

I Corinthians 3:1-11 ¹And so, beloved, I could not speak to you as spiritual people but rather as people of the flesh; as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. As long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human? ⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters share one purpose, and each will receive wages according to their own labor. ⁹For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building. ¹⁰According to the grace of God given me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

I Corinthians 3:1-11

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“Working Together”

Rev. Amy Terhune

This past summer, while we were working in Puerto Rico on the youth mission trip, I noticed that one of our team leaders had a really interesting tee-shirt. It was bright yellow, and it had all kinds of tools depicted on it – hammer, screwdriver, T-square, saw, lathe, paintbrushes, and so forth, and in the center on the front, it said, “Christian Under Construction”. I commented on the shirt to him, noting that it was very Wesleyan. Being a good presbyterian, he wasn’t sure what to do with that, but I noticed that he walked away whistling “God’s Still Working on Me”. For those who don’t know that old camp tune, the words go like this:

It took him just a week to make the moon and stars
The sun and the earth and Jupiter and Mars
How loving and patient He must be
'Cause God's still workin' on me.

And that is good news. All of us are works in progress. If we turn to our scripture lesson this morning, we find proof that even those in the early church were a work in progress. Paul is in Ephesus when word comes to him that the church in Corinth—which he himself planted and labored to build up for a year and half—was riddled with conflict and resentment. The reports are alarming. Some members of the church are going hungry while others gorge themselves and get drunk on the communion wine. They’re at odds about what they can or cannot eat, who they can or cannot marry, and whether they can marry at all. They’re unsure of certain theological truths regarding the meaning and import of resurrection and new life in Christ, and so they argue about what is right to teach and proclaim to the larger community. Some stick to what Paul taught. Some are going with what Apollos taught. How can the church be a beacon of hope, a haven of grace, an example of love for neighbor and enemy alike, when the very community of Christ has spiraled down into factionalism and bickering? And so Paul writes. And it’s not great literature. He skips around from one metaphor to another—babies, plants, buildings—in order to make his point. But then, Paul’s purpose isn’t great

literature. His letters are nothing if not pragmatic. They offer very real guidance, instruction, warnings, defense, and encouragement. The danger the modern church faces is to take these letters of Paul—written to specific communities facing specific issues and controversies unique to their time and place—and try to generalize them as applicable rules and stricture in every time and place. Paul himself would have cautioned us against such trivialization. Rather, it is when we dig into the text that we find certain underlying truths which can rightly continue to guide and inform the contemporary church.

But before we proceed, allow me to provide a bit of relevant background information: remember that Corinth was a very cosmopolitan place. It was a New York or London of its day. Built against great cliffs on an isthmus about 4 miles wide, it was easily defensible and directly in the path of merchants passing between two main shipping lanes of the ancient empire. Thus, Corinth boomed with trade and commerce. The people of Corinth came from all corners of the empire—from Northern Europe and from Eastern Asia and from Africa. They were ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse. They spoke many languages and ate different kinds of food. Scholars debated different philosophies and worldviews, so Corinth boasted a certain tolerance. There were shrines to various gods and goddesses everywhere, representing the many persuasions of the populace. Christians in Corinth reaped the benefits of this kind of situation. They did not face nearly as much persecution or scorn as did many other of the early churches in the Roman Empire. In such an environment, the danger was not that the church would have to face censure and violence. Rather, the danger was that their new faith would be deemed largely insignificant—that their behavior would discredit their message in the eyes of the community.

So Paul writes. I feed you with milk because you are infants in Christ. Okay. Seems a little demeaning, a little patronizing, don't you think? But that is specific to the people of Corinth, whose faith is, at most, three years old. Yet if we unpack it a bit, we find a profound wisdom implied in the teaching: growth is not an option. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. God gave the growth, and God designed us to grow. It's in our very nature—both in flesh and in spirit. That's Paul's point.

And so Paul, who is sometimes painfully blunt, calls them babies. It's a telling description. As growing humans, we are made of flesh. That's a scientific reality. But, notes Paul, we do not have to be dominated by needs of the flesh. And babies, after all, are consumed by the needs of their physical being. They cry to be fed, they cry to have their diapers changed, they cry when they're tired, they cry when they're scared, they cry when they're hot or cold, they cry when they're sick. They are indeed dominated by the flesh. They are the center of their world. It's the nature of infancy. But when I became a mother, I noticed something else, something that convinces me we are indeed made in God's image: babies cry to be held. When my girls were babies, there were times when every possible comfort had been seen to, and still, she would cry until I picked her up. I spent many hours walking the floor while my infant child slept in my arms. But the minute I tried to put her in the crib, the crying starts up again! At the time, it was utterly frustrating. But I recognize in that infant hunger to be held the seeds of God's grace for humankind. It is the infant hunger for connection, comfort, love, tenderness. While utterly selfish in infancy, when properly nurtured, that instinctual need to connect will lead us to reach out as we mature, and to offer ourselves as comforters, lovers, tender caregivers. This is the call of God on our lives.

Paul seems frustrated by the Corinthians failure to live like mature Christians. But I can't be so hard on them. I remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff talking about the first time he went into an American grocery store—how amazed he was by the range of selection and the modern conveniences. He said something like this: "On the first aisle, I saw powdered milk. Add water and poof—you get

milk. On the next aisle, I saw powdered potatoes. Add water and poof—you get mashed potatoes. On the next aisle, I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, ‘What a country!’”

If only it were that simple. Add the water of baptism and poof! Instant Christians! But of course, it isn’t that simple. It’s a process.

