

**Immerse: You've Got Mail!**  
1 Cor 1:4-11, 1 Cor 12:4-12

Good morning! I am really enjoying hearing from you as we read Immerse together. There is nothing like spending time with God's word. It is surprising and transformative! And it is not too late to join in! We still have 2/3s of the New Testament to go! I've heard from several of you about what a difference you've noticed reading scripture in context—reading a book or a letter as a whole instead of just reading a snippet. It's really eye opening. Many of you have been struck by how often in Acts the early Christians would explain their faith by telling the story of the OLD Testament. Some of you have now started asking about reading the Old Testament to help us connect the dots. Reading Immerse is a great reminder that our story today is a continuation of the great Bible story. From the Old Testament to Jesus to the letters to our lives now, it all connects together!

Do you remember your very first computer? The first one our family had was a Gateway 2000! Now that is some space age technology! I remember the boxes (yes, multiple boxes for one computer!) that it came in. They were black and white and designed to look like Holstein cows, kind of like a Chick Fil A ad today. The main way to get connected to anything at all back then, in the early nineties, was through AOL. We'd dial up to connect using our only phone—the land line (and wonder what phone calls we were missing while the line was busy!), and then we finally could log on to AOL. But what I remember most is waiting to hear that famous phrase—You've got mail! It was so exciting! We got mail *over the internet* from someone! They typed it WAAAAY over there and it showed up here on a screen in our spare bedroom! It is hard now to remember what those early days felt like—now we are always connected. Today email often feels like a burden or a chore. But then—getting a message through the ether, written to me? Now *that* was exciting!

Friends, today I'm here to tell you, You've got mail! God is sending you a message and it is a surprising, unusual, amazing thing. Here is a message from God, to You! And to me. Each time you turn to the Bible, remember that feeling—You've Got Mail! From God!

When our kids were little, we listened to a Christian singer who called himself the Donut Man. The Donut Man was kind of a dumb name, but he wrote some great songs about Bible stories. I think Alice and I learned more from them than the kids did. One of those songs taught us that the Bible is a love letter from God to me. The Bible isn't a book of harsh rules, it is a message to us about God's unstoppable love for you. Some parts of the Bible were written as poetry, some is history, some parts are stories that teach a lesson. Some were originally written as letters. Letters are what we are reading this week and next. Paul's letters, most of which were written to various churches around the Mediterranean, were written to specific people in specific circumstances. These are not general essays about faith, we are listening in on Pastor Paul working with people that he knew and loved. People he was sometimes frustrated with! And he is talking about specific issues in their lives.

One of those communities was Corinth. Corinth was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. It controlled a key trade route across a narrow strip of land that let cargo ships avoid the long, dangerous trip around southern Greece. Corinth was a city of new money, with both great wealth and great poverty. It was a port city with loose morals, and lots of people who thought they had the world figured out. Paul had visited Corinth in about AD 50 and started a little church there. Here he is writing to them a few years later, probably around 53 or 54 AD, about 20 years after Jesus' resurrection. In Paul's letters we hear one side of a conversation. In First Corinthians Paul is actually responding to a list of issues that have arisen in previous letters, so we can hear echoes of what the Corinthians are saying too.

Paul's letters give us *practical theology*. Practical theology—this is not abstract or academic, this is where the rubber meets the road—how do you deal with conflict in a congregation? What do you do with someone who is living in a foolish or harmful way? How do we worship? What about disagreements over worship? How do we build up new believers? How do we live in the face of a disapproving culture? All kinds of issues were facing the church in Corinth that are very familiar to us today too. This letter was written to that little group of believers in Corinth 2000 years ago, but God's message in it to us is just as helpful and relevant as if it were addressed to the believers at First Presbyterian of Salt Lake City. Maybe we could call it First Salt Lakers. This letter has some challenging parts—some of you have already

reached out to me with questions! But it also has all kinds of helpful information for us right now. It even includes some truly beautiful writing, including what might be the most famous chapter in all of the Bible, the Love Chapter, I Cor 13. This morning I want to focus on just two points from this love letter God sent us— one, that God loves us deeply and has given us all we need—we are not lacking in anything! And second that God give each of us gifts so we can take care of each other and live out our part in God’s mission.

First—we have everything we need. God gives us all we need. This is important to hear again, because it is so easy to focus on what we *don’t* have instead of what we DO have. Maybe especially this year when we are missing so many things—gathering together, hugging friends and loved ones, just sitting beside each other in the flesh. 2020 has been really difficult. This point about God’s provision for us is important. It is so important that Paul puts it first of all. He addresses the letter to God’s church in Corinth, who are called to be God’s holy people. That describes us too. Then he launches right into giving thanks for them—why? Not because of who they are or what they’ve done, but because of what God has done. The gospel is always, always about what God has done. It is not about what we DO, it is what Jesus has already DONE. Here Paul is celebrating the grace of God that has been given to them. He says the church is not lacking in any spiritual gift. God gave this church every gift they needed to care for each other. First Pres, God has done the same for us-- WE are not lacking in any spiritual gift. Say that with me--we are not lacking in any spiritual gift. God provides for us and gives us everything we need. Do you believe that? It changes everything. I’ve seen the truth of this over and over this year! When the pandemic struck, suddenly there were people like Eamonn and Mike with skills and willingness and equipment who could help us go online. When we needed to upgrade our camera but hadn’t organized funding yet, there was Ryan, happy to lend us his excellent camera. As we have wrestled with how to do ministry during this time, Christin and Nathan and Pastor Chris and the leaders of our many studies and groups all came up with creative ways to connect and encourage each other. The deacons have stepped up with calls and visits and new fellowship activities like the scavenger hunt. New leaders have come forward to take their part—because God has brought us all together! God has distributed gifts throughout our congregation. The way God provides for us is through each other! Listen

