

Sermon: Growing Pains

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

It may not surprise you to know that people routinely undergo shifts in perspective. Often, these are subtle, such as the person who goes from a middle of the road position to one that is just right or left of center. There are times, however, when even those holding extreme positions can move to the other side. Coming from Maryland, but growing up primarily in Pennsylvania, I often found myself caught up in discussions about sports rivalries with friends, especially Philadelphia vs. Washington, but not to worry, I never went over to the dark-side. I don't watch football these days, but somehow I still consider myself a fan of that team now known as the Commanders.

While my choice of football teams has not changed over the years, my political and religious perspective has. My view of scripture, including its cast of characters and authors, has changed overtime as well. Like many ministers who find themselves on the progressive side of belief, I have trouble with St. Paul, and not just in reading his circular letters aloud. When I began seminary, I had a rather negative opinion of him based primarily on letters that I now understand to have authorships that are disputed among scholars (1st and 2nd Timothy, for example). It's painful to read the supposed words of the Apostle Paul as he tells Timothy, a pastor in Ephesus, that he does not permit women to teach or have authority over men as if all women should be seen and not heard. When we look at scripture, we must look beyond the words, themselves, to the context. That context includes the textual history, the author, audience, and the broader meaning of the chapters and verses that surround the examined text. Many pastors have said they are bible believing Christians who take God's word literally and do not interpret through their own lens, but rather do so objectively. If anyone with any kind of pastoral role tells you this, I'd like to politely ask you to take whatever comes out of their mouths with a grain of salt. They're not being honest with you. We all bring our own experiences, thought processes, and cultural perspectives to the text. No one, hear me: NO ONE, comes to the text objectively. It's not possible. That's like saying you aren't

praying when there are seconds on the clock and your favorite team has launched a hail Mary pass. It's not possible.

But I digress. Let me return to my broader point: scholars and pastors can disagree about the meaning of the letters just as they can about the authorship of them. I view more critically the words of the disputed letters than I do the words we know to have been written by the artist formerly known as Saul of Tarsus. That said, while the letters to Timothy, Titus, the Ephesians, and the Colossians raise some questions regarding authenticity, 1 Corinthians does not. With the exception of chapter 13, which some believe to be a poetic interpolation placed out of context (a view I disagree with), scholars are united in believing Paul indeed penned these words to this Grecian community under the thumb of the First Century Roman Empire.

I'll confess that, while Paul's letters are not my favorite, 1 Corinthians holds a special place in my heart. This was the book on which we did our first Bible Study in my first year with you. It is a letter that is community-focused, one that requires us to examine our own Christian relationships, and asks us to take seriously the call to unity in mind and heart as followers of the risen Christ. This is a book that calls on us, as faithful people, to assess all aspects of our lives through the lens of the gospel.

As we pick up with the letter here in chapter 3, Paul is expounding (again) on the nature of the congregation's behavior in community. He detects a lack of heartfelt transformation based on the contentiousness of their relationships. The church in Corinth has become fractured and factional, following different human leaders rather than following the example, teachings, and ministry of Christ, himself. Here Paul makes the point that it is neither Apollos's church, nor is it Paul's; it is Christ's church. Today's passage has an almost comical quality to it in the way Paul mixes metaphors: he's goes from talking about infantile vs. adult behavior to talking about gardening and building—but in all cases, what he's really speaking of here is growth, its origins, and its potential.

It's funny that we should arrive at this scripture on a week in February in which our temperatures have been remarkably spring-like: planting and growth is probably on all our minds as we experience this mid-winter break from frigid cold and dream of warmer weather to come. Vacillating temperatures can be a real challenge to mother nature's order. It confounds those elements in God's creation that need steadily warm temperatures to fulfil their potential, as they go from seed to sprout on their way to becoming fruitful, mature plants. When temperatures are too warm too soon and then flip back to freezing, plants, insects, and even animals may get confused. While ideal conditions may not always be possible, weather that follows steadier, more predictable patterns is helpful for growth, right?

