

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

1 And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?

4 For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.

9 For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

BIG BABY

No one likes to be called a big baby. But, that seems to be what Paul is calling the Corinthians. He tells them that they are "infants in Christ" who are not ready for solid food.

Of course this is exactly the opposite of how the Corinthians viewed themselves. They thought that they were wise and filled with every spiritual gift. They thought that their church was the best church in town.

Paul conceded that the church at Corinth was gifted. He conceded that they had great leaders.

But, Paul didn't see them as wise and mature. On the contrary he saw the Corinthians as weak and immature Christians who needed a lot of help.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he mentions a painful visit. (2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4) It's no surprise to me that his next visit to Corinth was painful. Can you imagine the reaction if I stood up one Sunday morning and said,

"You guys are just a bunch of babies. You need to grow up!"

Before long I would have to update my resume!

The same was true in Corinth. They might have been acting like babies, but they sure didn't want to hear that hard truth, even if it came from the great Apostle.

Paul had it right in his second letter to Timothy when he wrote that the time was soon coming when people won't put up with sound doctrine. They will hire preachers to scratch them where they itch and tell them what they already believe. (2 Timothy 4:3)

IMMATURITY TODAY

That's right Paul. Tell those sorry Corinthians the truth. They need to hear it.

It's a good thing that we don't act that way. We are wiser and more mature in the church today.

Unlike the Corinthians we're not new Christians. We have the benefit of thousands of years of church history and sound doctrine. We have many different ways to measure spiritual maturity in the church.

And yet, in many ways the church at Corinth is not all that different from the church today. The times may change but human nature does not change. And the measure of true spiritual maturity is not what we know but how we treat each other, the life that we live together.

Look at how Paul defines spiritual immaturity.

In verses 3 and 4 the Apostle says the church is immature because there is jealousy and quarreling.

Paul says they are immature because they act according to what they want instead of what God wants.

They are immature because they follow human beings instead of following God.

I'm afraid Paul's description of immaturity still describes the church today. We emphasize the small things that we have in difference instead of the big things that we have in common. Many of the disagreements in the church today are due to jealousy and misunderstanding.

We in the church are called to be different. We are called to be a provisional demonstration of the kingdom of God. But, often we let our human nature get the best of us. Our lives do not reflect the good news of the gospel. Instead, we let fear divide us.

What can we do to change?

THE ECONOMY OF THE CROSS

Paul suggests that we must learn to measure our life and the lives of others in a new way. The Christian faith must give us a whole new way of looking at the world.

One commentator put it well. He said that we must be willing to use the economy of the cross as the measure of our world instead of the economy of the world.

Let's think about that.

What is the economy of the world based upon? It's a competitive economy. We work hard to produce so that we might be more successful as the world defines success.

It means that we are always trying to get ahead of our neighbor. It's an economy that depends (to a certain extent) upon jealousy. We want more of what the world has to offer, and we struggle to get it.

Even when we have retired from the system we still have that competitive spirit. We have this natural tendency to want more and be the best.

All things being equal I would prefer my favorite team to win the Super Bowl. I would prefer to get the promotion. I would like my church to be the one that is growing and thriving.

I think this is human nature.

But, on the cross we see an action that went against human nature. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus struggled with the sacrifice that he had to make.

The cross was not a natural or an easy choice. Human beings do not naturally sacrifice themselves. We want to preserve our life and our way of life for as long as possible.

And the Bible tells us that Jesus was fully human, that he was tempted in every way just as we are. He did not want to die.

But, the cross was the sacrifice that changed the world. The cross shows us the power of humility and sacrifice. There was a resurrection after the cross.

And those who witnessed that power were transformed. Frightened fishermen became bold disciples who gave up their profession to fish for men and women, to serve others in the name of Christ.

And that transformation has been happening ever since.

The economy of the world values power, competition, and money. The economy of the cross values sacrifice, and cooperation, grace and forgiveness.

LEADERS AND IDOLATRY

Paul told the Corinthians that they needed to reflect these core faith values in the way they lived. Instead of making their leaders into an idol they needed to remember that they were just human beings. Their only distinction was that they had been called to a special task.

Paul said that he and Apollos were servants, God's slaves who had been given the task of preaching the gospel. The Corinthians needed to make sure that they didn't confuse the messenger with the message.

And then Paul gives them an analogy. It's as if he and Apollos were working in a garden. Paul planted. Apollos watered. But, it was God who gave the growth.

And therefore it is God alone who should be worshipped and praised.

John Calvin once said in a very memorable phrase that human beings are virtual "idol factories." Isn't that true?

We worship, we put our ultimate trust in all sorts of things that are not worthy of that trust. We worship sports, hobbies, family and friends. And quite often I've noticed that people worship religious leaders.

It's very tempting to accept that worship. It's very tempting to think that we are "in the know" when it comes to all things holy. But, the very nature of the Christian faith precludes that kind of adulation.

AN EXAMPLE OF SERVICE

Jesus knew that it would be difficult for his disciples to avoid this temptation. That's why on the night before he died Jesus gave his disciples a graphic example of what it would mean to lead in the kingdom of God.

Most of you know the story. The disciples were in the upper room. They were tired and their feet were dirty from a long day of travel. It was the custom in those days for the most junior member of the group to wash those tired dirty feet.

But, the disciples were not in agreement about whom that might be. So, it hadn't been done. I suspect as it happened so many times in the past, they even used this occasion as a time to argue about who would be the greatest in the kingdom.