again to how Paul put it: You have every spiritual gift you need—he will keep you strong to the end. God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. God calls us together, he calls us into partnership with Jesus and he equips us with all we need! Let me hear an Amen!

When our youngest daughter was four, she decided she wanted to play the violin. I'm not going to lie to you folks, it is excruciating when your son or daughter is learning to play the violin. Maybe the only thing more difficult to listen to might be a beginner on the bagpipes. But even though it was screechy, every day we encouraged Gracie to practice her violin. Over time, she eventually joined a school orchestra. Later on she joined a youth symphony. Her playing got better and better. But no matter how well Gracie played, the music was never complete until everyone in the symphony played their part together. Often Gracie's part alone was repetitive and kind of boring. But when we heard it with all the other parts, THEN we heard it! It took everyone playing their parts together, from the violins to the French horns to the piccolos to the timpani. All of them working together is what fills a symphony hall with beautiful music.

Our congregation is like an orchestra that plays well together. God formed each of us and brought us here—together in this place—so that we can each play our part in carrying out God's mission. He made us and gifted each one of us. The whole point of spiritual gifts is that they are for the benefit of others, for the common good as our reading said. The gifts God gave YOU are intended to build up the body of the Christ. We all need to use our gifts so that Christ's body—the church—is fully functional. Often we are uncertain about what gifts we have or whether we have any gifts or how to use them. We are going to learn more about discovering our spiritual gifts in the new year, but for now know that God has specifically gifted each one of us for his rescue mission.

By the way, we are sometimes tempted to count some gifts as more important than others. We took a gifts assessment a few years ago and Alice and a friend were griping- oh great—service! But then they realized that actually helping people made them feel good. Our gifts are designed for us. In the orchestra there is often a hierarchy among the instruments. From the first violins all the way down to the triangle player. But great music requires everyone playing well, and sometimes people who are usually overlooked have prominent roles. In my

school band when we played Stars and Stripes Forever the tubas were featured, playing what is usually a piccolo part!

As you put your gifts to work, remember that they ARE gifts!! This is God's action, not ours. God gave them to us so we can use them to help others. Gifts are not something to be hoarded. Or to be proud of. In fact, later on Paul criticizes the Corinthians for being too proud of some of these gifts. It is crazy to be proud because you received a gift, right? Some people are born on third base and think they hit a triple. No—gifts are grace--they are a blessing *to us for the benefit of others*. We are gifted for the benefit of other people.

One of the problems in the church in Corinth was divisions. One group would get together and whisper about what some other part of the church was doing or not doing. They were divided economically, politically and theologically. That would never happen here, right Church? God calls us to be together—united *in Christ*. We are put together to be his body in the world! We are his orchestra playing together. God's church must be united—that is not just a nice face we put on, but a deep unity in Jesus. A certainty that what unites us in God is bigger and stronger and more important than anything that divides us. Red or blue—we are one in Jesus. Rich or poor—we are one in Jesus. The body of Christ is united. If it is divided, if it is cut up, the church can't survive.

The great encouragement from both of these readings is that IN SPITE of all their divisions, in spite of any problems, God has *still* gifted them with everything they need. God's Spirit is at work in everyone, gifting them with what is needed for us as a group. God enriched them in every way. That is true for us too. Rest in that.

First Pres, God loves you. Jesus is crazy about you! He came to save us, he pulls us together to be his body, and he gifts us with everything we need to live out his mission in the world. That is how much he loves you! In the Jesus Storybook Bible God's love is described as: God's Never Stopping, Never Giving up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love. That is what the whole Bible story is about. That is your love letter from God—in the Bible we discover God's never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love. That is the love that Jesus showed at the cross. That is the love that unites us and makes us one. That is the love that we get to reflect out to the world—to our neighbors, to our family, to our community.

Friends, we do not have to be afraid. We don't need to live in a spirit of scarcity. We are called and sent by Jesus to share his love. Be empowered and made brave by that. First Pres, we have what we need—we just need to use it! Paul promises us—God is faithful and he'll strengthen us to the end. If we stick with Jesus, he will continue to gift us and strengthen us through whatever comes. 2020 can't beat Jesus!

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you. The words can sound hollow, but we mean it from the deepest part of us—thank you! Thank you for making us. Thank you for saving us. Thank you for your never stopping love for us. Thank you for enriching us and giving us all the gifts we need to take our part in your rescue mission. Thank you for being faithful and staying with us until the end. Strengthen us, unite us, and send us out in love and with joy to share your loving rescue with others. In Jesus' strong name with ask it. Amen!