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Learning from Long Ago: The Corinthian Christians and Us 5. Paul: Apostle, Dietitian, Horticulturist

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 The Message But for right now, friends, I'm completely frustrated by your unspiritual dealings with each other and with God. You're acting like infants in relation to Christ, capable of nothing much more than nursing at the breast. Well, then, I'll nurse you since you don't seem capable of anything more. As long as you grab for what makes you feel good or makes you look important, are you really much different than a babe at the breast, content only when everything's going your way? When one of you says, "I'm on Paul's side," and another says, "I'm for Apollos," aren't you being totally infantile? Who do you think Paul is, anyway? Or Apollos, for that matter? Servants, both of us—servants who waited on you as you gradually learned to entrust your lives to our mutual Master. We each carried out our servant assignment. I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, but God made you grow. It's not the one who plants or the one who waters who is at the center of this process but God, who makes things grow. Planting and watering are menial servant jobs at minimum wages. What makes them worth doing is the God we are serving. You happen to be God's field in which we are working.

In today's scripture, the latest in our sermon series on what the opening chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church might have to teach us two thousand years later, Paul changes his tack. As we saw last week, Paul's native tongue, as it were, is more often than not to write densely, complexly, abstractly as he makes complicated and nuanced theological arguments. Despite his self-effacing claim that he came to Corinth and founded the church using no "fancy rhetoric," the evidence is clearly otherwise – and that is not a bad thing. Twitter, with its limitation of 140 characters per message, per tweet, has shown us that important discussions about both public policy and the meaning of Christian life are short-changed as discussion turns into diatribes and as gotcha's become the goal instead of improving things. Over-simple expressions of the faith can be both misleading and destructive. You only have to listen to some of the well-meaning but theologically horrid things people say to parents who have lost a child to know that sometimes simplicity is horribly hurtful. Over-simplified slogans – such as the one we've all seen, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" – do a terrible

injustice to both the richness of the gospel and the ambiguity of human life, and encourage us to be mindless in our faith even when certain expressions of that faith can be destructive or can seem to suggest that God is a tyrant and a bully. As Galileo once famously said, himself a victim of oversimplified and thus misleading theology, “I do... not believe that the same God who has endowed us with...reason and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.”

So, to my mind, Paul need not apologize for the way he thoughtfully if sometimes complicatedly seeks to share his faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, for a faith that can be captured in the space of a tweet or in the confines of a bumper sticker or in the words of a slogan just won't prove to be very helpful when life is hard and hurtful, when questions come our way, when sleepless 3:00 a.m. moments have us wondering if God truly cares. In today's scripture, though, Paul takes a breath, as it were, from such complexity and seeks to illustrate what he has been saying with two metaphors; and with those two metaphors he adds to his resume the title not just of “apostle,” but that of dietician and horticulturist as well. There are two main themes in these opening chapters of First Corinthians, the situation where the Corinthians are bickering and fighting with each other about which leader should be most influential and Paul's description of what he calls “the foolishness of the cross” as most truly showing the nature of God. In our verses today, he returns to their bickering with one another and starts out with his dietician metaphor. And while Eugene Petersen's translation sometimes goes well beyond translation and into paraphrase, his rendering here does capture Paul's exasperation; hear it again: “I'm completely frustrated by your unspiritual dealings with each other and with God. You're acting like infants in relation to Christ, capable of nothing much more than nursing at the breast. Well, then, I'll nurse you since you don't seem capable of anything more. As long as you grab for what makes you feel good or makes you look important, are you really much different than a babe at

the breast, content only when everything's going your way?" What's Paul's point with his shift to this metaphor?

Well, first, he is telling the Corinthians that those new to the faith indeed need a simple – but never **over**-simple or simplistic! - understanding of the gospel, and that those who would make fun of such folks are bullies. When you are new to any endeavor, you need simple. When I was learning to fly, my instructor wisely had me concentrate on just one thing – trying to keep the plane in a straight line – instead of immediately introducing all the complexities that are needed to truly be a fully-formed pilot, such as holding your altitude and going in the direction you are actually intending and communicating with Air Traffic Control and on and on. When you are new to the gospel, simple is good. “Jesus love me, this I know” is a wonderfully and appropriately simple formulation for one new to the faith. But simple food, milk alone, is not enough if we are to grow. One writer put this rather charmingly; listen to her words:

...the process of maturing in the faith can be a messy business just as the process of introducing solids to an infant's life can be fraught with problems. [For] Just as child can mistake pureed vegetables for [finger-]paint or can misunderstand that nostrils are not the appropriate orifice through which to ingest food, [so too] our explorations of God's love and message expressed to us in Jesus can create similar chaos.¹

And “chaos” is not too strong a word. For life is inevitably going to bring you to times when “Jesus loves me, this I know” all by itself is just not an adequate diet – because sometimes you will ask “Can He really love me when I've done this awful thing?” or “What does that matter when life is beating up on me?” or in the face of death and grief we all inevitably sometimes wonder what difference God's love makes. And so, Paul will go on to say, a simple diet of theological milk, the “Gerber Gospel,” as one writer

¹<http://revplockhart.blogspot.com.au/2014/02/1-corinthians-3-healthy-diet.html>

named it, will not be enough if you truly want to grow in your faith. The alternative is to refuse to eat more and more solid theological food in which case your growth will be stunted and you will too readily be the victim of those over-simplistic, too often harmful and hurtful things that I talked about earlier. “Jesus loves me, this I know” remains true throughout your life and mine, but we must add to it if we are truly to have a mature faith, if we are truly to let God grow us into better Christians. We will need to learn, sometimes painfully, that Jesus doesn’t love just me, but also loves people that I don’t like and who, without the “foolishness of the cross,” I will be tempted to hate and wall off and dehumanize. We will need to learn that while Jesus indeed loves me, He is not my personal trainer, my good luck charmer, my getter-of-parking-places but a Savior of tough love who will expect us to love our enemies and pray for them even as we seek to hold them accountable to the best instead of pandering to the worst.

