

Pastor's Message – 2/12/23
1 Corinthians 3:1-9

United Methodist pastors don't often have the opportunity to watch kids grow up, but I've been privileged in my four appointments and, even at Faith United Methodist Church in Westfield to watch some kids grow, at least for a few years. Even now, it is a joy to watch our youngest in the church and even some of our youth grow and develop as people and hopefully into mature, adult Christians as well. And, amazingly, they all grow up in different ways with different talents and abilities. They all have different needs as they grow up.

We hear today, Paul, writing in his Letter to the Corinthians, grudgingly recognizing what's necessary for the young Christians in the new Church at Corinth. Instead of force-feeding them with advanced spiritual lessons, he must supply their need for spiritual milk. Although he may wish that such pampering were no longer necessary, he directs their attention again to the most basic lesson of all: that they are God's beloved children who receive their identity and purpose from their God. He is aware that they are still children in faith.

Now some of you might be remembering Jesus' words in Matthew 18:3, "I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven." "What's wrong then, Paul, with having a childish faith?"

The United Methodist Church is a "big tent" church with lots of different opinions and viewpoints. Probably in every congregation and in this Church as well, there is a great diversity of opinions and theological viewpoints among Church members. There are people all along the continuum between immature and mature faith. People are at different points in their spiritual journeys. Paul sees that same thing amongst the Corinthians. Some of them have some growing up to do.

So, he tries to do some remedial language training with them, reminding them that Jesus is our foundation and Christ is the solid rock on which we stand. Last week we heard Paul reminding the Corinthians and us that he didn't come to them proclaiming the mystery of God "with lofty words and impressive wisdom" (2:1), but we receive knowledge and wisdom of God from the Holy Spirit.

Now, to be clear: There's nothing wrong with babies, infants or toddlers, but, hopefully, they all grow up and mature. A local congregation, like the one in Corinth, will hopefully grow up and mature

just as human beings do: from newborns to toddlers to kindergarteners to elementary school and so on. This Waupun United Methodist Church is arguably the oldest chartered church in Waupun; the first class was organized in 1844. This church is certainly not in its infancy, but it might be good to think about whether, theologically, it's in the baby stage, toddler stage, early childhood, adolescent, young adult, mature adult, aging adult or at death's door and how we can tell.

In his Letter to the Corinthians, we can see that Paul understands that new Christians are going to need the "milk of the Word." No problem.

His problem is that the church at Corinth should have developed well beyond the baby stage. Something is wrong.

It's okay to have a childish faith, it's okay to have a need for spiritual milk. What's not okay is to stay there. We are expected to grow in our faith and our spiritual maturity.

Paul equates the "infants in Christ" to "people of the world" (v. 1). They're people who have come to know the *words* about Jesus, but they haven't begun to assimilate them into *practice*; they still struggle with their old ways of being and doing. They are still behaving like selfish children, with "jealousy and quarreling" making them more fit for assignment to the church nursery than to the mission of the church itself (v. 3). The church was not yet weaned from its surrounding culture and needed to go back on a very basic faith formula before it could begin to chew on solid food and speak and act with maturity (v. 2).

Paul then goes on to give a basic lesson in what the word "church" means. The word "church" isn't defined by who's in charge or by the latest celebrity preacher, but by a group of people called and gifted to work together for a common purpose (v. 5). The church is a group of "God's servants, working together" as "God's field, God's building" -- a sign of God's kingdom (v. 9).

What does it mean then to be a mature follower of Jesus in a modern, or -- in our case --postmodern, society?

That's one of the hardest questions facing the church. Good news, sort of: It's always been a tough one for those who are part of this movement of Christ that we call the church.

In our snippet of I Corinthians this week, Paul provides one interesting way of looking at it -- he describes what it isn't.

