

My older sister Margaret celebrated her 50th birthday this past December 7. On December 25 the hard drive crashed on her computer. On December 28 she went ice skating with our nieces, fell, and broke her leg; she's in a cast up over the hip. They tell me there are worse things than turning 50 but I'm beginning to wonder. We take so much for granted -- the simple joy of walking; the technological marvel of the computer. It generally takes something serious to make us appreciate what we have and to evaluate how we protect it.

The months I spent on sabbatical helped me evaluate how I spend my time and how I share my life. A life-threatening disease can actually help people devote their time better to what they believe is important.

Unfortunately we usually need some catalyst to force us into that kind of evaluation. It may be some form of deprivation, like a serious illness or a journey away from home. It may be the encroachment of an enemy, as people discover in time of war. Ordinarily in life, we get into some routines that become comfortable, even if they're not very useful, and sometimes they cause stress for the people we love. If we could step away from them we could probably perform the necessary self-criticism to make our lives more whole and our relationships with others more healthy. But usually we need a catalyst; and very often -- if it's not a broken bone, a crashed computer, or a sabbatical -- somebody just has to tell us what we need to know.

St. Paul provided that catalyst for the people of Corinth. Corinth sits on the isthmus that joins the upper and lower portions of the peninsula of Greece. Corinth was to Greece what Columbia is to Missouri. If you want to go from Kansas City to St. Louis, you're gonna see Columbia. If you want to go from northern to southern Greece, you have to go through Corinth; it's still true. Within twenty years after Jesus died missionaries brought his message to Corinth; if you've got a product you want to get it into big markets. That was Corinth and many people there received the good news. However, dissension arose. People heard the message in different ways and they polarized; some claimed Paul as their leader; others claimed Peter (here called by his Greek name "Cephas"), and others claimed Apollos, an Egyptian missionary with a reputation as a great speaker. Paul could not bear this kind of division. It was completely contrary to the gospel. So he sent this letter, what we call the first letter to the Corinthians, as a catalyst to get them to reevaluate. Paul's point still cuts to the heart: Whenever there are factions in Christianity, the whole religion is weakened. The cross, Paul laments, becomes emptied of its power. This reading comes up this year during the annual week of prayer for church unity; to our utter shame, the Christian religions still exist in factions, and even within the religious bodies disagreements abound. This plight is not unique to churches. Interior differences afflict other bodies too, like congress, school districts, and families. People who should be rallied around the same vision are distracted by the emotional intensity of lesser matters.

The catalyst Paul offers is quite simple, the gospel, the redemption of Jesus Christ. Once you got that going for you, you can put up with a lot. So, let's allow St. Paul's letter to serve as our catalyst as well. As we

prepare to welcome Pope John Paul II to our state, let this be a week when we recommit ourselves to the heart of the Christian message, the gospel, and give our love especially to those who share our values, Christians, Americans, and family.