After Paul’s foray into pediatric dietetics, he now becomes a horticulturist, again in the context of trying to saying something to the Corinthians about why their bickering – and particularly their fighting over which leader they like best – is at best pointless and at worst harmful to their witness to a needy world. Again, let’s hear his words:

Who do you think Paul is, anyway? Or Apollos, for that matter? Servants, both of us-servants who waited on you as you gradually learned to entrust your lives to our mutual Master.... I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, but God made you grow. It’s not the one who plants or the one who waters who is at the center of this process but God, who makes things grow.

It’s always a little ironic, of course, for me to preach on agricultural or horticultural images. After all, I’ve been known to say that the reason I don’t do gardening is that I haven’t yet been able to find any bacon seeds to plant. Be that as it may, Paul’s point here goes back to what he has been saying about how the Corinthians’ bickering hurts their witness to the world and how they fundamentally misunderstand how growth in the

faith works. Their fighting and fractiousness about who has, as it were, more Facebook likes and Twitter followers, Paul says, makes the world around them skeptical. Now, there are certainly things that we ought to contend with one another about as we grow in our faith together: we need to challenge each other to expand our empathies and imaginations about who is our neighbor, we need to always keep talking about how we balance care for one another with care for those in the world who do not know the love of God, we need to argue from time to time about how we will best be a community that shows that we truly welcome all. Those things will grow us and they will show the world that we care about crucial things. But when we squabble about whether our December Starbucks cup ought to be more “Christmas-y,” or when we spend our energies on the silly claim that American Christians are somehow persecuted, then the world rolls its eyes and says “It’s not just that they fight, but they fight about stupid stuff. Why would I want to be a part of that?”

But Paul’s second point with his horticultural metaphor is even more important: he is telling all those, on every side, the Apollos lovers, the Peter proponents, the Paul groupies, that they have all profoundly missed the point. One of the goals of Christian life in community is to grow in our faith, to move beyond the simple Gerber Gospel. But such growth cannot happen until we realize that it is God – not any particular person – who gives the growth that we need. But perhaps a story will make this point more evocatively: Writer Rachel Remen tells the following story about a childhood encounter with her grandfather:

Often when he came to visit, my grandfather would bring me a present... Once he brought me a little paper cup. I looked inside expecting something special. It was full of dirt.... [I was d]isappointed.... He smiled at me fondly. Turning, he picked up the little teapot from my doll’s tea set and... filled it with water. Back in the nursery, he put the little cup on the windowsill and handed me the teapot. “If you promise to put some water in the cup every day, something may happen,” he told me.

At the time I was four years old and my nursery was on the sixth floor of an apartment building in Manhattan. This whole thing made no sense to me at all. I looked at him dubiously. He nodded with encouragement. "Every day..." he told me.

And so I promised. At first curious to see what would happen, I did not mind doing this. But as the days went by and nothing changed it got harder and harder to remember to put water in the cup. After a week I asked my grandfather if it was time to stop yet. Shaking his head no, he said, "Every day..." The second week was even harder and I became resentful of my promise to put water in the cup.... But I did not miss a single day. And one morning there were two little green leaves that had not been there the night before.

I was completely astonished. Day by day they got bigger. I could not wait to tell my grandfather, certain that he would be as surprised as I was. But of course he was not. Carefully he explained to me that life is everywhere, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places.... "And all it needs is water, Grandpa?" I asked him. Gently he touched me on the top of my head. "No....," he said. "All it needs is your faithfulness."²

We dare not let our fighting over inconsequential things keep us from witnessing to the "foolishness of the cross." We dare not let our bickering over minutiae keep us from fighting against those who would demonize and dehumanize those whom Jesus has told us to call our neighbors. We dare not wall ourselves off from what God is trying to grow in our little cups of dirt for the sake of a hungry world. Paul is very very clear on that and even his grammar shows it. When he talks about Apollos and Peter, his verb tense implies that what they have done is over and done with. But when he talks about God, his verb tense in the original Greek denotes that God's work is both continuous and yet unfinished.

For what God needs, indeed, as Rachel's grandfather said, is our faithfulness, and not our fear.

²Rachel Remen, [My Grandfather's Blessings](http://www.spiritsite.com/writing/racrem/part1.shtml), excerpted at <http://www.spiritsite.com/writing/racrem/part1.shtml>

- What God needs is our confidence and not our cowardice.
- What God needs is not our eagerness for building barriers but our work to forge friendships across lines of nation, race, and culture.
- What God needs is not our excuses but our energy.
- What God needs is not our acquiescence to evil, but our resolve for righteousness.

“I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, but God made you grow. It's not the one who plants or the one who waters... but God, who makes things grow.”

How, then, my friends, will you invite God to continue to grow you?