

‘MORE THAN MEDIOCRE - UNITY’
A SERMON BASED ON 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-23
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, JANUARY 20, 2019
10:00 a.m.

When Paul writes to the church,

he writes not to the walls and the roof, or to the institution

but to the people who are part of that church.

Corinth was a city in ancient Greece.

The letter to the Corinthians, is Paul’s letter to the church.

that congregation.

We are the church, the letter is also to us.

And in it Paul writes,

“You are God’s temple.

God’s Spirit lives in you.

You, the people, are God’s building,

the place where God dwells.

If anyone destroys God’s temple,

God will destroy that person,

for God’s temple is sacred,

and you together are that temple.”

Paul warns, Be careful how you build.

Consider your development.

Think about, plan for, be intentional about how you grow.

Make sure your foundation is solid.

Make sure you build using materials that will last.”

In the Corinthian church,

there was some crankiness going on as that new church found its feet and came to a place of trying to understand what a life lived as a follower of Jesus looked like.

They got side tracked into following individuals,

particular personalities,

attaching loyalties to people,

forgetting that their loyalty needed to be to Jesus only.

This behaviour got Paul angry.

He called the church infants, not ready for spiritual meat,

because they were still worldly.

He challenged them by asking when you say,

“I follow Paul or I follow Apollos.

Are you not worldly?”

He reminded them to put their attention and loyalty,

their conversations and their questions,

their thinking and their planning

where it always belongs in the church

with Jesus.

What after all is Apollos?

What after all is Paul?

Only servants.

Only servants.

I planted the seed.

Apollos watered it.

God makes it grow.

We are fellow workers in Jesus’ service.

You will be measured and rewarded against your own labour.

Not that of others.

Nor will you be doing the measuring or rewarding.

That is God's.

So do the labour,

do the planting,

do the watering,

do the building,

that God has given you to do.

Become the strong labourer for God,

that God needs.

Paul was frustrated that he was still dealing with infants.

The call to the church in Corinth,

the call to us as the church

is a call to move beyond spiritual infancy

to be more than mediocre in the life of faith.

Our growth and development as Christians is something

we tend to take for granted in our faith.

At work,

we will attend professional development courses and workshops,
to stay current in our field.

We will subscribe to the journals and read the books.

We will sign up for continuing ed. or a degree program,
to keep ourselves marketable,
or more marketable.

We will seize opportunities to learn new skills,
take on new or different responsibilities,
to keep ourselves challenged
to build our resumes.

We will take an evening class to learn a new hobby,
or to further develop an interest.

Horticulture, dance, photography, woodworking.

We will join a service club or organization,
to build relationships and make a difference,

We will balance our head knowledge with practical skills.

We will think about it and do it,
refining as we learn and grow,
until we have something that is a solid skill.

It is a no-brainer at work or in hobbies,
you need to grow and develop,
but it is something we can take for granted in our faith.

We are at risk of thinking that simply
being at worship on a regular, or a somewhat regular basis,
will be enough for our growth and development in faith,
that that is a signal that we are mature.

We think that it certainly puts us past
the spiritual infants that Paul is talking about.

We are in danger of thinking
the 'I used to' is a faith resume heading,
as if the things I used to do
qualify you as someone who is still growing.

If we prone to say, 'I used to...
go to a Bible Study

help with Sunday School
serve in my church
keep a journal and pray
read books to build my faith...'

When we say 'I used to', we are just that less likely to ask ourselves,
how am I growing now?

We are the church.

We are God's building.

We must be careful how we build.

We must be careful how we build our own lives in faith.

We must be careful how our church builds,
as each of us fit together to become God's dwelling place.

We can't take our faith development for granted.

Nor should we overestimate how far along we are.

Our risk is complacency,

feeling comfortable where we are in faith,
but missing how much is waiting for us.

The story is told of an old farmer

who described his Christian experience by saying

“Well, I’m not making much progress, but I’m established!”

One spring when he was hauling some logs,

his wagon wheels sank down to the axles in mud.

Try as he would, he couldn’t get the wagon out.

Defeated, he sat atop the logs, viewing the dismal situation.

Soon a neighbour who had always felt uncomfortable

with the farmer’s worn out testimony

came along and greeted him,

“Well, brother, I see you’re not making much progress,

but you must be content because you’re well-established!”

We can’t take our faith development for granted.

Nor should we overestimate how far along we are.

Our risk is complacency,

feeling comfortable where we are in faith,

and missing how much is waiting for us.

Another story is told that

In the course of their conversation at a dinner party,

Albert Einstein's young neighbour

asked the white-haired scientist,

“What are you actually, by profession?”

“I devote myself to the study of physics,” Einstein replied.

The girl looked at him in astonishment.

“You mean to say you study physics at your age?” she exclaimed.

“I finished physics a year ago.”

Over the years of my experience,

growing up in my home church,

internships and field placements when at seminary,

hearing the stories of seminary classmates in their experience,

plus my own work in various churches,

I have seen and heard the truth

of 1 Corinthians 3.

Growth in your faith will require both learning and obedience,

learning and service,

and if it isn't built on the foundation of Christ,
like buildings that aren't up to code in California,
when life comes and shakes us,
our faith can too easily come toppling down.

I knew of a person of great service in a church, not this one.

He was a primary giver in the life of the congregation.

Serving as an elder.

Present at the meetings, sharing his opinion.

Showing up for the dinners,

helping in the kitchen, stacking chairs.

For all appearances, a pillar in the church and in the faith.

His congregation

was still using King James Bibles in the pew.

The Shakespearian English in it meant the Bible was inaccessible
to most in the pew.

People just weren't understanding the Scripture lesson.

The church started to look at other translations

that might be used on a Sunday morning.

This leading elder became very, very adamant

and even somewhat belligerent,

the church should not, could not, change translations.

