

“We Are All God’s Servants”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

One of the natural tendencies of us human beings is that we often are drawn to organizations or groups because of influential leaders. We tend to gravitate to individuals who are charismatic and dynamic, perhaps seeing in them qualities that we wish we possessed. It’s how people are drawn to political figures, and politicians know this and are counting on this behavior in order to be elected. It’s how businesses many times are deemed successful, because their CEO or founder is able to sell their product in enticing ways.

This also happens quite often in the church. How many times have we heard that a church is growing because of its dynamic and visionary pastor? Televangelists have such a strong following because people are attracted by their outgoing, bigger-than-life personalities. And it seems that too often, people decide that their faith is directly tied to the pastor’s likability, and that drives where they live out their faith.

When I tell people that I am only the third senior pastor in this church’s 55-year-history, they are stunned. It is truly remarkable that our congregation has had such long-term pastoral leadership in its lifespan. When I was considering the call to come to John Knox, I seriously questioned whether it was wise to follow Dr. Roger Dean, who had been pastor here for thirty years. Would people give me a fair shake, or would I always be living in his shadow? Would my personality be a good fit for this congregation, after so many years of a very different style of leadership?

Now, fourteen years later, I can look back and say that I am glad I pushed through any of those doubts I might have had. Sure, some folks chose to go in other directions. But many other new folks, as well as several continuing members, have been active in this congregation’s mission and life. I believe that is a sign of God’s never-ending grace, which provides hope and promise in all times of life, but especially in times of transition and change.

When I read this passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, I couldn’t help but think of our modern day church battles over whose camp we belong to. “I belong to Paul” and “I belong to Apollos” sounds very similar to “I’m with that pastor” or “I’m with that group promising to do new things” or “I’m with that group promising to bring back the glory years.” As the old saying goes, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

As we have noted on many occasions in the past, the Corinthian Church was one of the most diverse faith communities that Paul founded. It was predominantly a Gentile community, meaning that those who came to the faith did not have the Jewish background that others had. The city of Corinth was also quite diverse, with many different cultures, religions, and ethnicities

represented (HarperCollins Study Bible, 2139). As a result, the Corinthian Church had many of these influences coming to bear on its life together.

In this case, Paul was addressing the fact that several in the Corinthian Church were questioning Paul's wisdom and knowledge, especially as it compared to others' leadership. It is clear that there were those within the church that believed Apollos is the one with all the right answers. There were those who also believed that Paul's way was the right way. And there were others who likely believed there were yet additional ways to know God and have the faith which Paul so passionately speaks of. All of these forces were influencing the Corinthians; so what does Paul say?

He says that these signs of jealousy and quarrelling are evidence that the Corinthians are still "people of the flesh." They are allowing their human inclinations to primarily guide their faith. Paul compares his teachings to feeding a baby: "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready" for the spiritual food which is necessary to be Christ's disciples (1 Cor. 3:2).

Because, Paul says, what does it matter who brings you the gospel of Jesus Christ? "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" (3:5-6). He says that it makes no difference who is the human leader that speaks to you. What matters, as spiritual people, is that you recognize who is working in, around, and through those human leaders - and through them, the church: that is God and Jesus Christ.

The image of planting and watering brings to mind how flowers and trees grow in creation. Someone might take the time to dig up the ground, placing in the soil a new plant. And someone else might spend the time to water that plant, to pull out weeds, and to fertilize it. But ultimately, neither of those people have anything to do with the plant actually growing. The plant grows because of God's miraculous work in creation. As Paul puts it: "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" (3:8-9).

We can bicker and fight about whose way is the best way, but in the end, we are all God's servants. We can allow our faith to be defined solely by human leaders, but in the end, it is God who gives the growth. We can allow jealousy and quarrelling to rule our lives, but in the end, God calls us to a spiritual life that is above such human inclinations.

So why do we do it? Why do we act like children so often? Why are we jealous and envious, refusing to see how God is working through the other just as much as God is working through us?

One commentator notes: Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche community, suggests that we all carry a deep wound of loneliness that is not easily overcome, and that this wound is so much a part of our human condition that we cannot escape it, try as we might. We want to belong in

the worst way, so we join communities, but they always tend to disappoint us
...

These wounds were much in evidence in the church Paul founded in Corinth. The people of the church in Corinth, it seems, wanted desperately to belong. They must have had mainline Christian leanings, because they divided up into groups with buttons announcing, “I belong to Paul” or “I belong to Apollos” or some other charismatic leader. In Paul’s view this rivalry betrayed a misunderstanding of the gospel. Paul came preaching Christ and him crucified, one who identified most deeply with our human woundedness, reconciling us to God – a God who alone can give a sense of who we are and whose we are as beloved people of God (Roger Gench, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 350).

Too often, we run from our woundedness. We know it’s there, but we pretend it is not. It takes many forms, unique to each individual. Feeling inadequate in comparison to others. Grief that will simply not let go of us. Doubt about what we actually believe. Frustration over aging parents, or trying children, or the glass ceiling at work. Whatever our woundedness may be, it makes us want to be loved. It makes us want to be made whole. It makes us want to belong, to be valued, and to be cared for.

Except that’s a risky step to take – to open ourselves up to be made whole. It requires us to acknowledge that we are not perfect, that we do not have it all together, that we are not self-sufficient. It requires a certain maturity, as well as a great deal of courage.

What would it look like if the church, the community of faith, were a place for the wounded to be made whole? What would it look like if we stopped worrying about whose camp we are in or who is spiritually feeding us, and we simply trusted that we are all God’s field, we are all God’s building, we are all God’s servants? What would it be like if we accepted that it is in our woundedness that our God comes to us in Jesus Christ, loving us for who we are, and empowering us to be the spiritual people Paul speaks of?

God alone gives us a sense of who we are and whose we are. As the people of God, may we trust in that essential tenet of our faith, knowing that in our brokenness, we are reconciled through Christ, so that others might be made whole.

Thanks be to God. Amen.