A visitor to the Grand Canyon once stood speechless before the grandeur of that marvelous sight. Finally he recovered enough to exclaim, "I wish I had been here to see this happen." The ranger standing nearby said, "You are!" The ranger was saying that the Grand Canyon is still happening. That mighty gorge in the earth is still changing, still deepening. So it is with us. [adapted from “We Are God's Temple” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

We are a work in progress. We are called to continually grow and mature into persons of faith capable of digesting the meat of the gospel—the call to love and serve others unselfishly and unreservedly. But of course, the longer we are involved in church, the more we realize that none of us is as together as we appear. Greed, lust, anger – Christians struggle with these things, just as much as anyone. Our pews are full of the imperfect—the thief, the schemer, the adulterous, the gossip, the backstabber, the unforgiving, the bitter, the hateful, the money-hungry, the pompous and arrogant. Our pews are full of the wounded—the cynical, the sick, the hurting, the dying, the damaged, the lost, the ashamed, the addicted, the friendless, the downtrodden, the exhausted, and the hopeless. And lest I sound like I’m judging you, keep in mind that what is true of our pews is all too often true of our pulpits. I’m every bit as imperfect as the rest of you. We’re all here, and sometimes, we give in to those baser instincts, which has led some to say the church is full of hypocrites. Partly true. We profess something that most of us cannot live up to all of the time. We fall, we stumble, we backslide, we regress. But it is also true that we’re full of folks who want to take faith seriously, who want it to impact their plans, their choices, their dreams, their emotions, their relationships, and their behavior in the world. But we’re still ‘under construction’, so to speak. John Wesley called it ‘striving for perfection’—a good Methodist term. This doesn’t mean we’ll get to a place where we never make a mistake in math or spill spaghetti sauce on our nice white shirts. Wesley followed Christ, who defined everything in relation to loving God and neighbor. To strive for perfection is to commit our energy and our will to growing in our capacity to love more deeply, more completely, more genuinely.

To be in the spirit is to put down roots that tap into the life-giving flow of God’s nourishment. Paul would teach us not only that we are growing up, but that we are growing deeper. As we plunge beneath the flesh, we find the deeper, inner spiritual reservoir that gives us deeper insight into life. We have more in common that we have differences.

Later tonight, the Kansas City Chiefs will take on the Philadelphia Eagles in Phoenix, Arizona. There will be moments of incredible talent, and there will be moments of heart-breaking error. That’s how it goes. But the team that wins will be the one that plays best together. But it reminds me of a story I read recently by Joseph M. Stowell. He writes...

“Before our son’s freshman football game a few weeks back, one of his coaches shouted at a player and abruptly dismissed him from the field. A coach on the sidelines looked squarely through the bars of the boy’s helmet, spoke sternly to him, and sent him to the locker room. We wondered what could have ever evoked such a strong response from the coaches. As soon as our son got home from the game, we asked him. He answered simply: "He shoved his teammate."

“What a profound principle: If you are in it to win, you work together to defeat the opponent. Shoving your own threatens the effort.

“For a long time I have felt that we Christians have afforded ourselves a debilitating luxury, that of bashing one another. And in particular, we tend to shove our leaders. Most pastors, teachers, missionaries, elders, and national spokesmen understand that unwarranted criticism, innuendo,

misunderstanding, and maligning of motives go with the territory of leadership. But it doesn't make it right. [3 ¶s from Joseph M. Stowell, illustrations for Epiphany VI – yr. A on www.Sermons.com.]

Indra Nooyi, an India born woman who was Chairman and CEO of PepsiCo from 2006-2018, grew up with loving parents. She was quite close to her father, and she tells about a lesson she learned from him: always assume positive intent. Regardless of what one says or does, always assume it originates from a positive intention. She went on to say, "you will be amazed at how your whole approach to a person or problems becomes very different. If you assume negative intent, your anger goes up, you get defensive and your response is random and unpredictable. But when we assume positive intent and we listen, we're non defensive, and we seek to understand." We can approach persons and problems from a place of grace. [from Brett Blair, illustrations for Epiphany VI – yr. A on www.Sermons.com.]

There are all kinds of great leaders and teachers in the world. And some resonate more than others. But only one is the foundation upon which we build our lives and our dreams. Only one has the power to build a Kingdom around us where there is real and lasting peace, love, equity, justice, compassion and grace. And Jesus shares that power when he touches hearts and lives. Friends, there are all sorts of people out there who say that our society has grown callous and hard-hearted. But I'm here to testify this morning that it's not true. Why does a team of Army engineers take a red-eye military flight on a cargo plane to Syria to dig through rubble after an earthquake? Why does a chef from Washington DC organize millions of meals for Ukrainians? Why does an educated surgeon who graduated top of his class in Ann Arbor spend his days in the slums of Rio De Janeiro? Why does a promising business woman give it up to run a homeless shelter? You know why. Because they believe in sowing love and not hate. Because they're invested in healing and not hurting. Because they want to be part of building Jesus' dream for the world. Because Jesus touched their lives and they want to share the peace of Christ. Because working together will always mean more than shoving our way to the top. If you're grieving the latest shooting, or the poverty and destruction on display in Turkey and Syria, or the divisive rhetoric in our nation's capital, or the brokenness of our world, resist the urge to shove back. Instead, be another's hope today. Life built on a rock-solid foundation is good. Hearts change. Systems change. Healing happens. And brick by brick, the kingdom flourishes. This is the blessing and the power of serving Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.