

*Simple Words*

A sermon preached by

Dean L. Francis

I Corinthians 3:1-9

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 (CEB)

*Brothers and sisters, I couldn't talk to you like spiritual people but like unspiritual people, like babies in Christ. I gave you milk to drink instead of solid food, because you weren't up to it yet. Now you are still not up to it because you are still unspiritual. When jealousy and fighting exist between you, aren't you unspiritual and living by human standards? When someone says, "I belong to Paul," and someone else says, "I belong to Apollos," aren't you acting like people without the Spirit? After all, what is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants who helped you to believe. Each one had a role given to them by the Lord: I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. Because of this, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but the only one who is anything is God who makes it grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work together, but each one will receive their own reward for their own labor. We are God's coworkers, and you are God's field, God's building.*

On Thursday night I was fortunate to sit around the conference room table at the church and get to know a few of our church members who have agreed to serve on a task force that will explore how our congregation might structure, organize, and prepare ourselves for growth as a congregation. Joe Haughney and Greta Conner have agreed to lead this process and one of the questions they asked of the group (many of whom are relatively newer members in the church) was, What was it that drew you to First Church? And secondly, what is it that keeps you here?

The answer to the first question was very much what you might expect. Many were drawn here by changes in their own life experiences, a new job, a new relationship, a retirement, acceptance into a graduate school, a new baby, the desire for a child or youth to find a place of spiritual belonging. In most of these instances, there was a conscious desire to make a commitment. To move beyond the temptations of the world that bend toward self-absorption and instead to open one's self toward service, study, prayer, and discernment. And when asked what it was that kept them here, almost to a person they pointed toward the personal relationships that had been formed and nurtured here. They talked about choosing First Church as their extended family and they very much pointed toward a process of spiritual growth that Paul writes about to his brothers and sisters in the church at Corinth.

When Paul writes about unspiritual ways -- some translations say the "ways of the flesh" -- he is pointing to the standard, normal, and agreed-upon ways that human society functions,

the accepted ways of defining and pursuing the good life. And he tells the early Christians that you cannot put aside these behaviors and beliefs easily or quickly, “I had to feed you milk, instead of solid food.” “Even today,” he says, “You are not up to the solid food of the gospel.”

Well, even though that reality is predictable, it isn't all that easy to hear. They call it bait and switch in some sales scams. You lease a car for \$199 a month, only to discover that you can't put more than an extremely low number of miles on the vehicle. In the life of discipleship to Jesus, it means that you are told that everyone is welcome only to figure out later that discipleship also means giving of time, talent, and -- God forbid -- your money. Or that you are constantly being called to forgive your enemies, those who promote the complete opposite of what you hold to be dear. No wonder you have to start with milk. The solid food of forgiveness, reconciliation, or commitment is just too difficult to swallow.

This counter cultural life and world view is being played on at First Church on a daily basis. As we gather with Dr. Zaki for our Church Conference after worship today, we'll be marking and celebrating some of these realities in our midst. And certainly, any of the markers of our congregation's "success" come in part because we were willing to jettison the culturally bound ways of the world, in favor of a strange and mysterious kind of behavior that doesn't make a lot of sense to much of the world. Bob, one of the members of the task force, said it this way on Thursday night, “I need to come here every week, sit on an uncomfortable wooden bench and just listen for a change.”

Every Sunday morning a group of young adults gather with Mollie down at Panera and have coffee and conversation instead of sleeping in. Every Wednesday singers young and old, bell ringers, and other artists come and practice to make beautiful music instead of going home after a long day's work. Young families hang out in and around the nursery after engaging in an epic struggle to get their kids to church. Our youth come here on Sundays and Wednesday to be part of a community that most of their friends would find to be puzzling at best. We feed the hungry and diaper the helpless, in the face of despair, wondering if it makes a difference. We give money to repair this building when our own homes could use a little TLC.

Some of us have practiced these kinds of behavior so long that we no longer recognize just how weird they are, but if we can step back and assess what discipleship means, then we can learn that the true work of the spirit must not be shaped by our culture's lionizing of “entrepreneurship” and its assumption that we are called to “sell” the gospel. Instead Paul is

leading us to imagine our calling to plant the seeds of God's mercy, which will grow by God's action and in God's time. We are called to nurture and water that mercy with compassion and love and justice, and leave whatever growth, in whatever form, to God.

Last week Bonny preached about the Corinthian church as a community of literate, well read, urbane individuals who would have been drawn to the ways of the world. They were people who could make an impression by being convincing speakers, demonstrating sophisticated wisdom and knowledge, and, above all, powerful and brave. These were Roman ideals and seemed good to most.

And to these Roman sensibilities, Paul's rhetoric seemed to value the wrong things. Making a crucified Jewish Messiah the center of faith flew in the face of what good people in the wider community saw as ideal. It was very subversive and seen, probably, by most as ridiculous. For Paul, Jesus' resurrection does not cancel out the meaning of the cross; it highlights it as the way Jesus was and the way God is. God's power is in weakness and apparent foolishness.

But it isn't easy to rid yourself of the ways of the world so Paul confronts these would-be wise Corinthian Christians with the executed Christ, who shows that God is the compassionate one who confronts human foolishness and invites relationship for change. These puzzling meanings don't come to us overnight, they dawn on us only after time has allowed the seeds to grow. In a world where many feel absolutely and utterly powerless, it is tempting to follow a standard bearer. I belong to Paul or I belong to Apollos to seek to suppress the alienation through all of the accepted ways that society has taught us will work. To stand with the powerful instead of the poor, to acquire instead of give, to shout rather than listen....

Yet this is not the God that Jesus reveals. It seems weird to our spiritual but not religious friends, silly to our intellectual friends and downright irresponsible to our financial advisors. But for all of us the seeds have already been planted and we are praying that the simple words of the Gospel will not just change us...but the world as well.