

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday after Epiphany
February 16, 2020

Old Testament Lesson

Psalm 1

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

1 Corinthians 3:3–11 NRSV

For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human? 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. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building. According to the grace of God given to 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. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

What’s Happening in the Garden?

One of the brightest, most insightful, and helpful professors I had **in seminary** held a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies and Ancient Languages and taught several courses on the New Testament. Like many of my seminary professors, he was ordained in the Presbyterian church and has remained very focused on insuring that our knowledge from seminary, specifically **Biblical knowledge**, would find a very **practical** application for us graduates working in the church. This had to be a **challenge**, because only about 30-35% of my seminary class members were Presbyterian. Our classes were composed of us Presbyterian students, Calvinists from the Midwest, and Methodists and Wesleyans, along with Lutherans, Episcopalians, many people from a variety of denominations, and several students who were not affiliated with any mainline denomination.

So, the reality and **challenge** of this was complicated even more: Several of my schoolmates never intended to become a parish pastor, but were obtaining their **Master of Divinity** degree before pursuing additional graduate degrees, such as a Ph.D. Still others planned to take their M.Div. degree and intentionally seek employment with a non-profit entity. Somehow, this professor was able **to reach** nearly **all** of us, all the while drawing out, or mining, the riches of the **Biblical texts**. This professor remains a skillful teacher. He regularly publishes authoritative papers in five or six ancient languages. This is his particular **gift**.

But, this professor had another skill as an educator. He had a pretty broad **experience of the world**. He was well-rounded, having played **competitive sports**, golf in particular, all the way through his college years. And, he had been a **varsity athlete** in high school in the other standard sports of football, basketball, and baseball. So, this gifted teacher was easily approached in a conversation over coffee or in the hallway. He had a variety of interests and experiences, And, he remains **approachable and personable** in his position in the administration of Princeton Theological Seminary.

But, the other dimension that played out so well in the classroom, was that this scholar of the New Testament grew up on a **large farm** in the Midwest. Wheat was the principle crop, and he was familiar with the cycle of preparing the ground, **planting seed**, tending the crop against harmful insects, and disposing of weeds that competed for the precious **water** for the wheat. And, he new about the timing of **a harvest** and the thrill of **a bumper crop** and the agony of **a drought**, which meant **no harvest** at all. With all of that very necessary work of planting and the applications of nutrients and herbicides, came the big-stakes **financing** behind it all, resulting in financial boon or total ruin. And, all of it was dependent on **the weather!** In summary, full time farming is a **labor intense** undertaking with significant requirements of time, energy, and financial resources.

So, when I read about **planting** and **watering** and **growing** in these images from the mind and pen of the **apostle Paul**, I had clear mental images of this on a large scale thanks to my professor. I know that a farmer can have a lot more at risk than most of understand from our limited experience in plants and gardening.

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.

1 Corinthians 3:6-7 NRSV

It seems that Paul really wanted us to know that we cannot take **growth** for granted. And, with some help and guidance from our **scripture lesson**, we can put on our theological “thinking caps” and address this interesting text provided to us today by the lectionary.

In our scripture lesson, Paul is in a **big dispute** with his contacts in the **church at Corinth**. But, Paul is some distance away, most likely back in the area around **Ephesus** in modern Turkey, hundreds of miles and several days journey removed from the **Greek city** of Corinth. Things have gone a bit “off track” since Paul departed from these converts to the new faith. **Paul is disappointed**, since he helped found this congregation. Remember, that in this time, what we now call the Christian faith was still in its **infancy**, just as Paul points out to us. This bit of church history after the **founding of the church** which we encounter in **Lent, Easter**, and the time following Easter that lead up to the gift of God’s Spirit at **Pentecost**.

