*The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham*

*“Foundations: Dig a Hole”*

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***Genesis 1:26-31***

***26****Then God said, “Let us make humankind****[***[***a***](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201:26-31&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26a)***]****in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth,****[***[***b***](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201:26-31&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26b)***]****and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”*

***27****So God created humankind****[***[***c***](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201:26-31&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-27c)***]****in his image,  
    in the image of God he created them;****[[d](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201:26-31&version=NRSV" \l "fen-NRSV-27d" \o "See footnote d)]*** *male and female he created them.*

***28****God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”****29****God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.****30****And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.****31****God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

***1 Cor. 1:1-9***

***1****Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,*

***2****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 who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord****[***[***a***](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Cor.%201:1-9&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-28350a)***]****and ours:*

***3****Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

***4****I give thanks to my****[***[***b***](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Cor.%201:1-9&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-28352b)***]****God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,****5****for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—****6****just as the testimony of****[***[***c***](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Cor.%201:1-9&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-28354c)***]****Christ has been strengthened among you—****7****so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.****8****He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.****9****God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

To build a foundation, the first thing you have to do is dig a hole.

Later on, you’ll fill in the hole with things that are strong and sturdy. You’ll make sure your foundation is straight and level.

But first, you dig a nice, big, hole.

Well, that’s just what the Corinthian Christians had done.

Corinth was a city of boundless potential. Its location was advantageous for both commercial and military success. It had a long and illustrious history. In the first century, it was the Roman capital of the region. Wealthy and educated people from all over the known world resided there.

Despite this potential, Corinth had an historical pattern of getting into military skirmishes and starting outright wars. In fact, Corinth *could* be blamed for both the first and second Peloponnesian Wars. This was due, in part, to the fact that her allegiance shifted with the tides of world powers.

Corinth was the bridge between the Greek super powers of Athens and Sparta. She had ports in both the Corinthian and Saronic Gulfs, providing a trade route between the East and West. And she provided a focal point for the Aegean islands.

Corinth, like most Greek cities, had been conquered again and again – by the Macedonians, the Ottomans, and finally the Romans. With each of these defeats, the population was both dispersed or diversified.

The Romans conquered Corinth about 200 years before Paul’s visit. They destroyed the city, killed all of the men, and sold the women and children into slavery. About a hundred years later, the city was re-established by Julius Ceasar. The "new” Corinth was populated with freedmen from all over the Roman empire, creating a diverse and unsettled population of Romans, Greeks, Jews, and Arabs.

So when one might try to identify a Corinthian, there was not much to go on. Due to the commercial success of the city, Corinthians became known as wealthy and elitist, giving birth to the Greek proverb: not everyone is able to go to Corinth. Then again, most of the city’s population was actually quite poor and uneducated. Corinth became characterized by its immorality, likely stemming from the prevalence of prostitution in the temple of Aphrodite. But Corinth also had a thriving healing community, so some people attached to it a sense of wellness and health.

The foundational identity of Corinth, if there ever was one, was buried so deep beneath the rubble of power struggles, transient traders, and social upheaval that it was nearly impossible to discern what it looked like in the first century.

The Corinthian churches, too, were full of boundless potential. While Paul says that not many of them are wise or wealthy, some of them are. The church had the benefit of Paul’s presence among them for an extended period of time, and he even visited them a second time. Along with its military and commercial advantages, Corinth was a strategic place from which to spread the gospel as people passed through its ports toward destinations all over the world.

Despite this potential, the Corinthian church was beleaguered by divisions of the same sort that hampered the city itself. There were disagreements around a number of issues ranging from what to eat and what to believe to who to marry and who to judge. There were divisions between rich and poor, men and women, Jews and Greeks, married and single.

The foundational identity of the Corinthian Christians, if there ever was one, was buried so deep beneath the rubble of division, immorality, and judgment that it was nearly impossible to discern what they should look like.

And so, they dug a hole.

Now, if you’ve ever dug a hole – a large one, one big enough for a foundation – you know that this is no easy task. It’s laborious and messy. There’s likely to be some mud-slinging in the process. People get tired and cranky and take too many water breaks.

But the Corinthian Christians dug a hole. They dug up their various cultural identities. They shoveled through their family connections. They excavated their professional relationships. Until they came up with a cavernous hole. And a lot of questions.

