

GOD AT WORK

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Then there's the story about the man who had been stranded on a desert island for thirty years. One day, as he stood on the beach, gazing longingly out to sea, he spotted a ship on the horizon. He quickly built a huge bonfire to signal the ship and, to his delight, he soon saw a rescue boat headed toward him. When the two rescuers came ashore, they greeted the man and told him to get in the boat, but the man hesitated. "What's wrong?" asked one of the rescuers. "We thought you'd be anxious to leave this island." The man responded, "Well, I've lived here by myself for thirty years. I'd at least like to show you where I've lived all that time." The rescuers agreed, so the man led them through the jungle to a clearing where three huts stood. One of the rescuers said, "I thought you said you were the only person on the island. Why are there three huts?" "Well," the man said, as he pointed to the first hut, "that's my house and . . ." he pointed to the second hut, "That's the church I go to." The rescuer asked, "Well, what's that third hut for?" "Oh," said the man, "that's the church I used to go to."

We laugh because it's a funny joke, but we also wince a bit because it's all too true. Christians split churches for all kinds of reasons – sometimes because of theological, biblical, or doctrinal differences, but many times because somebody gets mad at the preacher because he or she isn't like the former pastor, or because somebody doesn't like the color carpet or the paint color the Building Committee chose for the sanctuary renovation, or because personal grudges and slights are carried forward through the years or seep in from outside.

Case in point – the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, one of Christianity's holiest sites, is built on the spot where Jesus was said to have been buried. In the late 4th century, a Western European Christian woman named Egeria made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to see the church. When she arrived at Easter, she found different communities of believers worshiping together as one body in the Church of the Resurrection. Today, six ancient churches have a presence at the Church. Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox, all of whom have their own chapels, run the Church. The Coptic Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox can use the church but have no say in its administration. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is present, but has no rights in the Church. Throughout almost 2,000 years, this holy site has been dominated by ongoing disputes and separations, with occasional agreements.

A 1927 earthquake in Jerusalem badly damaged the Holy Sepulchre, but a restoration plan wasn't begun until 1961 because of political tensions, religious differences, and wars. An article about the Church of the Holy Sepulchre says, "It was to take until 1961 before the project got underway. Mistrust naturally did not disappear overnight. Psychological barriers had to come down and the communities reach consensus on big issues of principle. . . The most difficult challenge facing the

communities throughout was not the technical work of reconstruction, however arduous and complex, but the political task of negotiating scores of agreements, definitively settling possessory rights in the entire basilica.”¹

After I read 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 in Bible study Monday night, one person said, very tongue-in-cheek, “Whew! It’s a good thing stuff like that doesn’t happen in the church today!” Well, as we’ve heard this morning and know all too well, “stuff like that” does happen in the church today, and it’s been happening since the very beginning of the church. When the apostle Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth, he wrote to people he knew well, for he had founded the church, been their pastor for eighteen months, and then moved on in his missionary journeys. The Corinthian church was a conflicted church in many ways, some of which Paul point-blank confronts them about in these verses: “For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human standards? For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely human?” (1 Corinthians 3:3-4) In other words, Paul was telling the Corinthian believers, “You’re not really the church when you divide yourselves based on your allegiance to this person or that person, instead of coming together as one in Jesus Christ.”

To Paul’s credit, he modeled for the Corinthians exactly how he encouraged them to live and serve together and to treat one another as members of the body of Christ. This morning we heard about Apollos’s credentials and gifts as “an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures and instructed in the Way of the Lord, who spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus.” (Acts 18:24-25) Apollos spent time with the believers in Corinth and was apparently very popular. One source notes that “Apollos, with his natural gifts, had attracted a following among the church in Corinth, but simple admiration was growing into divisiveness. Against Apollos’ wishes, there was a faction in Corinth that claimed him as their spiritual mentor, to the exclusion of Paul and Peter.”² Paul could easily have been resentful or jealous of Apollos. Instead, Paul rightly described the work and ministry he and Apollos were called to do: “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.” (1 Corinthians 3:5-6)

On Thursday, April 30, 1789, George Washington stood on the balcony of Federal Hall in New York City and was sworn in as the first president of the United States. Three weeks later, on Thursday, May 21, the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States was held at the Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Twenty-three ministers and eleven elders representing thirteen of sixteen presbyteries attended. Rev. John Witherspoon, president of what is now known as Princeton University, was asked to preach the opening sermon as the first national organization of the Presbyterian Church was formed (the first presbytery had been formed in 1707).

Rev. Witherspoon was described as “an old man, hair all gray and figure showing too much enjoyment of good food.” Thirteen years earlier, two blocks down the street from the church, he had signed the Declaration of Independence, the only member of the clergy to do so. Rev. Witherspoon chose 1 Corinthians 3:6 in the King James Bible

for his sermon text that day: “So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.”

