

6th Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 2.12.23

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

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. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 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.

Matthew 5:21-37

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.'³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. (664)

A number of years ago, David Brooks of the *New York Times* broke with conservative orthodoxy and proclaimed, "The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake." Known to be one of the more conservative voices in the mainstream media, Brooks didn't necessarily write the headline—though maybe he did. In the *Atlantic Monthly*, it announced an article which began with the brief moment

in America when the nuclear family was indeed the stabilizing force some still believe it could yet be. From 1950-1965, during the post-war boom, this way of social grouping enjoyed its blaze of glory. Prior to then, people mostly lived as members of extended families. Since then, people have become more and more isolated.

There are exceptions, of course, Brooks understands. Some nuclear families remain intact. But this is most widely the case among the affluent, people who can hire out for childcare, housework and maintenance, even meal-prep. These are tasks extended family used to perform, and they're the sort of things that can stress a family out.

Other exceptions are more widely accessible to all, what's called chosen families. These first arose in the gay community—people whose families of origin were rejecting of them, people who then found each other and formed bonds as tight as any in the most resilient families.

Now others are following suit. As the nuclear family breaks down, chosen families are popping up. Brooks himself has followed this same trajectory. His children grew up, his marriage came apart, and now he gathers weekly with his chosen family in D.C. They share intentional meals, often on Friday evenings. They celebrate holidays together, or personal milestones.

David Brooks, God love him, is a master of discovering as new something that's been around for a really long time. When it's not frustrating, it's amusing.

So, he declared that the nuclear family was a mistake, that chosen families are an innovation that might really have some staying power, and I kept thinking, "Oh, you mean like the church? This chosen family that gathers not for some clear shared task or purpose of industry or more general aim of productivity, but simply to be in relationship with one another as is crucial to every human bring to be? Like, the church?"

We're still with Jesus as he preached his Sermon on the Mount. We've been here with him for the last three weeks, whether up the mountain, with his disciples, gathered close, or down a ways with the crowd though perhaps able to overhear. (I wonder where you are in this story.)

We've been here with him for three weeks; and, if time allowed, we could be here with him for many more. The Sermon spans three chapters of Matthew's gospel and, three weeks in, we're not even through the first chapter.

But next week we begin our turn to Lent, the season that begins with Ash Wednesday and ends six weeks later with Easter. That turn begins on a different mountain top, many chapters later in the gospel, many months later in Jesus' life. The Transfiguration. More on that later.

As for now, we're three weeks into the first of three chapters, though here we'll leave off with Jesus yet preaching.

To be honest, it's a bit of a relief, to me at least. The Sermon on the Mount is hard to preach on. Too many points to cover, too many things to try to clarify or to admit are mystifying, the Sermon has its throughline but is also a grab-bag of things to think more about, to try to hear in its original context before trying to hear it in our context.

One thing that always seems certain to me, though: Jesus meant in his preaching to conjure, to call forth, something new, a new politics, a new gathering of people with a new aim. The church: a gathering of people that doesn't share a blood line like a nation; and that doesn't dwell in a certain region like a tribe with its territory; and doesn't even practice the same cultic rites and rituals in what modern thinking has come to call religion, (other than to hear the word, interpret the word, and break the bread and drink of the cup. That's what our "religion" comes down to.) The church is something else from all these things: nation, tribe, cultic practices. But what?

What is it?

Jesus began this conjuring with the Beatitudes, which we'd have heard in worship two weeks ago if it hadn't been for Godly Play. But maybe you know them anyway: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth..." all of which declarations seem the opposite of what any rational person would know to be true—that the mighty in spirit are the ones who own the kingdom of heaven, that those who have no cause to mourn are the ones who enjoy comfort, that the ones to inherit the earth aren't the meek but the dominant. Here, though, Jesus turns that all upside down and inside out. Here, Jesus is calling forth another realm with another set of assumptions.

He would go on, which we heard last week, to indicate that this new politics, now conjured forth, wouldn't stay small. Though it would stay local, it would take root and grow up far and wide, further and wider with each passing season, each passing year. Eventually, it would go global, as wide as the world. As salt for the whole earth, as a light to the whole world, this would be a people for all people, a thing the joining in with which would have nothing of birthright or entitlement or inheritance but would be something more of the soul and spirit, more of individual call and communal response.

And the only way this would then work, which we hear this week, is if everyone who came to count themselves as among the church were to live by a law every bit as strict as the earlier law, the Torah of the Jews, but not anywhere near as delineated. This is a law not declared from on high and spelled out to its finest points but discerned from among and within. A law of self-restraint, a law of self-binding, where you pursue not your own interests but the interests of the other and of the whole: this is the law by which this new people was to live. And it shouldn't be anticipated as a total unbinding from the old law. It should rather be understood as a total committing to any and every mode that serves the purpose of love.

