

# Paul's letters and ours

Welcome to the spiritual practice of letter writing.

BY ANGELA SHANNON

***Note:** This letter-writing devotional can be used on your own or with an intergenerational group to explore the art of letter-writing as a way to love God and the neighbor.*

For most of my life, I have written letters. My grandmothers instilled in me the joys of letter writing. Before email or texts were a thing, I would pen a note and enclose it in an envelope. Then I'd either walk it to a mailbox or hand it to our letter-carrier — the person who delivered mail to each house and building. I couldn't wait to give them a letter I'd written or receive the treasure of a card or letter addressed just to me!

## CONNECTED OVER DISTANCE, TIME

Letter-writing was part of my elementary school's curriculum. So was writing in cursive. After watching a short film about how to address and post a letter, we were given the assignment to write a letter. So, I wrote a letter. And guess what? Someone wrote back! I was hooked!

When I was in sixth grade, my maternal grandmother moved from my hometown of Gary, Indiana, to Tennessee. Tennessee was “down south”—a region where many African American parents sent their children each summer, so they could get to know their extended families. It felt so far away. But “Bunch” (as I affectionately called her) and I could still connect through letters. I would begin my letters with: “Dear Bunch, how are you? Fine, I hope.” Her letters were

always encouraging. She would ask about my studies and hobbies. Eventually, she moved back to Gary. There was no need for letters. My beloved Bunch was home!

## Share or reflect:

1. Do you remember learning how to write a letter? Who taught you? Who did you write?

## PAUL'S LETTERS AND OURS

Over the years I've spent as a pastor in the ELCA, my appreciation has grown for a good Pauline letter. The Bible contains 13 “Pauline” letters—letters that are attributed to the Apostle Paul and his followers. Seven of these letters are known to have been written by Paul himself: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. Other letters have enough style differences where they are thought to have been written by a follower of Paul, in the name of Paul—a common practice in those days. In each letter, I hear the voice of a colleague who—like most pastors today—is trying to hold a worshipping community together in faith, while making space for unity in diversity and the law of love. Paul's letters feel familiar, perhaps because they follow a familiar form. They were also intended to be read aloud to the faith community—something likely very familiar for those who read *Gather* magazine in audio form.

■ **Read:** Romans 1:1-17 and 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

When we write a letter, we begin with salutations—words that introduce the writer of the letter and greet the listener or reader. Today, job seekers might introduce themselves in a cover letter, alongside a resume with descriptions of ongoing work and links to completed projects. We might also write a letter to an acquaintance or friend, sharing more about ourselves in the hopes of making a connection.

While we might write, “Dear Nadine, I hope you are doing well...,” Paul introduces himself as someone called to be an apostle. He greets his listeners, calling them God’s people in Christ Jesus. And he says, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is just the opening. If you glance ahead in these biblical passages, you can see that Paul spends quite a bit of time in his letters presenting his developing theology around Jesus Christ.

**Share or reflect:**

2. How would you introduce yourself in a letter to people who do not yet know you (or know you well)?
3. How is sending a letter similar to or different from sending an email, text or direct message?
4. What do you think is the purpose of Paul’s Letter to the Romans? What about the purpose of his 1 Corinthians letter?

The middle section or “body” of a letter reveals our reason for writing it. For example, we might want to express gratitude, sympathy or joy; encourage or congratulate others; express regret or apologize to someone. Because Paul’s reason for writing is pastoral, his letters often provide many chapters of encouragement, comfort, wisdom or correction. Paul addresses specific questions and concerns people had in the early Christian communities with whom he corresponded. Paul wants his listeners to know the depth of God’s grace, mercy and love for them.

I think Paul would have been quite surprised to know that letters he wrote would someday be elevated to scriptural canon, and that nearly 2,000 years later, people would still be reading them in worshiping communities and homes around the world. (But that’s another story.) Sometimes our **▶ p. 52**

## The ritual of letter-writing

Writing letters and sending cards can be a devotional ritual.

**Paper:** You can use fine stationery, regular college-ruled paper or even a lunch bag. Sometimes I use handmade paper—including paper I’ve made myself. I once used dried autumn leaves to write a note. Or you can collect or make greeting cards to send for various occasions.

**Pens:** Printing or writing in cursive can also become a devotional practice. Any pen will do, but the slow strokes of a calligraphy marker or gel pen can slow your breathing and oxygenate your brain. They are a far cry from the trusty stick pens of my childhood. Don’t worry too much about mistakes—crossed-out words and minor misspellings, for example, are part of what makes our letters human and real.

