

## “Killing It is Killing Us”

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

I want to talk to you about a phrase we do not run into much in the Midwest. The phrase is: killing it. "You're killing it."

If you look online 'Killin It' means: having a ripped body, a cool fashion style, career success, a high level of achievement, going on envy-producing vacations, having fabulous hair, immense personal charm.

A quick search on line showed me that Beyonce is killing it after racking up the most grammy awards for her music than any other woman. Kim Kardashian is killing it. She is a reality-TV star, entrepreneur, and mother of 4. She sold a chunk of her KKW Beauty brand cosmetics for \$200 million, and her Skims clothing brand is worth \$3.2 billion. She is also studying to become a lawyer to work toward prison reform. Elon Musk is killin it. He is the innovator who started Tesla, SpaceX, Starlink, the owner of X – which used to be Twitter. He's the richest man in the world. This guy's killin it.

Here in Amherst, we tend to have a calmer lifestyle. Nevertheless, everybody wants to succeed, to do life the best they can. To some extent you are killin it. Even at church, people want to know they're killing it, so turn to the person next to you really quickly and say, "Thou art killing it."

Killing it ends up involving a whole lot of pressure and we all know about this. I compare other people's beautiful Instagram life with my real, dull, ordinary life. Are my kids killing it? Are my abs killing it? Is my hair killing it? Is my resume killing it? Is my vacation killing it? Plus, the problem with killing it is it never stays killed. You have to kill it again tomorrow, and the drive to be killing it leads people to overwork, to addictions, and to envy.

We all know about this. Anxiety, depression, isolation, exhaustion, feelings of worthlessness, feelings of failure. In fact, killing it is killing us, so I want to take you to the city where they kind of invented killing it. Then, they learned one day about another way to live, and we can too.

It's a city called Corinth. I want to kind of walk through the history of Corinth so we can all see the incredible relevance for your life and for our church and for where we live.

Corinth, located in Greece, is actually on an isthmus, a narrow strip of land that connects two larger areas of land. On one side is a harbor that leads to Asia. On the other side is a harbor that leads to Italy and Europe. This is an unbelievably strategic piece of land for trade. The Roman peace, the *Pax Romana*, meant global trade was available on an unprecedented scale, and that would mean unbelievable wealth.

A city built on this site was clearly going to be a goldmine, and that's why Julius Caesar rebuilt Corinth basically from scratch just a few decades before Jesus. In other words, to use today's language, Corinth was a startup with all of the unconventional culture of a startup. Caesar populated it mostly with ex-soldiers and freed men (ex-slaves), so there was no landed aristocracy or nobility. That meant this was just a mob of hungry, scrappy, highly ambitious risk takers who were dissatisfied with old ways and old traditions and driven to leverage new opportunities.

This, in turn, attracted entrepreneurs from Greece and Italy and Egypt. Infusions of new capital began to generate wealth until by Paul's day many Corinthians had very serious fortunes. This, in turn, meant the real estate market in Corinth went crazy. If you wanted to get rich, you'd buy Corinthian real estate. Flip houses there and you will be rich.

Also, Corinth was a center of innovation. Because it was new, it was designed by Rome's best city planners. One ancient writer said that it had the most sophisticated water distribution system in the ancient world. In the Mediterranean world, water is always a big issue. This, in turn, reinforced their belief that human ingenuity and technology could solve any problem people faced. They were intensely proud of where they lived and self-sufficient.

The first travel guide in history was written a little after Paul's time by an ancient writer who was kind of the Rick Steves of the ancient world, and a big chunk of this travel guide is devoted to

Corinth. It was believed that a son of Zeus, named Corinthus, founded Corinth and that gave the people the image that this city was a magic, divine place.

Corinth had 2 harbors, so there were lots and lot of sailors. Sailors on leave are known to blow lots and lots of money. So Corinth developed a reputation for a kind of anything-goes attitude toward sexual expression. It was a vulgar, party city.

Another Greek writer named Aristophanes said, promiscuous sex was so associated with Corinth that he made up a word "Corinthianize" to mean sexual activity." Plato used the phrase, *a woman of Corinth*, as a euphemism to mean prostitute. It was the red-light district of the ancient world. What happens in Corinth stays in Corinth.