The Corinthians, as you may have guessed, have developed plenty of habits and practices that are inconsistent with a mature expression of Christian discipleship as outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. Some

expressions of immature faith Paul experienced in Corinth include fighting, jealousy, selfishness, and worshiping leaders instead of the Lord. It's not a comprehensive list, but it is long enough to make his point.

The mission statement of the United Methodist Church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" and I'm sure we are doing a very good job of that. Disciples, by the biblical definition, aren't simply worship attenders or financial givers, but people who answer a call to follow Jesus with their lives. This Church has had two mission statements that I am aware of and I would bet that none of you know what they are. The SPRC and the Church Council are working on updating a mission statement, inviting suggestions, and later this year will offer 2 or 3 for the Congregation to vote on. People and churches change over time and what once was a focus may not be any longer. As people grow, churches do too, growing into spiritual maturity. Spiritual milk is no longer enough solid food is needed.

Mature churches have mature characteristics. Paul

- envisions the day when his young churches will gain some maturity and grow in independence.
- dreams of the time when there will be less sibling rivalry and more unity.
- yearns for less whining and more appreciation of their blessings.
- Is looking for less self-absorption and more outward awareness, along with the corresponding compassion. His goal is fewer arguments about status and more willingness to work together.

In other words, Paul wants these children to put aside their childish ways. Much to his dismay, it isn't a smooth transition from infancy to childhood to young adulthood but rather a gradual process filled with fits and starts. And so it is for us too. Our journey toward spiritual maturity, sanctification – to put it in Wesleyan terms, "becoming holy as Your Father in heaven is holy," Jesus says, doesn't happen overnight. We can receive a baptism of the Holy Spirit again and again and we can be converted many times during our lifetime.

Paul's Letter and our passage for today focus on being or becoming healthy as the body of Christ. Paul has been clear from the beginning of this letter to the Christian community he founded in Corinth that he knows they have been given abundant spiritual gifts, and he rejoices in this fact. And that means it's time for them to recognize their own spiritual role as a people. It can't be just about leaders or former pastors anymore. They, the people, are God's field, God's building.

As it was with the Corinthians, so it is with us. This Church has been given amazing and uncountable blessings. This Church and the people who make up this Church have been created as unique and special people and have been brought together for a purpose. This Church and the people who make up this Church are blest to be a blessing.

Paul doesn't develop the metaphors. For now, simply to state them may be enough. They are God's field. They are soil for harvest and the harvest itself. They are God's building. They, as a community together, one supporting the other, provide a home for God and a home of God in the midst of the wider community. There are farmers for fields, and there are architects and engineers for buildings. Paul himself in a way takes on both of these roles in this letter. But they must not forget who they are first: God's field, God's building.

There is a song in the United Methodist The Faith We Sing songbook which talks about God's presence and awareness throughout all the ages of our life: in our bawling cry, at our baptism, in childhood and adolescence, young adulthood, middle ages, old age, death and at the moment of new birth. It sings about how God offers gifts and celebrates our response to His call and our growing in faith and knowledge and love of God. In that song, there is no expiration date on spiritual growth.

An infirm lady from a nursing home wrote Billy Graham a letter asking his permission to die, as her illnesses had become unbearable. Rev. Graham was sympathetic when he wrote to her, "The older we get, the closer we get to heaven, if our faith is in Christ and his promises. And the closer we get to heaven, the more we'll want to get there -- particularly when life's burdens press down upon us. Don't feel guilty, then, about asking the Lord to take you to heaven." But then Graham went on to encourage the woman when he wrote that as long as God keeps us on earth we have a purpose in serving him, so "we should ask him to show us what those purposes are."

They will know we are Christians by our love. We ask God to use us and mold us into not just who we are but who we will become. God offers his love and His gifts and offers a Savior that we might be redeemed from death and brought into new life. At the cross we are redeemed, find forgiveness for our sins. No more shame, no more guilt. Hallelujah!

If we believe that and if that makes a difference to us, we need to be more: to move beyond spiritual milk to solid food – to learn, to grow, and to be a church that continues to make a difference.