

## February 12, 2017: Paul Admonishes the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 3:1-9)

We know lots about the early Christian movement from various texts in the New Testament: people gathering in homes to share bread, people meeting in the temple, learning and absorbing the apostolic teachings, experiencing fellowship, increasing in number daily. We also know that the early church was embroiled in disagreements. Jesus seemed to know that discord would be inevitable. He outlined, for example, a first-class conflict-management strategy in Matthew 18.

St. Paul's letters were preserved at first by the communities to whom they were sent. By the end of the first century, Paul's surviving correspondence began to be collected into some kind of Pauline corpus that began to circulate in the churches.

The Corinthians certainly had their squabbles. We read about them this morning. Corinth was a prosperous ancient city connected with Greece and the Orient, a centre of trade and industry, particularly ceramics. The church in Corinth was fairly large, some Jews in its membership but predominantly Gentiles, a yeasty mix of classes and religious backgrounds, the majority of humble birth and education. Paul's stay in Corinth was, for him, unusually long: 18 months, we learn from Acts. A number of effective teachers had passed through Corinth. A Christian rabbi named Apollos had been made a deep impression. Apollos was an Alexandrian Jew with a gift of eloquence and learning, and a profound understanding of the Old Testament. He was an expert in Christian apologetics: contending for faith. There had been many conversions in the Jewish community. But ugly divisions began. Converts began making comparisons between the various teachers. These comparisons became battle-cries, factions in the name of Paul, Apollos, another leader, Cephus, and Christ himself. Many said they loved Apollos' polished eloquence. The deadly poison of negativity and dissention that can infect community and rot the fabric of love.

Paul goes to great lengths to say that there is no cause for party spirit, that both he and Apollos worked together. Paul had a close relationship to the church in Corinth, as their first evangelist. His intense love for them is clear: it explains the vehemence of his reproaches. Paul notes elsewhere that his Corinthian friends possessed a considerable number of spiritual gifts.

Notice Paul's agricultural imagery. The Corinthians are quarrelling about which gardener is more important. Verse 3. You are still worldly, Paul says in his forceful Greek. There is jealousy and quarreling among you. One says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos." Are you not mere human beings? Who, after all, is Apollos? And who is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe. **I planted the seed, Apollos watered the seed, but God is making the seed grow. You are God's field. We together are co-workers.** Their activities, planting or watering, ought not to be the cause of dissention. Each has his own responsibility.

The Matthew passage discusses the **lex talionis**: eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. We are familiar with "turning the other cheek" theology. Maybe we even think ho-hum. It's the last verse in that text, however, that gives us pause: be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect. The perfection demanded of a disciple springs from attitudes that have been turned upside down. This perfection is unattainable - and therefore continually to be aimed for. It strikes me, however, that for hundreds of years the church has laboured with this ecclesiology of perfection, our branch of Protestantism

in particular. It has not always been good news to us. I think Catholics agree. Listen to Ronald Rolheiser, in his book, *Forgotten Among the Lilies*. "If the Catholicism in which I was raised had a fault, and it did, it was precisely that it did not allow for mistakes. It demanded that you get it right the first time. There was supposed to be no need for a second chance. If you made a mistake, you lived with it, and like the rich young man, you were doomed to be sad, at least for the rest of your life. A serious mistake was a permanent stigmatization, a mark that you wore like Cain. I have seen that mark on all kinds of people: divorcees, ex-priests, the ex-religious, people who have had abortions, married people who have had affairs, people who have had children outside of marriage, parents who have made serious mistakes with their children, and countless others. We need a theology of brokenness! He writes. We need a theology that teaches us that even though we cannot unscramble an egg, God's grace lets us live happily and with renewed innocence far beyond any egg that we may have scrambled. We need a theology that teaches us that God doesn't just give us one chance, but that every time we close a door, God opens another one for us." End of quote.

The women and men to whom God is present are ordinary, flawed human beings. The Anglican Book of Common Prayer says about our vexed human condition: "We have done those things which we ought not to have done. And we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and there is no health in us." Thomas Cranmer wrote those words for King Henry VIII. On the last day of the American civil war in 1865, officer Joshua Chamberlain was in command of the Union army. His soldiers lined up on both sides of the road down which the Confederate army had to march in order to surrender. One ill-considered word, one belligerent act and the longed-for peace could become slaughter. In a brilliant act, Chamberlain ordered his troops to salute their foe. No taunting, no vicious words, he said: guns only in salute, swords raised to honour. Jesus often spoke about being people of such grace.

What can we learn from the early church and its struggles? The church grew because it learned that within the creative tension of diversity the Spirit brings growth. Difference in worship practices, ethnic backgrounds, economic class, education, different people drawn to different leaders. Sound familiar? May we be people of growth and grace, as we go into communion. Thanks be to God.