In terms of religion Corinth was extremely pluralistic. Archaeologists have found temples to over 26 different gods. All these immigrants and sailors would be bringing their religions and their gods into it including some from this little nation of Israel who worshiped the God of Israel.

By St. Paul's day, Corinth was the future, very clearly. This was so true that when that part of Greece was made a colony of Rome, it was Corinth, not ancient historic Athens, that was made the capital. Athens' best days were behind it. Corinth's best days were all in front of it. These days businesses have been moving out of California and Washington State, moving from Chicago, and the northeast, and all of them headed to Texas. Dallas, and Austin, and San Antonio – that's where the future is. Corinth was like that.

There was ceaseless building going on, and every project and every monument had inscriptions designed to promote the status of the builder. One man, a man named Baebius, had a fountain built in Corinth as a monument to himself. He wrote on it, "Baebius paid for this monument out of his own wealth and approved it by his own authority as a city magistrate." Just to make sure nobody missed it, he had the inscription chiseled on it twice. The number of such inscriptions in Corinth was quite staggering. One author writes,

"Corinth was a city where public boasting and self-promotion had become an art form."

What a weird society where people would publicly post their accomplishments, honors, experiences, and possessions in order to be seen and liked by other people! What a weird place that must have been! Inscriptions were to Corinthians what social media is to us today.

Over these next weeks we're going to look at all of this because these are real people like you and me today, and they want a flourishing life, just like you and me today. And it seemed to them that wealth and status and honor and reputation and security and being beautiful and being healthy are the bringers of that flourishing life, just like us today.

It was into this great city of unprecedented wealth, super-competitive, hyper-sexualized, status-obsessed, religiously pluralistic, un-tethered from tradition, proud, self-sufficient, striving, anxious, and spiritually empty that one day came a tentmaker named Paul and he spoke of the alternative to ambition for superficial worldly things.

The Bible book of Acts tells us about Paul's coming where it says, ***"After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them."*** Acts 18:1-2

The fact that Paul was a tentmaker is important. Tent making (to be bent over sewing tents with leather or with canvas or fixing a harness or a sandal or something) was considered to be a menial, low-status occupation, and that's Paul.

He stayed with tentmakers. He lived in their home which would have doubled as their shop. You have to picture him teaching while he's doing this. People will sometimes think about Paul at leisure walking around dropping these gems of wisdom. No. He was multi-tasking. He would have been working at his craft and trying to teach people while he was doing that.

Here's the thing. Paul didn't have to do this. Paul had an education. He had a brilliant mind. He was deeply literate not just in the Hebrew Scriptures but in ancient writings. He was a Roman citizen, for crying out loud. Paul could have come as a brilliant lecturer supported by wealthy patrons, and there were people who were trying to give him money and he refused them.

Instead, he comes as a low-status, tent-making slave, and proclaims a carpenter killed on a cross. Paul was a man of status who gave it up for a low status. And he came telling the story of another man of high, high status, who gave it all up. His name is Jesus who, although he was in the very nature God, took on the likeness of a human being and became a servant and humbled himself to even death on a cross.

Here's how Paul starts this letter: ***"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."*** *1 Corinthians 1: 1-3*

What jumps right out at you is how the names *Christ* or *Jesus* or *Lord* are found 11 times in just these three verses. Paul is preoccupied with this man. How weird is this? In Corinth, Paul comes and his hero is a carpenter who died the shameful death of a person rejected by society as a despised criminal, a failure by every conventional standard. He is convinced Jesus is not only the revelation of who God is (if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus) but that Jesus is also actually the expression of a flourishing human life. If you want to know what it's like to be REALLY human, look at Jesus.

On the cross, Jesus put to death sin and guilt and hell and mortality that have destroyed the human race. Jesus is killing it.

Then, they put Jesus in a tomb, and they roll a stone in front of the tomb.

The Corinthians had a myth or legend that the first king of the city was a man named Sisyphus, a name that might ring a bell. It is

said that in death he was condemned to roll a huge boulder up a giant hill, and every time he got that enormous boulder almost to the top of the hill, it would slip from his grasp and roll all of the way back down, and he would have to trudge back down and roll it up again. This goes on through all of eternity.

