



“Letters from God”
Sermon preached by Anne Ledbetter
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Scripture – II Corinthians 3: 1-3

Art Linkletter featured a spot on his 1960’s television show in which he interviewed children. He called it “Children say the darnedest things!” Not too many years later teachers and pastors began compiling *Children’s letters to God* – probably through a Sunday school class or Vacation Bible School activity. Most of us have read some of these letters from kids to the Almighty – whether in books or on online. Here are a few of my favorites:

- *Dear God, I want to be just like my daddy when I grow up, but not with so much hair all over. Sam*
- *Dear God, did you mean for a giraffe to look that way or was it an accident. Your friend, Norma*
- *Dear God, instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don’t you just keep the ones you got now? Jane*
- *Dear God, I think about you sometimes even when I’m not praying. Sincerely, Elliott*

These letters to God from children sound fresh and honest, at times humorous and at other times even theologically reflective.

In today’s reading from II Corinthians, Paul underscores how we are letters from God. Paul writes to the church in Corinth – a church he helped establish on a missionary journey to that city, a city which lies now in present day Greece. In these epistles known as I and II Corinthians, we detect that Paul’s ongoing relationship with the Corinthians was disturbed from time to time by doubts and suspicions on both sides. In today’s brief text

Paul responds to some criticism that has reached him – specifically, that he has been commending himself, that is, bragging. In his boast about the gospel, some believers wonder if Paul is in fact blowing his own horn. In response to the criticism, Paul employs rhetoric and asks whether he needs a letter of recommendation to enhance his status like others do. No, he says, I do not, because you yourselves, by the lives you lead as followers of Christ, you are letters written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. Paul alludes to imagery from the prophet Jeremiah in which he describes the new covenant God will make with the people, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their heart...”

Letters played a particular role in the culture of early Christians. A Roman official often carried a **commend’atory** letter to a town or province which would give him authority, or status as a servant of Caesar. But Paul tells the Corinthians he needs no such letter – that his authority comes from God who has made *them*, letters of recommendation – letters prepared by Paul and Timothy, but not recommending them – no, recommending the gospel of Christ.

The letters of Paul and other apostles, the epistles in our scriptures, quickly became more than mere communiqués to early congregations. They served as teaching documents *in the early church*. Paul, or James, or some other evangelist might send an epistle, or letter to one congregation with the expectation that it would be shared, or passed around the churches in an area. Without the printing press, much teaching was done orally, and these letters functioned as early Christian primers. In his letters to the church at Corinth we remember that Paul reminded the people of various events – from Jesus’ words at the last supper with the disciples to Paul’s own conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Paul also used his letters to teach – explaining the resurrection of the body and the preeminence of love. In his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul regularly corrected them, addressing divisions in the church, lawsuits among believers, and abuses at the Lord’s Supper. Paul used exhortation, encouraging them in their life together as members of Christ’s body, explaining the wisdom that comes from God, the spiritual gifts bestowed to each and every believer, and the need for orderly worship. Paul’s letters were truly a godsend to the people of the early church – helping them sort out their conflicts, gain clarification on church doctrine, stand fast in faith through difficult circumstances, and hold on to hope in the midst of suffering.

How do letters function in our society today? I would wager that our mailboxes at home, at the office and on our computers contain more junk mail than business and personal correspondence. The role of letters has certainly changed over the years, has it not? From the pony express to the transatlantic railroad, from telegraph to telephone,

airmail to email, from instant messaging to skyping, texting to twittering, our methods of communication have radically changed – especially in the last ten to twenty years.

Does anyone remember what a first class postage stamp for a letter cost when you were young? When I first sent letters as a child, a letter cost a nickel to mail! And a postcard was only 4 cents! Letters were the primary way my parents communicated with their parents, and the typical way I stayed in touch with my family when I was away at summer camp and even during college. Letters seem to be fading as a popular means of communication.

Letter writing has become a lost art in this age of email, texting and cell phones. I'm still learning the shorthand of texting – I remember the first time I saw that my then 8th grader had written LOL on an instant message. I was horrified thinking that she had signed her message to some boy “lots of love” but discovered later that it simply meant Laugh Out Loud. How about ttyl (talk to you later) or 2g2bt (too good to be true) tmth (too much to handle) lmk (let me know). Visiting my son Evans in California, I was included in a BBQ hosted by some of his church friends. One of the hosts had on a t-shirt with an ascending Jesus on the front, with the letter BRB (be right back). I have to confess I returned to DE and tried to order myself one!

Texts, instant messages, calls, letters. Personally, I prefer getting a letter from one of my children, or yes, a lengthy email these days, because they express themselves differently. I usually get more reflection from them, and can almost see their lives and experiences through their own eyes. Our daughter Mary spent last semester abroad in Vienna, Austria. The first few weeks she was there we skyped – that is, talked with her by phone via our computers which with camera capability also allowed us to see each other. It was fun, but there were occasional technical difficulties which frustrated my husband as he was forever trying to troubleshoot the problem while Mary and I tried to talk. While we visited Mary last March, her Ipod broke and she asked to borrow mine for the rest of her semester. I readily agreed, but stipulated that her rental fee would be a weekly, newsy email, at least 200 words in length. She groaned, but acquiesced and ended up writing twice as many words as I had requested! You cannot imagine how much more she shared with us in her emails than through the earlier phone calls. I cherish certain letters and save some emails, but I do not record phone calls nor save texts. As Texan Liz Carpenter quipped, “What a lot we lost when we stopped writing letters. You can't reread a phone call.”

How does God communicate with the world today? Through the living word of God in scripture, and through the living breathing body of Christ, through you and me. To follow Christ is to become a love letter from God – a part of God's communication in and

to the world. As God's family, we are a mass mailing in the world – letters sent out every day to the masses whom God calls precious, (His) beloved.

A friend once told me of a young man named Bill who grew up in her small hometown in Mississippi. Not only was Bill an outstanding student and citizen, but he was a committed Christian and active in his church. Bill mowed the grass for his elderly neighbor, delivered meals on wheels, volunteered in an after school program for children, and never turned down a request from a person in need. He majored in English in college and planned to attend seminary when he graduated. Everyone in that small town loved Bill. They were proud of him, and excited about his promising future. Returning to school after Christmas break his senior year, Bill fell asleep at the wheel of his VW beetle, careened off the road, and died in the accident. When rescue workers went through his wallet to retrieve his identification, they found a worn piece of paper which read, "Remember that your life may be the only Bible some people ever read." When the pastor related this incident at Bill's memorial service, the congregation sat stunned, then nodded understanding that Bill had proclaimed the good news of the gospel each day – living a life of compassion and service.

What message is God sending the world through you? Maybe it's a lesson you learned in Sunday School as a child, and which has deepened over the years until it is now written on your heart: God is love. Or perhaps it's a verse of scripture in which you have found continual comfort over the years and it has become like a dear friend – a companion of your heart – "God is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Or maybe it is something you read in the life of another child of God – in a parent or grandparent, a teacher or even a stranger. A message you knew God had sent special delivery to you: God's grace is all sufficient. Perhaps it is something you discovered in AA, or a mantra learned in meditation which has grounded your life and become a treasure in your heart – "I can do all things through the One who strengthens me."

You are a letter from God – with a message written on your heart by the Holy Spirit. What is God saying to others, everyday, through you?