

1 Corinthians 7:29-35
Epiphany 3B
January 21, 2018

“Grab Hold!”

Grace, mercy and peace to you my brothers and sisters in Christ from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Paul writes to an incredibly divided church in Corinth. A church that has taken their “freedom in the Gospel” to wild extremes. Failing to understand the truth of the gospel and the freedom they now have in Christ; their life and worship practices are all over the map. They grab hold of almost anything and everything. This is the setting for Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians which includes these words of instruction urging them to grab hold of Christ alone. Why? Paul says, **(1 Corinthians 7:29, 35)** *“The appointed time has grown very short ... I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”*

The world has always had problems with this kind of advice. The world doesn’t like to be limited. So, preferring multiple paths to salvation, the world says, *“Grab hold of something ... anything. And if it doesn’t help ... grab hold of something else until it feels good.”* The world does get one thing right ... we do need to grab hold of something. But, what we grab onto matters. Not just anything is going to work.

Imagine for a moment you’re in the ocean treading water desperately. Nearby are three objects to grab onto. They all seem to be about the same size. They all seem to float. Does it truly matter which one you grab onto?

A shark ... it lives in the ocean – it should know how to navigate this environment for you.

Another person – you can talk to them and discuss a way out of your predicaments.

A small life raft – an object created to hold people and float on water.

Which will you grab onto? Your very life depends on which object you grab onto.

Dave Beddoe ... he's a man who faced some challenges in his adult life and made some choices about what to grab hold of. David grew up in the church. His dad was a pastor. His wife's parents were missionaries. He went to a Bible College in California. He became a pastor. I bet most of you are thinking ... Dave is a godly man who has grabbed hold of the Lord.

While in college Dave suffered from severe migraine headaches. Doctors treated the headaches with pain pills containing an opioid. The pills definitely took away the pain. But, they had a great side effect Dave found useful as he prepared for ministry. They helped him deal with his insecurity around people. He grabbed hold of the pills as a way to be more comfortable around people rationalizing that this would be good for his ministry too. He says, *"I needed those pills to get me up in the morning, to keep me going through the day, and to wind down at night."* Dave, the good church kid, the pastor, the husband and father ... was an opioid addict.

He built a façade, while in secret he grabbed hold tighter and tighter to those little pills which brought him confidence, comfort, and rest. He even landed his dream job as a camp director, leading year-round spiritual camps and retreats. However, he says, *"I was a pastor mouthing pastor talk."* He spent his free time hunting down his pills, juggling credit cards to pay for them, and trying to stay ahead of bill collectors. One day, it all came crashing down. Two executives from the camp's board confronted him with credit card receipts detailing pill purchase after pill purchase. They prayed for Dave. Then they fired him ... giving him two weeks to move out of camp provided housing. The things Dave grabbed hold of so tightly slipped from his hands. He began to desperately tread water ... searching for something to grab hold of.

God's Word tells us the history of a people who grabbed hold of the things of the world. This includes Ninevah, the capitol city of Assyria, the mortal enemy of Israel. Ninevah's

idolatry, violence, and cruelty is well documented. To this people, God called Jonah, one of His prophets to speak His word of repentance to this godless, evil, pagan society because, (Jonah 1:2) *“Their evil has come up before me.”* Reluctantly Jonah went to Ninevah and proclaimed God’s word to them, (Jonah 3:4) *“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”* What happened?! The Ninevites heard God’s word. They released their hold on their immoral lives and grabbed hold of His word and believed Him. They repented and confessed their sin. (Jonah 3:10) *“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”* The Ninevites “undivided devotion to the Lord,” grabbing hold of His word, led God to forgive them these most heinous of sins and live.

The Corinthian church came to believe in the gospel. They had been (1 Corinthians 1:2) *“Sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints ...”* But Paul heard about divisions, quarreling, and practices counter to God’s Word they all professed to believe. Paul wrote to the Corinthians to emphatically remind them about the true freedom found in God’s word they had grabbed hold of. They aren’t free to grab hold of and worship preachers like Paul, Apollos, or Cephas. They aren’t free to grab hold of the practice of having sex with whomever they please ... stepmothers, temple prostitutes, members of the same sex, or someone they aren’t married to. They aren’t free to grab hold of things like eating food sacrificed to idols which could lead weaker brothers or sisters back into idol worship. And they aren’t free to abuse God’s gift of the Lord’s Supper by grabbing hold of all the bread and wine for themselves while leaving others out in the cold.