And it was at this moment that Jesus tied a towel around his waist, poured water in a basin, kneeled down and started to wash his disciples' feet.

And when Jesus was through he told his disciples,

“You call me Lord, and you should. I am your Lord and Master.

And I do this humble service for you to show you what the kingdom is all about. You ought to wash one another's feet. Humble service is the essence of what it means to be my follower.” (John 13:1-16)

There are some churches that think a foot washing ceremony should actually be a sacrament in the church. I would be hard pressed to disagree with them. Probably the only reason it isn't a sacrament in more churches is that like those early disciples we would find such a service to be uncomfortable.

But, the main point, according to Jesus is that this is an example of what it means to be his follower. The way of Jesus is the way of humble service.

It is not the way of lording it over someone else and insisting on our rights. It is the way of voluntarily giving up our “rights” in order to serve our brother or sister.

CONFLICT AND IMMATURITY

This is an example that hits all of us where it hurts. We often see the quarreling and division in our ranks though the lens of righteous indignation.

Isn't it a shame that those “other people” cause trouble?

But, suppose it's not just them. Suppose it's us as well. Maybe conflict is also a sign of our own spiritual immaturity.

Charles Colson told of despising the anti-war protesters who filed by the White House during the Nixon years. He felt like they were aiding an abetting the enemy. And so he was absolutely opposed to all of them.

But, then, as has been well documented, Colson was caught up in the Watergate scandal. He went to prison, and that changed his life. He became a Christian and on account of his experience in prison he developed a ministry to prisoners that continues to this day.

A woman who had been a part of those demonstrators that he had despised so much helped him in his work. When Charles learned this, he had a hard time with it.

He was now working with someone whom he once considered to be an enemy of our country. Colson's politics had not changed, and yet because of his newfound respect for this woman he had a dilemma.

In the end he learned to accept her as a sister in Christ and appreciate her viewpoints even though they were not his own. Colson made allowance for grace and forgiveness. The man who talked about being born again was learning what it meant to become a mature Christian.

This is a process that all of us must learn. If we are to mature as Christians we must learn to step back from our conflicts.

Often in the church we choose sides and leaders. We suggest that we can't live with people who have a certain opinion.

In days gone by church conflicts even led to armed conflict. Today it often leads to division into different denominations and statements of condemnation toward those who disagree with us.

Now don't misunderstand. I'm not suggesting that we abandon what we believe is important and true.

But, on the other hand, I think it's also wrong to try and force someone believe something that they don't really believe.

Part of the problem we have been having in the Presbyterian Church is that for too long we have been doing that very thing. We have been trying to force people to see things our way.

RETELLING THE STORY

I think it is possible to disagree strongly with another Christian and yet be willing to step back and retell the story so that everyone can acknowledge the other as a sister or brother in Christ. I think it is possible to recognize how someone who is quite different from us in some significant ways is also engaged in an important work for the kingdom of God.

This, in my opinion, is the mark of Christian maturity. It is a recognition that what God is doing is always greater than what I can imagine.

Can you imagine calling someone with a radically different political view a sister in Christ? Can you imagine calling someone with a significantly different theological view a brother in Christ?

The Corinthians put limits on their love. Their love was limited to those who had a certain viewpoint and followed a certain leader. But, the mature Christian recognizes that the love of God does not have limits.

In our lesson for today Paul wrote, "We are God's servants, working together ..."

I think that is a good way to look at our life together. We are God's servants. A servant is not in charge. A servant awaits the orders of his or her master when the time comes.

The servant may not know why the master commands a certain thing to be done. But the servant does it without question. On the other hand the good master has a plan that when followed is good for the entire household.

We have a hard time with this kind of language. We live in a democracy where there is freedom and individuals choose their own path.

But, we need to remember that the church is not a democracy. The church is a theocracy. The church is the body of Christ.

And the head of the church is not the preacher or the elders or the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. The head of the church is Jesus. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

And we don't get to judge who is in and who is out when it comes to the kingdom. Jesus will take care of that later.

We get to follow orders. We get to work with all kinds of people. Some are mature in the faith. Some are contentious. Some will agree with us and some will disagree with us in some very important ways.

But, all are a part of God's plan and all are charged to build each other up. We are charged to promote growth in the Kingdom of God.

That is the measure of all our actions and words.

This past week I was reminded of this important fact. Someone had written to me as the Stated Clerk of Central Florida Presbytery asking for a ruling. I sent an elaborate, well-documented reply only to learn that this person was not a member of the Presbyterian Church USA but a member of the Presbyterian Church in America.

(Now for those of you who don't know the history, the PCA is a very conservative offshoot of our denomination, and the split in the church was very contentious.)

But, due to this misunderstanding I sought out the name of the Stated Clerk of the PCA presbytery our area, and gave him a call. Right after I did a Bible study on this passage he gave me a call back.

He was an absolutely delightful fellow. We laughed about common concerns and the fact that someone had sent their complaint to the wrong denomination. We talked about getting together some time.

I noticed that as he talked he sometimes referred to me as “brother”, and our denomination as a “sister” denomination. Those words made me feel really good. And I thought to myself,

“This is what the passage is talking about. This is Christian maturity. We are more than denominational labels and doctrinal positions. We are God’s servants working together.”

This week I would suggest that you think about this wonderful and difficult truth.

Make a point to pray for someone who differs from you in some important way. Try to listen sympathetically to a viewpoint that is not your own.

Think about the fact that the kingdom of God is wider and deeper than we sometimes imagine.

Let grace be more than a word. Let it be a way of life.

Amen.