Uneven temperatures are to plant growth as uneven temperaments are to communal spiritual growth. When conditions are not optimal, growing pains are inevitable. Paul has visited the church in Corinth and heard from its leaders and is not happy with what he sees as growth in things of the flesh vs. things of the spirit. He writes here about jealousy and quarreling among the congregation, hot tempers that appeal to the worst parts of our humanity rather than the parts of us that have been transformed in deepening relationship with God. The people seem determined to walk in the way of society rather than the way of the counter cultural Christ. The Corinthians are literally cleaving to the human conduit... just the pitcher or just the plough, instead of cleaving to the One from whom the growth actually comes; that is, from God's own being.

Like Paul, we live in a time of cultural factionalism and political division. As a direct result of these things, we all share concerns over the future of the church in the world. We who are part of the Body of Christ, whether we have healthy individual relationships or not, are not immune to the impact of culture waves or wars. Elsewhere in Paul's letters, he asks something of the church that is probably unrealistic: to be of one mind. Can we really be of "one mind" about anything? I'm not sure we can—especially in times as polarized as ours. Like the name suggests, though, we in the *United* Church of Christ are to look for paths to unity in the service of Christ's church. What that means is that we may not all think the same way, but that we should seek to find places where we

can work together across the lines that divide us for the purpose of sharing the good news of God's love, grace, and with the world.

Rachel Held Evens once wrote about her path of leaving and then finding the church again, "Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people... try as I may, I can't be Christian on my own. I need a community. I need church." Ultimately, believing rightly isn't the first thing Jesus focused on—he was much more interested in community and service than in following the letter of the law. As we hear over and over in our selected reading from the Sermon on the Mount today, just because we've heard it said, doesn't mean God's done speaking.

The whole of the sermon on the Mount is really about community. Jesus uses plural nouns, prays a communal prayer, pushes us toward radical sharing, and encourages unhindered fellowship. By calling individuals to follow him, he wasn't teaching them to be a certain kind of person individually, but a certain kind of person in community. He called the disciples and all who made the choice to follow him to become a transformed people *together*, not alone, not in isolation—he called them to a life together in faithfulness to God.

But as Paul and the early church found out pretty quickly, life together in faithfulness to God is hard. It's not for the faint of heart. It requires a commitment to the fruit of the spirit: love, patience, kindness, joy, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, peace, and self-control. To be members of Christ's church in community means that we must commit and re-commit to living out the gospel imperative of love even and especially when there are inevitable growing pains. Just as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: we must remember that growth at its most foundational, ultimately comes from one source, *the source*. That is, growth comes from God. Not from individual teachers, but from God. A teacher may water, she may plant, but only God can make the growth happen.

Just like in sports, the church must be willing to develop bonds and work hard at our

relationships to be a healthy functioning team. The Eagles and the Chiefs do not just show up, play the game, and go home—they have to learn to work together toward a common goal. If there is too much enmity and not enough grace, their shared purpose will be almost impossible to accomplish. By the same token, if they do not allow themselves to have healthy disagreements within the team and learn to work them out peaceably, they aren't likely to be able to work through the challenges that come from the outside.

As we continue along our spiritual journey as a community, as we consider important issues of God's justice and mercy in the light of the larger battles being waged in the world around us, and as we seek to grow together in God's love, we will face challenges. We will disagree. We will get frustrated and tired and feel all the things that our humanity allows us to feel. Amidst that humanity, though, is the Spirit of the God who took on flesh so that we could learn from him how to heal rather than hurt, how to love rather than hate, how to rebuild rather than tear down, and how to grow together rather than languish alone. God gives the growth. What we must decide for ourselves is whether we are willing to boldly follow God's call to growth even if it means some pain in the process. Are we willing to openly step out together in faith, to be transformed as individuals and as a church body, even if that transformation turns us into something we don't recognize? That's not a question I can answer for you. It's one we all must answer for ourselves.

Amen.