**Writing space:** For me, writing is intimate and personal. I prepare my writing space by lighting a candle, selecting a card or paper and choosing a pen. I think about the person and sometimes pray for them, and then I write. I seal the envelope, sometimes with a wax seal. If I have time, I walk my letters to the post office, and off they go!

**For more letter-writing ideas, visit [www.gathermagazine.org/letter-writing](http://www.gathermagazine.org/letter-writing)**

letters become documents for future generations. Just ask a historian, an archivist or someone who has held onto letters from past generations. Our correspondence can provide a unique record of history.

📖 **Read:** 1 Corinthians 16:13-24

Today, we usually end our letters with a concluding thought, followed by a “complimentary close”—a phrase like “Sincerely yours” or “Best wishes” or “Love from,” followed by our name or names. When I wrote letters as a kid, “Your friend” was my favorite complimentary close. However, Paul’s letters usually add a benediction or blessing. Here’s an example from Galatians 6:18: “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.” At times, I have also used this blessing as an ending, especially when writing sympathy cards and notes.

#### **Share and reflect:**

5. What is Paul’s message at the end of 1 Corinthians, chapter 16? What, if any, parting greetings does he offer?
6. Why do you think he might have said that this particular letter is written in his own hand (v. 21)?

#### **COMMUNICATING OUR THANKS**

On my father’s side, I have well over 34 first cousins in four different age groups. When our grandmother Sadie gave gifts to the cousins in my age group, I sent her a thank-you note. Grandma Sadie told me that I was the only grandchild that sent a note. Then she told me story of the tenth leper (see Luke 19:11-17). In this story, Jesus heals 10 people who have a skin disease. Only one, a Samaritan, comes back to praise God and thank Jesus. After asking where the other nine are, Jesus says that this man’s faith has made him “well.”

All 10 were physically healed, but only one was also “made well.”

“Angie, always be like the tenth leper,” Grandma Sadie told me. “Always stop and return thanks.” Gratitude is holy, and even the act of saying “thank you” rewires our brains, improves our heart health and sleep, and otherwise contributes to our wellness (see [www.uclahealth.org/news/article/health-benefits-gratitude](http://www.uclahealth.org/news/article/health-benefits-gratitude)). Giving thanks is a radical act, unlike toxic positivity that denies the jarring reality of a tragedy. I have learned to give thanks even when the church has not lived into its calling and, even when I have not done so. I am grateful that God can heal and restore.

📖 **Read:** Romans 1:8-15 and Philippians 1:3-11

Consider the similarities and differences between these two prayer passages. Pay close attention to Romans 1, verses 8-9, and Philippians 1, verses 3-5. Note Paul’s gratitude and his response.

#### **Share or reflect:**

7. What do these readings suggest about Paul’s life, the lives of these communities, and how they relate to one another?
8. In your own life, think of one or more people who make you want to burst forth in thanksgiving and praise. Take five minutes now to write them a note to tell them! The simple act of writing a note can be a 360-degree blessing.

#### **THE DIFFICULT-TO-WRITE LETTERS**

Some letters are more difficult to write, especially those that offer a correction or an apology. The fact is, because we are human, we sin against each other. Each week during worship, we confess our sins in the Order of Confession and Forgiveness. We also confess our faith in God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Yet God calls us to work to mend the relationships broken by our sin. It is hard, I know, but God equips and empowers us for this ministry of reconciliation (see 2 Corinthians 5:11-21), beginning with a genuine, meaningful apology. For most of us, this is difficult, but it gets better with practice. I know this from years of experience.

📖 **Read:** 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 and 1:26-31, and 2 Corinthians 2:1-4 and 7:8-13.

The church at Corinth was teeming with spiritual gifts, yet much like our church today, they were struggling with what freedom in Christ meant for them (see 2 Corinthians 3:12-18). Some thought freedom from condemnation meant they were free from the consequences of sin. Paul felt compelled to address this.

Pay close attention to 2 Corinthians 2:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 7:8-13. Paul refers to what theologians call “the sorrowful letter.” While this letter no longer exists, we can guess at its serious nature.

### Share or reflect:

9. What are your thoughts about “the sorrowful letter?”
10. When is it appropriate to correct someone (friend, relative, beloved)? How would you write a sorrowful letter to a friend, a relative or a colleague?