An article about Rev. Witherspoon’s sermon at the first General Assembly says, “That was a word needed by those men. This first general assembly had been called in response to the continuing growth of Presbyterian witness on these shores. New churches had been established, then connected with one another in presbyteries and synods. It would have been easy for the commissioners to fly off to heights of inordinate pride in the accomplishments of the American Presbyterians, but Dr. Witherspoon’s word about who is responsible for growth brought them back to earth.”³

Paul’s advice to the believers in 1st century Corinth about how to be the church is good advice to us in 21st century Wallace about how to be the church. When we focus only on the work we do and lose sight of what God is always doing in the church, we forget what it means to be the church. In fact, we might not even be the church at that point. Whenever we use the gifts God gives us for ministry to elevate ourselves or put people on a pedestal, we forget what it means to be the field of God. When Paul arrived in Corinth, he planted the seed of that church. After he moved on, Apollos came and watered what Paul had planted. If Paul had not planted the seed, there would have been nothing for Apollos to water. If Apollos had not watered what Paul planted, it would have died. But, more important than that, God gave the growth. Paul and Apollos were just the workers in God’s field, each using his own gifts and doing what God had called them to do.

Each year in our elder training, I ask the elders-elect to discuss some questions about the role of Ruling Elder in our church. The questions are (1) What do you think a Ruling Elder does in our church? (2) Do you think the office of Ruling Elder is respected in our church? and (3) Do you think the work of a Ruling Elder is as important as that of the minister? Folks usually don’t have any trouble answering #1. Almost always, the answer to #2 is “Yes.” And, interestingly, most of the time the answer to #3 is, “No.” But I think the answer is “Yes.” That leads to a good discussion about how ministers and elders share equal responsibility for the nurture of the congregation – the planting and watering, if you will – we just have different tasks in God’s field.

That’s what Paul was telling the Corinthians believers. As one commentator observes about this text, “Since neither planting nor watering on its own could bring forth fruit, it follows that similarly neither the initial evangelization nor the continued preaching or teaching is of greater value. Instead, since ultimately God is the one who produces the growth, God is the only one worthy of all admiration, glory, and praise. . . . As co-laborers, both ‘the one who plants and the one who waters’ participate in the common task of building up God’s church. This is the beauty of the farming motif closely followed by Paul in this passage: laboring in the church is a group effort and, in the end, God gets all the credit.”⁴

Shortly after we joined the Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia when I was in 7th grade, the church called Rev. Chuck Mann to be our youth minister. Chuck was one of a kind. Under his leadership, the youth group grew to over 100 Senior Highs and approximately a dozen of us went on to seminary. After about ten years as youth minister, Chuck gave up those responsibilities and focused more on

adult Christian Education. The church called a younger minister named Bill Waterstradt. As a college student and then a recent college graduate, I still helped out with youth group, as did a bunch of my friends. I remember talking with them when some of them would compare Bill with Chuck and say things such as, “He’s just not like Chuck. He doesn’t do things the way Chuck does.” Of course, that was true! He was Bill, not Chuck, but he was faithful and talented and a good youth minister. I told my buddies we needed to be grateful to God for Chuck who planted and for Bill who watered, and to remember that God always gives the growth.

In Bible Study Wednesday morning, someone said, “This sounds really applicable to your upcoming retirement.” Agreed, although that’s not why I chose this particular scripture text to preach on today. It’s the lectionary epistle lesson for the sixth Sunday after Epiphany. But God’s living Word has a way of addressing us where we are, doesn’t it?

The Wallace Presbyterian Church is a fertile field for God, set in the midst of a fertile field in the community and world. God calls us all to be co-laborers in the field. Some plant, some water, but God deserves all of the glory all of the time for whatever growth and fruit are produced. And, to extend Paul’s agricultural image a bit further, when you plant a seed in the ground, you can’t see what is happening down in the soil. It might look like nothing’s happening, or not happening as quickly as we would like, but God is at work in the process and the changes. It’s sort of like the tag line in my emails: “Ask yourself this question: Where is God already at work in this situation?” and also our final hymn today, “In the bulb there is flower; in the seed, an apple tree. . . unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.” In this time of transition here at the church, between now and the end of May and beyond, it’s important for us to remember that all of us are called to be co-laborers in God’s field, doing whatever it is God has called us to do, whether it is planting or watering, and to trust that in God’s season the efforts will bear fruit.

And we remember and draw hope from the promise that God is always at work – already at work – even when we can’t see what is going on. As I was getting ready to go to work on Wednesday morning, I remembered something I read in my early days in the The Pastor as Spiritual Guide Program. I want to share it with you. Written by Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit priest and theologian in the early 20th century, it’s called “The Slow Work of God.”

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are, quite naturally, impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress that it is to be made

by passing through some stages of instability —

And that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually —
let them grow.
Let them shape themselves,
without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today
what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense
and incomplete.

To God, who is always at work and gives the growth, be the glory, all the time!

Let us pray: Gracious and generous God, Creator and Giver of all that is good, we thank you for our many blessings. We acknowledge that all that we have is from you. Blessed by your grace, may we show gratitude by following Jesus and sharing what we have been given, for we know that by serving our brothers and sisters, we serve you. We remain ever grateful for your constant love, the gift of your Son Jesus, and the presence of your Holy Spirit with us. Protect and guide us on our journey of faith as we seek to be your faithful fellow-workers, your field, your building. Amen.

NOTES

¹Mark Elliot, "The Church of the Holy Sepulchre: A Work in Progress," *The Bible and Interpretation* at www.bibleinterp.arizona.edu.

²"Who was Apollos?" at www.gotquestions.org.

³"Planting and Watering," *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit*, Series VI, Cycle A.

⁴Sammy Alfaro, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 3:1-9," at www.workingpreacher.org.