Paul is disappointed that things are **coming undone** among these followers of Christ. He has lived through the growth and founding of these churches, which are **growing spontaneously** out of this new faith which has sprung out of **Judaism**. From our **21st century perspective**, we must remind ourselves that this is a new way of living for these people, soon to be called **Christians** by the largely pagan society that surrounded them.

The new believers in Jesus Christ differed from the common people in the way they lived, rejecting much of the norms of the **society** of Greece and Rome. Believers in Christ **forgave** the offenses of others. They gathered regularly in **prayer and worship**. They took care of **the sick**, even those who did not believe as they did. They offered a decent **burial** for their neighbors, even for non-believers in **stressful times**, such as epidemics. Casual observers noticed these differences, and it probably was a large factor in the **growth of the church** in these early decades. Living in this way gave rise to the term that the Christians gave themselves: They were following **the Way**.

But, according to Paul's letter all was **not well** among those who worshiped God through **Jesus Christ** in the busy city of **Corinth**. Paul gives us a glimpse of the **discord and squabbling** that was going on there, but likely something like it went on in the many congregations of Christian worship in the Mediterranean.

For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

1 Corinthians 3:3-4 NRSV

Something is going horribly **wrong**. This is not just a question of **baptism** or even circumcision, which was the hot topic for the **Galatians** in another letter. This is about **the church and its purpose**.

The infighting may sound pretty familiar to us from our work or club, but let's put personal experiences aside and study the underlying **focus** that Paul pointed out to the church **leadership and members** in Corinth. Thanks to the *Acts of the Apostles*, we do know a little about the characters involved here. We can assume that **Apollos** was the same fellow that was making the rounds in **Ephesus** and other churches in cities in Greece. He was a fine speaker who knew something about **Christ**, but he there were gaps in his knowledge of **the faith**. It took some **disciples** of another church, taught by Paul, to set him straight. From the book of *Acts*:

Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.

Acts 18:24-26 NRSV

So, Apollos was preaching **repentance** from sin. And, that was the message from **John the Baptist**. But, the faithful in **Ephesus** knew that there was much more to **following Christ**. **Apollos** received guidance on the faith from the very folks that had supported Paul when he founded the congregation. Now, this same Apollos is in another city, **Corinth**, where Paul has been working. This new speaker and **evangelist** on the scene may have been invited or sent there. But, **trouble had followed** Apollos and his words. Those believers **in Corinth** heard Apollos and liked what he said, and how he said it!

Perhaps, those in the church were comparing the **preaching style** of Apollos with what they remembered about **Paul**. Or, maybe they took sides, based on personal **friendship** with Paul or Apollos or someone else? In the middle of the conflict, Paul realized that this was **going badly**. The congregation became confused over some of the most **important parts** of the **Gospel message**. Paul told them that they were **immature** and lacked understanding about the true nature of the Christian life: The life they are **to live** each day. They were receiving the substance of the Gospel but were only prepared for milk, like infants. Paul went on to talk of planting the seeds for future growth. But, the responsibility for the Gospel and its growth was not coming from Paul, Apollos, or anyone else. Paul reminded them that the Gospel came from God through Jesus Christ. And, Paul boldly stated that **God** provided the **growth**. And now, today we have to ask ourselves: What kind of **soil** are you and I offering for our growth in **spirit**, in charity, in **service**, and in **living out the Gospel**?

In our scripture, **Paul** was bristling and wasted little time in imparting his wisdom, and judgement, to those asking for **support and guidance**. It seemed that those coming to him were insisting that he take sides in an ongoing **destructive argument** in a church where Paul had labored pretty hard. But, Paul showed that he not only was a pastor and church leader: **Paul** was a **theologian**, and probably the most brilliant in all of **Christian history**.

In his reply, he took them back to **the basics**. Apparently, the attempt to **wean** the membership from the introductory instruction on the Faith, the **milk** of the scripture verses, was all that they could handle at Corinth. Paul let these images of **dependency and immaturity** drift along in their minds, and now in ours. **Solid food** was the goal, the Gospel message **about Christ** that leads to **service and work** for the community around them. But, being the famous teacher Paul had a sudden onset of **serious indigestion**! He redirected the discussion away from **personalities** of Paul and the overly popular Apollos.

