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1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Formed for Growth

When I was young my family traveled a lot between Texas and Kansas, visiting family. My sister and I rode in the backseat. Sometimes the journey seemed long, and we were bored. We thought of ways to entertain ourselves. One of those ways was to remember, name, and sing songs, usually Christmas or Gospel songs that we knew from church. I don’t remember which one of us first named the song, but I remember the argument. You see, I knew I was right. My sister claimed the song was “Bringing in the Cheese.” I knew that was wrong. Where in the Bible does it talk about cheese, much less about bringing in the cheese. But the Bible talks a lot about shepherds and sheep. I was positive the song was “Bringing in the Sheep.” Of course, we were both wrong. The Gospel song is ”Bringing in the Sheaves” and it refers to Bible verses about sowing and reaping.

It was a childish mistake, based on what we both thought we heard and knew, the kind of mistake with language that is fairly common for young children. In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul claims that the people there are arguing like children. “I could not speak to you as spiritual people,” he writes, “but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food. Even now you are still not ready, 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?”

For Paul, spiritual people live lives shaped by the cross. As Caley reminded us last Sunday, to be shaped by the cross is to set aside position, privilege, prestige, to empty ourselves, sharing our brokenness and vulnerability, entering into the suffering of others with compassion and empathy. That is not what the Corinthians were doing.

Instead of looking to Christ, they were judging each other by human standards. To be of the flesh is to judge by wealth, prestige, honor, knowledge, position. It is to assume the rightness of one’s own position. And so they argued. They took sides. Was it better to follow Paul or Apollos? Which leader was better? Which was right? Which understanding was correct? Each side thought they were right.

Their struggle is not unique. It has plagued the church from their day to ours. Is it better to follow Menno Simons or Martin Luther or John Calvin or the Pope? Do we side with the evangelicals or the progressives or the mainstream churches? Is it better to be Catholic or Protestant or Anabaptist? Or to bring it right here, do we prefer Jon or Juan, Caley or Barb? Is it a competition?

Or what about how we worship? Do we sing hymns or choruses? Do we follow the lectionary or some other way of using Scripture? Is our style formal or informal? Are we liturgical or charismatic? And what about how we read the Bible? Do we hold everything the same or are some parts more important than other parts?

The struggles of the church in Corinth are not that different than our struggles today. It is easy to focus on differences, especially the differences that divide us. I have named only a few. The list could go on and on, throughout the history of the church right up to and including the present. We don’t really know why some in the church at Corinth preferred Apollos or Paul. Was it preaching style or message, Christology or theology, presence or absence, personality or charisma? Does it even matter?

I think some differences do matter more than others. Convictions matter. They affect the choices we make, the way we live our lives, the ways that we experience God’s presence. People have lived and died based on their convictions.

So what do we do when our convictions or differences separate us in the church, in the congregation? Paul offers us another metaphor, an agricultural metaphor. “I planted. Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” We are formed for growth. We know that physically. We know how infants grow into children, into teens, into adults. We know how education helps us grow intellectually. We know that seeds are planted, that they need nutrients and water, and that they grow into plants that eventually produce fruit. But we don’t make them grow. We don’t make our bodies grow from birth to adulthood. We may provide the nutrients but the growth comes from God. We are formed to grow.

Our spiritual lives are also formed to grow. Think back to the faith you had as a child or new believer. I suspect your faith is different now. It has changed. Growth implies change. That means that what we believe now may change in the future as we listen to God’s word and discern with other believers. We don’t know what direction that growth might take. What we do know is that God works with us where we are at. That doesn’t mean our convictions are wrong. It means we need to hold them with humility. Micah 6:8 is one of my favorite Bible verses, It says, “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” I think part of walking humbly is to recognize that God is still teaching me, I am still learning, and God gives me growth and understanding, that I haven’t arrived yet. It means I need to listen to other believers, to their experiences, and that I need to share my own with them. It means that, although my convictions are important, I need to be open to what God still wants to teach me. It means sometimes I am wrong, or at least, only partly right.

Paul says that he and Apollos are God’s servants, working together, and that the church is God’s field, God’s building. To be formed for growth means we focus on our shared commitment to the one who makes us grow, to God our Creator who formed us for growth. It means we focus on our shared commitment to Christ, who calls us to love God and our neighbor. It means we build, not on our differences, but on our desire to live and serve as God’s beloved children, growing in grace and truth. It means we are open to learn from each other as we share our joys and sorrows, our questions and understandings, our failures and successes.

Our congregation is part of Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference. PSMC is a diverse group of congregations. We are not united by our form of worship. We are not unified by language or culture or even theology. This is what we say about ourselves:

“*We are a diverse body, gathering for worship in many languages and coming from all corners of the globe. We are Anabaptist Christians who embrace various expressions of worship and theological points of view—charismatic, evangelical, liturgical, Pentecostal, and progressive among others. Following Jesus, our mission is to create Spirit-filled healing community across boundaries, sharing God’s love, justice and peace with each other and with our local and global neighbors.”*

Here at First Mennonite, Primera Iglesia Menonita, our two services differ in worship style, language, and culture. We don’t always understand the Bible in the same way. We bring different past experiences and knowledge to the table. But we are called to love one another, to support each other, to carry each other’s burdens, to bear with each other. It’s not about following Jon or Juan or Barb or Caley. It’s not about enforcing orthodoxy in our beliefs. It is about shared commitment to following Jesus and opening ourselves to God’s Spirit, allowing God to work in our lives as we relate to each other and to those around us.

“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

May we open ourselves to God’s purposes, a fertile field where God can work bringing growth that bears fruit pleasing to God and a blessing to our neighbors.