What were they supposed to fill this hole up with? What mattered in the Christian life? What constituted Christian identity?

In the first century, the first step in laying a foundation would be to fill this hole with layers of large, square blocks fitting snugly and firmly together. The top-most layer of these stones will be smoothed and leveled, but to start with you just needed solid, square stones.

And that is just what Paul provides.

In the opening of this letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul teaches them foundational truths about their identity.

He begins with leading by example. He identifies himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus *by the will of God*.” He doesn’t boast in choosing Christ or in working up to the rank of apostle. He is who he is solely by God’s initiative.

God’s activity is the first block in the foundational identity of a Christian.

Paul then goes on to define the Corinthian Christians as “those who are being sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints.” Despite the reality they all can grasp – the divisions and infighting, the muck they are covered in after their digging – Paul claims that these people are holy. This is hugely important for Paul because for him there is this dividing line between God and humans. God is holy and humans are not. And the only way for us to be in relationship with God is for God to make us holy. And not just so that we can praise and honor God – though that is certainly true. We are made holy, called by God, so that we can call upon God.

Relationship, through holiness, is another block in the foundation of Christian identity.

But this is not for the Corinthians’ individual benefit. While they are each personally called by God, they are called into community with “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In the story of the sixth day of creation, we hear of God creating humankind on God’s image. Male and female are created in God’s image, and they are put into a caring relationship with the whole creation and told to “be fruitful and multiply.” Humanity was created in community. Part of the image of God in us is this sense of community.

So Paul teaches the Corinthians that this inter-dependent community is a foundational piece of their identity.

Paul then goes on to describe how grace has been at work in the Corinthian church. The believers have been enriched in speech and knowledge, their testimony has been strengthened, and they are not lacking in any spiritual gift. Now, this section represents a bit of foreshadowing as Paul will later chastise the Corinthians for arguing over which of the spiritual gifts is the best. He reminds them, first and foremost, that all gifts are given by God and are signs of God’s grace.

So yet another foundational block in the Christian identity is grace.

Finally, Paul reminds the Corinthians that “God is faithful.” God has called them and, despite their current struggles, the hole they’ve dug themselves into, God will not let them go. God will see this thing through. They will not be left in the lurch.

So the final foundation stone Paul lays in the opening of his letter is trust. Trusting in God’s faithfulness.

God’s initiative, Relationship, Community, Grace, and Trust. Not a bad foundation upon which to build an identity.

But not an easy one, either.

To begin with, most of us have no interest in digging ourselves into a hole. Who wants to deal with the hard work of digging up all those things that make us who we think we are? Who wants the messiness of deconstructing our easy associations? Who wants the bother of excavating the truth about ourselves?

The good news is this isn’t an individual task. If we all end up in little holes all over the place waiting to build our foundational identity, we’ve missed the point. This is a big job. It requires everyone to pitch in. I won’t learn who I am in Christ without you. And you won’t learn without me. It is like the African saying Ubuntu – I am because we are. We need lots of shovels, lots of hands. And we should all end up in the same hole.

And why should we bother?

Because we long for a foundational identity.

Identity comes so easy in our world today. I can “like” something on Facebook or follow someone on Twitter. I can pick a news channel to watch or choose which sports team to cheer for. I can shop for the most popular brand or eat at the hippest restaurants or travel to the hottest vacation spots.

But what I can’t do is build on that foundation.

These identities are transitory. They constantly shift and change. Even something as foundational as family identity can change with age or death or broken relationships.

We may be on top of the soil, but we don’t really have much to stand on.

And so, I invite us to dig. Dig up our political and cultural differences. Dig up our assumptions and our doubts. Dig up our definitions of success and failure.

And I invite us to dig together. Helping each other out. Lifting each other’s load.

We will get messy, no doubt. There will be the occasional bit of mud-slinging and we might get tired and cranky from time to time.

But when we find ourselves at the bottom of that great, deep hole, we’ll be able to build a foundation. One built on God’s work in our lives and in the world. One built on God calling us into relationship. One built on a larger community of believers. One built on God’s grace. One built on God’s faithfulness.

And, I believe, that when this foundation is laid, we will find that what is built upon it is the very image of God. When we have this foundational identity in Christ Jesus, we will reflect the goodness of our Creator. What more worthwhile project can you imagine?

Now, let’s get digging. Amen?