The Corinthians were grabbing onto whatever worldly things they desired. They had become distracted by these worldly things, making them the focus of their attention. Paul reminds them these worldly things, even if they are good gifts from God, will not save them. Sex ... given as a gift from God to be enjoyed between a husband and a wife within the confines of their marriage.

Food and drink ... given as a gift from God to be enjoyed in moderation to sustain life in this world. Possessions ... given as gifts from God to help us live in security, comfort, and enjoyment. But, these gifts, as well as life on earth, are temporary ... they won't last forever.

Rather Paul makes his point saying, (1 Corinthians 7:29-31) *“Let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.”* Paul isn't advocating singleness over marriage ... ignoring those in need over service to neighbors ... or living in isolation from the rest of the world. He reminds Corinth that these things are temporary. They will go away when Christ returns. Even good gifts from God can't save them from their sin and bring them into eternal life. Paul tells them, there is only one thing that can save them. He is advocating that their number one priority in all things be God and spending time with Him in prayer, study of His Word, and worship, (1 Corinthians 7:35) *“I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”*

God's word is timeless. These same words are written for us today. God tells each of here this morning, “Don't let worldly things distract you from ‘undivided devotion to Me.’” He knows this can happen though as we focus more on the gifts the Creator provides rather than the Creator Himself. For example, those of us who are married can be distracted from “undivided devotion to the Lord” by our concerns to provide for our spouses and families ... earning enough money to put food on the table, ensuring our children study hard and get into the best programs so they can earn a living later in life, and giving our children opportunities to grow through sports and music and art. Married or not, how often do we forgo time with the Lord in prayer,

devotion, and weekly worship because we feel ... we have to watch our favorite show ... we have to work ... we have to get our kids to tournaments and competitions ... we have to study for an exam or finish a critical project? These are important things in our vocations ... but they shouldn't be the primary things we grab hold of in faith at the expense devotion to the Lord. Regardless of what the world tells us ... these things are temporary at best. God our Father, through His apostle Paul urges us to grab hold of that which is eternal ... Jesus Christ.

In our gospel, we heard how the disciples let go of their livelihoods and grabbed hold of Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. But even these who heeded Jesus' call to follow Him grabbed hold of the world's words too. They became divided in their devotion to Jesus quarreling over who was most worthy to sit at His right hand in the Kingdom of Heaven. They grabbed hold of the world's wisdom that children were nearly worthless and undeserving of a front seat for the King of kings teaching and pushing them away from Him. They grabbed hold of the world's notion that nobody is any good to anyone if they die ... rejecting the notion that Jesus must die to save the world from its sin. And, they grabbed hold of fear ... abandoning Jesus as He was led away to be tried, falsely convicted, and executed on a cross.

But, Jesus continued to grab hold of His Father's single focused mission to save His people and redeem His creation. Jesus would not allow Himself to be distracted. But the world grabbed onto lies to falsely convict Him. They grabbed onto His body stripping Him, beating Him, and nailing Him to a cross. There He died ... and they buried Him in a tomb.

But Jesus, the Son of the living God, grabbed hold of life. He rose from the dead to new life. He grabbed sin, death, and the devil's evil plots against God's creation and hurled them back into the tomb. He destroyed their power over all who believe and confess that Jesus is Lord ... who grab hold of His Word, devoting themselves to Him above all things! To these people, people

like you and me, Christ delivers forgiveness of sin ... even for those times we divide our devotion between the world's words and His word. Grabbing hold of Him and His promise, we also grab hold of eternal life!

At his darkest hour, Pastor Dave grabbed hold of God's word. He remembered **Romans 5:8** "*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" In that moment Dave realized that despite his repeated failings as he grabbed hold of his little pills, God continued to grab hold of him. Dave says, "*He knew me – and He loved me, in spite of my addiction.*" Hearing God's word, Dave repented. God forgave him. God worked through His church to help Dave finally let go of his pills and grab hold of God and live his life as God intended. Eventually Dave returned to ministry. He now leads recovery groups that help people like him let go of the anxieties and distractions of the world and grab hold of God.

God calls to each of us. Sometimes He calls His people to move to a far away place to proclaim repentance to a people we don't know and maybe don't care for ... like Jonah. Sometimes He calls us to drop our careers and do something completely different to serve him ... like Peter, Andrew, James, and John. But most often, He calls to us through His word to live our lives right where we are ... as husbands, wives, single people, children, parents, workers, or students. He calls us through His word to live by His word in these vocations He has given us. In this way, each of us proclaims His gospel by grabbing hold of His gospel and living our lives in service to Him and our neighbors guided and led through "undivided devotion to the Lord."

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

James Kent