

Paul writes a letter to his brothers and sisters in Christ, who live in the town called Corinth. Corinth is a city located on a narrow strip of land between northern and southern Greece. It has always been a two-harbor town, and it certainly worked hard to earn its reputation for being a rough and, shall we say, “earthy” city...It has historically always been a crucial stop on the major Mediterranean trade routes...this made it a melting pot of cultures, religions, politics, and morality...or shall we say, a decided *lack* of morality...

This was a raucous and prosperous and wealthy city by the time Paul arrived on the scene...They certainly had their share of ways with which to amuse themselves. In true Greek tradition, they held the form and function of the human body in very high regard, which was honored in art and dance and athletics. Every two years, major athletic games were held to honor the Greek god Poseidon, god of the sea. The ports and harbors brought wealth into this city, as well as religious and cultural influences from far away. It also brought with it shiploads of sailors, looking for a meal and shall we say, recreation and companionship, which they graciously found waiting for them temple prostitutes that lined the steps of Aphrodite's temple.

So when Paul shows up, preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, proclaiming the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins, he was met with a

mixed reaction...mockery, confusion, apathy, reverence. To many in Corinth, Paul was just another guy bringing another religious recipe. Their city was awash in religion, what's one more?—they had at their fingertips the cult of the emperor, which compelled them by law to worship the emperor on pain of death; they had the full pantheon of Roman and Greek gods, including Poseidon, Aphrodite, Dionysus, just to name a few; they had mystical religions, imported from afar, like Mithraism, which required the blood from a bull sacrifice; all this, plus a wide variety of carnal religions, which claimed that erotic acts brought one into close communion with the gods. Ok, Paul, sit over there, right next to all the other religions. You're no different, just one of many.

Wait a minute.

Am I still talking about Corinth?

Because I could be talking about New Orleans, where I just happened to have spent the last five days.

Is this a description of a first century city halfway around the world, or a specific modern city in our very own country?

The description fits both.

Paul writes to the saints in Corinth, and the readers of his letter would have certainly laughed out loud.

“Saints,” they would have sneered, “yeah, *right*.”

The above description of Corinth clearly does not seem to describe the saintly life, at all. It seems to describe a city of sinners, who wallow in their immorality and debauchery. It could be any city, really. It could be Calamus. It could be Amsterdam or Paris or DeWitt, or simply put, it's any town and every town, wherever people are...there is the internal collision between saint and sinner.

And there is no better place to observe this than New Orleans, because the word "saint" is literally everywhere, for obvious reasons, but used in a wide variety of ways, some fitting to share from this pulpit, some not.

I saw a basket of pocket-sized Catholic saints, selling for \$2/each. If you carry the saint in your pocket, you would be blessed by God and have good luck. The sign said, "Hey, sinners! Buy your saints here."

There was a sign above the entrance to a jazz club on Bourbon Street; the name of the place is "Saints and Sinners." I wondered, when people go into this place, which do they identify themselves with, do you think? Easy, the sinners.

A man named James took an hour out of his busy day to show me around a magnificent Jesuit cathedral deep in the city.

"I hold every key to every door in this church," he said to me.

"So this is your church home?" I asked him.

"No, ma'am, I do not attend services here or anyplace else for that matter,"

he answered.

“May I ask why?” I asked James.

“Because I isn't good enough to sit in the house of God,” James answered.

“But you're good enough to clean it?” I asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” he answered, “it's how a sinful man earns his bread.”

So is that it, then? Is that the truth of humanity, whether it be in 1st century Corinth or 21st century New Orleans...is the basic truth of humanity that we all think we are filth, that we can clean for God but not commune with him, and that we don't really want to pay too much attention to God, because that would mean we would have to pay attention to ourselves—to the deep hurt we carry around with us, the devastating reality of our brokenness, the desperate craving to be loved by ourselves, by others, and yes, even by God.

No one needs to convince anyone that they are a sinner.

The convincing comes when you tell someone they are a saint.

When I told this to James, he laughed softly and said, “No, ma'am...you got me confused with someone else.”

A saint is not how we see ourselves. It's how God sees us.

It's the same love that a mother has for her baby, a love that makes her believe with every bone in her body that her baby is the cutest baby ever born

on this earth. It's the same love that makes a grown man weep with his dog dies—a mangy, limping creature to the rest of the world, but a best friend and faithful companion to him. It's the same love that draws two people together, a love that draws a lifelong vow from their lips, even if the rest of us go, “I just don't get what she sees in him/what he sees in her.”

It's how God sees us. It's how God sees Paul, formerly Saul who tortured and killed Christians, but worthy enough to be loved by God. It's how God sees Andrew and Simon Peter and Matthew and John and the rest of the disciples, yes, even Judas, calling them to his side because he loved them, not because they loved themselves. It's how God sees you, *not how you see yourself*, it's how God sees you, broken but altogether lovely, soiled and yet pure, and if has to die in order to prove his love for you, he will.

In fact, he already has.