

**“Now Is the Time”**  
**II Corinthians 6:1-13; Psalm 51:1-12**

I began my college career at a branch of the University of Kentucky in my hometown of Ashland. Ashland, Kentucky is also the birthplace of Ashland Oil and Refining Company, now merged with Marathon Oil. With its national headquarters and two refineries located there, Ashland Oil, along with Armco Steel, dominated the area’s industry.

At that time, although rising in international importance, Ashland Oil still carried a family feel. For instance, every year the company held a Christmas party for its employees. A show, such as a circus was brought to town. This gala event was always followed by its most important moment for us children, the appearance of Santa Claus. But not only did you get to sit on Santa’s lap and tell him what you wanted for Christmas, up to the age of twelve, you also received a present — a nice present furnished by the company. And the toy was wrapped, just like it came straight from Santa’s bag.

What I did not know until my freshmen year in college was how those thousands of presents become wrapped. The fall of my freshmen year, for a part time job, along with about ten others, every weekday afternoon I wrapped Christmas presents and prepared them for the big party or to be shipped to employee children all over the world.

The woman who ran this operation was the wife of an Ashland Oil executive. Sitting in the middle of our wrapping tables, flanked by her assistant, she kept an eye on all activity while smoking cigarettes at an astounding rate of speed. A large, imposing woman, she exuded an air of authority. When she talked, she assumed her words were unassailable.

As you can imagine, with people sitting around tables wrapping present after present, conversation broke the monotony. Life stories, jokes, gossip, half truths, whatever floated in and out garnered comment and discussion. Some subjects gave pause for reflection, like the middle aged woman who had lost her husband in World War II, or the college girl whose brother was a second lieutenant in Vietnam. Others were frivolous, but most knew about each other’s families, backgrounds, and where we went to church. And church was the subject the day I most remember.

As with any good Bible belt town, we all belonged to a church, or so we supposed. Until the boss cleared her throat, raised her voice and pronounced, “I don’t go to church because of all the hypocrites.” One could readily see this pronouncement carried an element of conviction, spiced with an attempt at bravado, shock, and cosmopolitan pretentiousness. But to that point in my life, I had never heard anyone say their reason for not attending church was all the hypocrites occupying the pews.

Now, that doesn't mean I wasn't aware of hypocrites in the church. I was the grandson of one minister, and the nephew of two more. There really wasn't anything she could teach me about hypocrites in the church. But it was the first time I had heard anyone use it as an excuse for not attending. To this day, this incident reminds me that if someone doesn't wish to attend church, there will always be a convenient excuse.

In our scripture this morning, the Apostle Paul is attempting to take away any excuses the Corinthians might use for not accepting and living the love of God. For almost 2000 years, Paul's two letters to the Corinthians have made Christians feel good. Why? Because regardless of where you were a church member, reading these letters reminded you that no matter how bad your church was, at least it wasn't as bad as the Corinthian one. Scholars believe we no longer possess the really nasty letters between Paul and the Corinthian members. The two we have are bad enough. The letters question Paul's qualifications as an apostle, disparage his motives, denigrate his conduct as a Christian. His interpretation of the Gospel is widely criticized. He is compared with other pastors, and found sorely lacking. Essentially, the Corinthians just rake Paul over the coals, nit picking any little rumor they can find in order to question his integrity and character.

Paul defends himself. When backed into a corner, the Apostle was amenable to coming out swinging. But he also says this isn't really about him. At its heart, the faith concerns them and their relationship to God.

Let me remind you of what we all know, but so often forget. The Church is not a perfect place. It has never been a perfect place. It will never be a perfect place. As recent headlines remind us, sometimes it can even be a bad place. This has been true for almost 2000 years, whether you live in Corinth or Greenville. After all, our neighbors aren't perfect. Our children aren't perfect. Our ministers aren't perfect. We aren't perfect. Therefore, the Church isn't perfect.

Yes, there are hypocrites in the Church, always have been, always will be. Actually, there are times when each of us falls into that category. And, if you are seeking an excuse to not participate in a community of faith, a reason to ignore God, you don't have to look very far. There will always be someone in front of you at the church dinner who takes the biggest piece of chicken. There will always be a parent who is constantly a half an hour late to pick up her children from a church activity. There will always be someone who acts like Mother Theresa on Sunday and James Bond on Monday. The Church is made up of wavering, struggling, back sliding, hypocritical sinners. Always has been. Always will be. The Apostle Paul knew it. You and I know it.

But it is also the one place where we meet Jesus Christ. It is the one place all of us back sliding, hypocritical sinners try to do better. It is the one

place where we pool our inadequate, less than perfect abilities, talents and resources and try to make a difference in the world. It is the one place where status, politics, even sinful acts pale in comparison to God's people deciding we will speak and act the love of Jesus Christ to God's world.

Paul reminded the Corinthians, and us, that our spiritual lives, our relationship to God is not about how other people act. It solely hinges on how we respond to Jesus Christ. Paul's question to the Corinthians is the same to us: Are you and I listening to God's call of love and forgiveness? As Paul encouraged the Corinthians, "...now is the acceptable time;...now is the day of salvation."

One day in the supermarket a man pushing a cart that contained a screaming, bellowing baby. The gentleman kept repeating softly, "Don't get excited, Albert. Don't scream, Albert. Don't yell, Albert. Keep calm, Albert." A woman standing next to him said, "You certainly are to be commended for trying to soothe your son, Albert." The man looked at her and said, "Lady, I'm Albert."

The Christian doesn't need to worry so much about how others react to God. Our job is to worry about our relationship with Him.

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Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that the actions of other people could not be used as an excuse to turn from God. That decision comes in the context of the community of faith, but it is one between us and God. Our relationship with God, our acceptance of Jesus Christ, rests solely on our shoulders. But, now is the time to make that decision.

Today, we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This is Christ's invitation of love and forgiveness to each one of us. This morning, don't look to the right and left of you. The only relevant question is: How and when will you respond to God?

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