In our scripture, Paul **raised the bar** and immediately compared the **goal of learning**, the process of assimilation, to that intended by **Christ**.

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

1 Corinthians 3:4-6 NRSV

Paul reminds us that **our efforts** are **not creating the growth** of a church or someone's faith, any more than you and I produce the tiny **creation miracle** that is the sprouting of a dormant seed.

That is the role of the **Holy Spirit** from God and Jesus Christ. Instead, you and I are **nurturing** along this thing we call **faith** and this overarching creation that Christ placed before us: **the church** called by Christ. Paul provided a **fertile soil** and a warm and receptive environment for **growth** and maturity, along with the **nutrients** which God produced for this purpose in **God's Spirit**.

How would any of this apply to us today? We have a fine facility to **welcome our neighbors** and **the stranger**. We have some inkling of the Gospel message **in our hearts**, and we show nearly every day that we can relate well to those familiar to us and the occasional stranger.

But, **there is more to do**. Simply being who we are should make this kind of work of outreach relatively **easy**. Sometimes, just **showing up** is the hardest part. And, although we often hesitate to use the term, this really is **evangelism**. But, Paul knows that we need **reminding** and continual **direction**. That is why we **Presbyterians** train and ordain our leaders. We need consistent **guidance** like Paul recommended. We cannot remain **static** in our approach to God, our faith, or our living. And, we are expected to **make progress** in our learning, in **our living**, in our giving, and in **our service** to others.

In ancient Corinth, the church was growing, something that Paul had nurtured and pushed, and the miracle of growth was no longer limited to a garden or a field. In the same way, you and I are **growing here**, as well: watered and planted by **others** who have gone before us. And, all of it is **nurtured continually by God** through Jesus Christ.

So, how might this effect us? The **business owner** can begin to deal **more honestly** with customers, even when it means taking a small loss. Or, in the workplace we might **befriend** someone **outside our circle** of companions. Sometimes the situation comes to us without knowing: When we volunteer to **help children and adults** in reading, or assisting someone to complete their tax forms, or helping **a co-worker** who never thanks us when we help and support them. Many of these small seeds of **good will** are going to **grow** and bear fruit long after you and I plant the seed.

This is **Paul's message**: God provides **our growth**, and in return we are expected to grow and **mature** in our faith and in **our living**. That includes **accepting others** right where they are and showing **mercy**: the same gifts that you and I **receive** each day from God in **Jesus Christ**. And so, **what's happening in our garden**? Paul says that **God** is expecting some real growth. No matter where we start or how we got there, our **faith** and our **service** to God are expected to **grow**. And, we need to **look to God** continuously to accomplish this.

This means that we have to keep the core portion of **the Gospel message** before us at all times. When you and I begin to focus on minor details, we tend to disregard service and ministry. This is critical, because the **distractions** are unnecessary and, according to Paul, they are **totally detrimental** to the life and mission of the church **called by Christ**. Paul proclaims that we are called to **engage the world** and to develop **trust and tolerance** among each other. We are to avoid **creating conflict** among ourselves. Instead, we need to plant the seeds of **love and acceptance** and tend them like **a garden**. The Psalmist put it this way:

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

Psalm 1:3 NRSV

The apostle Paul was saying that **God provides** our growth. But, he also is explaining that God knows our **growing edges**, as well. God is urging each of us to keep **our focus** and to patiently allow our **faith** to grow and mature, as we look to God and the gift of **God's Son**. For, it is **Jesus Christ**, who points out the Way and remains with us to guide us as we grow in faith and service.

God provides the growth. Are you and I mature enough in our Faith, in our **giving**, in our **living** to do the work required of us in **God's kingdom**?

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