This story captivated writers and artists. It still does. Albert Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*, an amazing expression of the power of despair in a meaningless world where life is just exhaustion and empty.

In Corinth there was this wealth and power and status. But there was also this despair. The despair was pictured by the endless rolling of this stone. Paul came speaking of Jesus. He rolled a stone too. Jesus just moved the stone one time and when Jesus moved the stone it stayed moved. This is not a picture of despair but of immense victory. So Paul says, "Jesus is the beginning of a new way of life."

Jesus is another shot at the human race. In His resurrection, He's starting a new way to be human. The pathway to human flourishing is not through accumulation and wealth and success and status and self-sufficiency but through surrender to this God and humility and generosity and loneliness.

Jesus' crowd is people who are carpenters and tentmakers and slaves, for God's sake, and a few wealthy people in this community of status inconsistency. Slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor.

Paul is kind of a poster boy for this. Paul used to be named Saul. Saul was the first king of Israel, a name of great pride, and Paul gives up that name and gives up his old pride, gives up his old belief that Jews are superior. Instead, he came to identify with people he once despised. As Paul his whole life was dedicated to embracing the whole world of people Jesus loves.

He mentions he's an apostle. In Corinth, they would at least expect him to mention he's not just an apostle but he's the greatest of all of the apostles. He's Paul, for crying out loud. He wrote more books in the New Testament than anybody else, but he doesn't

promote his apostleship. It is not an accident that in this very letter Paul would write, ***"For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle... But by the grace of God I am what I am..."*** 1 Corinthians 15:9-10

Then, Paul includes this guy, Sosthenes. Sosthenes is also mentioned in Acts 18, in Corinth, when Paul is in trouble for talking about Jesus before a Roman official named Gallio. This happens in Corinth. We're told, ***"Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever."*** Acts 18:17

What a strange community! Tentmakers and carpenters and slaves and guys getting beaten up. Really? And of all places in Corinth?!

Paul says ***"To the church of God in Corinth...together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours..."*** 1 Corinthians 1:2

This is somewhat unique not just to the church of God in Corinth but to everybody else, too. In other words, "Hey, Corinth! You're not all that." What matters is not actually that you are in Corinth but that somehow, somehow, somehow Christ is in you. This is unbelievable!

When they would write and send letters back in ancient times, those letters always used to start with the word *chairein*, which meant greetings in Greek. Paul just changes it ever so slightly to *charis*, grace. Then, he would add to it from the wonderful history of Israel, *shalom*, peace. *Flourishing* would be our word for it. Flourishing. Grace has come to Corinth. You didn't earn it. You didn't acquire it. You didn't trade for it. You didn't compete for it. You just need it. Sometimes when you live in Corinth, you forget that. And we do too. And yet it's this grace, this unearned, undeserved love and forgiveness, from a lowly carpenter, who died as a condemned criminal – this grace is what defines you. This is who you really are. This grace from this Savior, Jesus Christ, is all that ever matters.

It's not the stuff this world boasts about that matters at all. It's not being in Corinth – or its equivalent today – that makes for a real life. It is, instead, being “in Christ.” This is who you are. This is all that matters. This identity is a gift of grace that was placed on you in your Baptism.

Grace came to a city called Corinth. And grace has come to small city in Ohio named Amherst. This Jesus life is so different than the killin it life of our world around us. Jesus calls you to just humble yourself. Confess your sin. Let go of the need to prove yourself or advance yourself or promote yourself or save yourself and just let grace come. Jesus offers you real life. His humble grace has transformed individuals and marriages and families and even whole cultures. And grace can change yours. In God's eyes this life of humbly receiving grace from Jesus, is the life that is truly killin it.

Meanwhile, what am I going to do with my pride? What am I going to do with my selfishness and my stubborn ego? What am I doing with my deceit? What am I doing with my apathy toward other people? What am I doing with my anger? What am I doing with my bitterness? What am I doing with my sinful self? What am I doing with the evil that is not just all around me but inside me? I'm killing it. I'm killing it. By the power of God living in me, I – and you – are ‘in Christ’ and God's grace wants to work in you too. It's a new way to live – a life of killin it. Amen.