 years ago, there's something else important to say.

That guy who ghosted me, he did very much ghost me. Due to his own personal needs, he was also the person who lent me his entire collection of CDs, jazz CDs.

It was in a folder. I know. But jazz CDs. And y'all, it was because of him that I discovered this music that felt like God had created it just for me.

I'd never been exposed to jazz before. And that straight woman that I was assigned to work with, the one for whom I developed feelings that complicated our relationship for years, and she was also the person who helped me name for the first time for myself what I had never been able to name.

That perhaps gay love lived inside godly love. May we be a church who understands, really understands who we are, our identity.

[27:01] May we understand what holds us together and what threatens our fellowship. may we be open to the beautiful surprises of this group project, assigned by Jesus, and may we learn to actively thank our God for it.

Amen. Amen.