It didn't matter

that people couldn't understand the Scripture

on Sunday mornings.

King James was the 'authorized version'.

I'm not sure when a King from the 1600's

became the last word for him

and the one who could authorize on these things,

but it had.

He went to visit the minister.

Sat down across from him and said with passion and some anger,

the new translation couldn't be trusted,

and should not be used.

as it was not authorized.

To make his argument, he said,

the new translation didn't have Jesus' words,

'I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you invited me in.'

Shocked,

the minister quickly and without effort turned to Matthew 25:35

in the new translation they were considering,
and passed it across to the elder.

Of course it was right there in front of him.

In English that was easier to understand as well.

He was dumbfounded.

This elder didn't know where this famous passage was.

Nor did he know how to go about finding it.

In his ignorance,

he was championing a decision,

that would keep the Word of God inaccessible to many,

as well as berating his church,

tearing it down,

questioning the teaching and the leaders

and the committee members.

He was tearing down the church, God's temple.

To this kind of situation, we hear Paul say to the church today,

If anyone destroys God's temple,

God will destroy that person,

for God's temple is sacred,

and you, together, are that temple.

Paul writes to the church.

Be careful how you build on the foundation of Christ.

You can't only serve. Learning is necessary.

But so is service – obedience.

In my internship I came across a Bible study group,

steeped in knowledge of the Bible,

having moved through a three year reading cycle of the Bible,

the lectionary,

a number of times,

they knew what their Bibles said as well

and in some cases better than, many clergy.

But they neglected service,

they neglected to do what Scripture said and what they learned.

Their faith moved from their heart, into their head.

Their faith moved out of their hands,

Without obedience, without service,

to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger,

the naked, the sick and the imprisoned,

they turned inward,

and their faith collapsed in on itself,

and became about theology and ideas,

and which teaching was right and which wasn't

and they too,

became well-established in their thinking,

just like that wagon in the mud.

Learning and obedience,

Learning and service are both necessary for us to grow,

but to also be solid and strong,

when life shakes our faith.

Along with worship and connecting,
learning and serving are two of the four legs of the table
holding us up,
keeping us strong in faith.

Paul was frustrated with the Corinthian church.

Their faith was out of their hands,
out of practice
and into their heads.

Their faith had turned into theological arguments,
over the quality of the various teachers they had heard.

They were fighting with each other.

Who was the better teacher, worth following?

Paul? Apollos? Peter?

Paul chewed them out.

Eugene Peterson translates

the beginning of today's Scripture this way,

“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?

How we treat one another, particularly those closest to us,

is a pretty sure indication of how much your faith has grown.

Knowledge of forgiveness is one thing.

Forgiving quite another.

Knowledge that Jesus said love your enemy is one thing.

Loving your enemy quite another.

Knowledge of his words,
sell your possessions and give to the poor is one thing,
releasing your grip on your stuff and your wallet,
quite another.

Knowledge that a gentle answer turns away wrath is one thing,
speaking gently, quite another.

Knowledge that we are called to be servants is one thing.
Your reaction when asked to serve is another.

Knowledge that Jesus says, come follow me is one thing,
stopping what you are doing to go with him,
quite another.

Learning and obedience,

Learning and service,

must go together for faith to be built up and grow.

To build a faith that is more than mediocre,

that will stand the test,

will require both; the seed and the watering.

Plant the seed.

Water it.

Let God make it grow.

Tim Hansel writes,

“A close friend of mine was asked back
to his forty-year high school reunion.

For months he saved to take his wife back to the place
and the people he'd left four decades before.

The closer the time came for the reunion,
the more excited he became,
thinking of all the wonderful stories he would hear
about the changes and the accomplishments
these old friends would tell him.

One night before he left he even pulled out his old yearbooks,
read the silly statements and the good wishes for the future
that students write to each other.

He wondered what ol' Number 86
from his football team had done.

He wondered if any others had encountered this Christ
who had changed him so profoundly.

He even tried to guess what some of his friends would look like,
and what kind of jobs and families
some of these special friends had.

The day came to leave and I drove them to the airport.

Their energy was almost contagious.

“I’ll pick you up on Sunday evening, and you can tell me all about it,”

I said.

“Have a great time.”

Sunday evening arrived.

As I watched them get off the plane,

my friend seemed almost despondent.

I almost didn’t want to ask, but finally I said,

“Well, how was the reunion?”

“Tim,” the man said,

“it was one of the saddest experiences of my life.”

“Good grief,” I said, more than a little surprised.

“What happened?”

“It wasn’t what happened but what didn’t happen.

It has been forty years, forty years—
and they haven't changed.

They had simply gained weight, changed clothes, gotten jobs...
but they hadn't really changed.

And what I experienced
was maybe one of the most tragic things
I could ever imagine about life.

For reasons I can't fully understand,
it seems as though some people choose not to change.”

There was a long silence as we walked back to the car.

On the drive home, he turned to me and said,

“I never, never want that to be said of me, Tim.

Life is too precious, too sacred, too important.

If you ever see me go stagnant like that,

I hope you give me a quick, swift kick where I need it—

for Christ's sake.

I hope you'll love me enough to challenge me to keep growing.”

Do not destroy God's temple.

The Lord has assigned to each their task.

Learn.

As you start taking the solid food of Christian teaching,
as you grow to understand this book
what is in it, what it says, and more importantly
what Jesus has to say to you,
you will grow.

Then do.

Do what Jesus gives you to do.

You will grow.

Build with Jesus as the foundation,

your life, this church, your workplace, your school,
any and all of those can become something
that rather than bringing destruction,
brings life.

The Lord has assigned you his task.

Plant. Water.

Learn. Serve. Grow and build

God's temple will amaze you. Amen.