Have you been approached by someone who has expressed that you have harmed them in some way? In the moment, try not to rush to defend. First, listen with the “ear of the heart.” Tell them you will pray about it. Afterward, actually pray about it. Seek God’s help in prayer and listen. Search for your own culpability and complicity. “Lord, is it I?” Determine your part in the collapse of the relationship. Speak privately with your pastor, spiritual director or therapist.

### ACTIVITY:

*(You will want to talk through these steps as a group, but do the activity, which will take time, at home.)*

Sit down to write a letter to the person who expressed that you harmed them. Here are the steps:

- Describe the situation without rancor or blame. Name and accept your part.
- Silently, in your mind (don’t write this), consider how the situation must have made the other person feel.
- Express empathy.
- Offer an authentic apology, such as, “I apologize for my actions...” Do not write “I’m sorry that you felt that way...” Half apologies only widen the divide.
- Express that you do not wish to cause further pain. Say that you will take steps toward not repeating the offense. Then take those steps to not repeat the offense. In church circles, this is called repentance. (One more idea: Try writing a letter to yourself with these steps, so you can make them into a habit.)
- Leave the door open to meet with the person later, perhaps over coffee or a meal.
- Be prepared. The offended person may not be in the head space to receive or accept your apology. Continue to hope and pray.

This is how we engage in the ministry of reconciliation via letter. Keep praying because God is at work in this process.

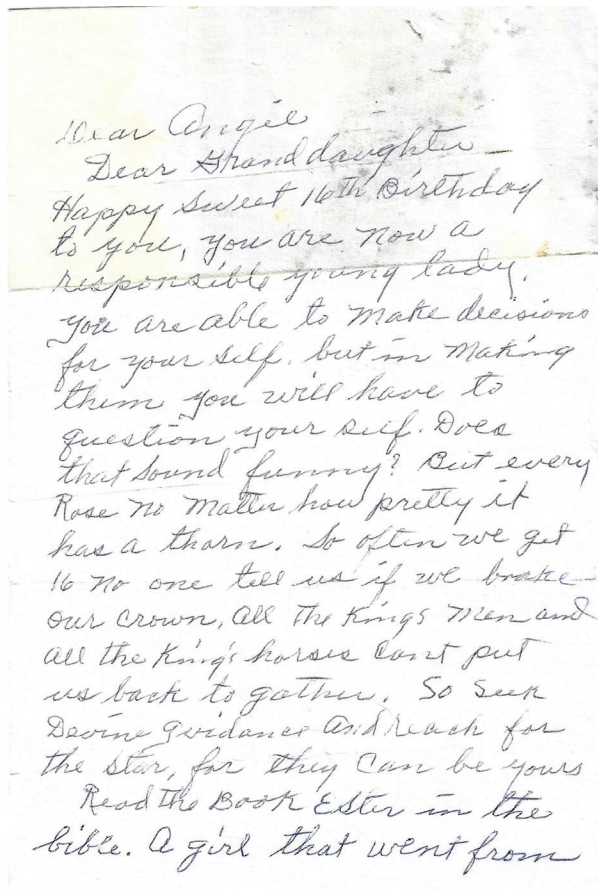
### LETTERS THAT ENCOURAGE

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 1:15-19, Romans 8:31-39, and 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

### Share or reflect:

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11. In each passage, how does Paul encourage the gathered church? Do you find these encouraging? Why or why not? Which, if any, parts of these letters are especially inspiring for you?
  12. Write down your favorite sentence from these passages. Consider posting it at home on your refrigerator, door, mirror or somewhere you'll notice it daily.
  13. How could you encourage your pastor and other church leaders in a note or letter?
  14. How might you encourage friends or family through a note or letter?

When I was 16, Grandma Sadie sent me a “coming of age” letter. Below is the first page.



## CONCLUSION

When it comes to letter writing, sometimes our words do not flow easily. When this happens to me, I read cards, greetings and letters (including Paul's). When I read poignant, funny and caring words that communicate presence, I feel inspired again.

In an age of constant busy-ness and noise, writing letters helps us remember our human connection to each other. Whether we're introverted or extroverted we all crave presence. Writing letters helps me to connect with and be present for others. The best thing about a letter is that, unlike spoken words we can no longer recall, we can read a letter again and again.

My grandmother Sadie died in 2004 and laid claim to all the promises of baptism. Now, each time I read her letter, it becomes a “thin space” for me, lifting the veil between now and the hereafter just a bit, reminding me of God's love through her. I pray that you, too, can write and receive a letter like this.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Your friend,  
Pastor Angela

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