See, you have heard it said, "Do not murder. Do not commit adultery." But with this new gathering, this new *generation*, it isn't enough not to murder one another, and it isn't enough not to prey on one another's households so to take for your own the spouse of your neighbor, or the livestock or otherwise means of wealth and wellbeing of your neighbor. No, now, with this new gathering, this new *generation*, the aim is higher than just coexistence, and higher even than peaceful coexistence. Now the aim is abundant life, flourishing, thriving, love.

But it's an even bigger deal than that because Jesus, in the gathering of this people, was doing something that had never been tried before. He was, in the conjuring of this alternative politics, introducing something that was totally novel. Moreover, utterly without precedent, it was something that should inspire skepticism as to whether it would even succeed—a people gathered of no foundation other than their human being and for no purpose other than to enact the realm of God in our midst.

This is a very unstable thing to propose.

Because people need a task, you know?

There's that scene, in the Book of Acts, in the 1st chapter, right after Jesus' is remembered to have been taken up on a cloud while the disciples stood on the Mount of Olives looking up as he disappeared from their sight.

They received word then, from a stranger who appeared among them, that they should go back to the room where they had spent so much time in those days since the crucifixion and then all those smattering of appearances of him resurrected. They should go back there and wait for the Holy Spirit, which would come.

It could come.

So they went, and they filled that room.

The story doesn't say anything about what they actually did while they were there, all of them, 120 in number, so the story goes. It doesn't say anything about how they filled that time. It only says it was ten days later that the Spirit came.

So, I guess that's it. They waited there. 120 of them. Waiting. Ten days. One room.

Can you imagine?

Awkward.

Stressful.

Funny.

Boring.

A moment to come to terms with all that happened. A moment to grieve. Maybe hungry too.

This moment comes around for preaching every three years.

I often preach into it.

Awkward.

Stressful. (That one person's too noisy. That one person's too quiet.)

I do so usually thinking there's something particular in that event, which we really should take time to imagine, to feel. Now, though, I think it's not just about those ten strange days. Now, I wonder if there's something suggestive in those ten strange days about the whole life of the church from now on, about life in the world in Christ from now on, life together with but Christ as our foundation, this mystical foundation that can be imagined as solid as a rock, but...really? Can it really?

I mean, what should we be *doing*?

'Cuz we should be doing *something*, right?

Otherwise, why go to such trouble?

And trouble it is. In fact, while I revisited the church in Corinth this week, contemplating this reading from Paul's first letter to that congregation, I found myself wondering whether he regretted getting a church going in Corinth after all. They'd been *so difficult*. They'd amounted to so much trouble.

Corinth was a busy city. A major city of antiquity, it was founded in the 10th century before Christ by Dorian Greeks and was prominent for shipping and trade. Over the centuries, it became site to all sorts of religious and cultural expression. Remains of a synagogue were long ago found, and a temple to Aphrodite was there, too, where (rumor has it) orgies were common, sacred

prostitutes numbering in the thousands. There's recent questioning of this, though, one commentator writing that "Corinth was probably no more or less virtuous than any other cosmopolitan port city of the Mediterranean in the 1st century."

Or, I might add, any other century.

All of which is to say, if we're certain of nothing else, we can say with certainty that Corinth was syncretistic, a coming together of a world full of varied practices, traditions, ways of life, sorts of people.

You know, like cities are.

By contrast, Paul, was a man long disciplined in his way. A Pharisee, and one who zealously persecuted the early church for its apparently libertine ways, he eventually came to embrace that seeming lawlessness of the church—embrace it as God's grace, as God's boundary-breaking spirit. Eventually he could even trust a place like Corinth, see in it possibility for the building up of a church.

But you know the old advice, you have to know the rules before you can well break them. e.e. cummings wasn't ignorant of grammar. Picasso didn't fail to recognize where eyes actually are on a human face. Apparently, one of the quarterbacks in today's game is known for his long-game strategy, he doesn't do what's expected in the moment because he's got another idea in mind. But it's not because he doesn't know what's expected.

Paul knew well the law from which the church was an opening to a new way, a less legalistic way.

The Corinthians didn't.

And they had little in common among one another. Little shared tradition from which to understand this new dispensation. Few shared customs or social imaginings by which to understand and function amidst the world. For all this, the people of the church of Corinth were like infants, unready for the more complex stuff of life together in the spirit, ambiguities that require a lot of wisdom, a lot of self-understanding and restraint. Some thought they'd joined the church of Apollos, but only because it was Apollos that had first baptized them. Others thought they'd joined the church of Paul, but only because it was Paul that had first gathered them in. They were well primed, it seemed, for cults of personality, a human characteristic and tendency that seems to transcend all time. What was harder for them to grasp was that they'd joined something altogether more mysterious, and perchance more enduring, more true.

The letters to the Corinthian church are many, are heartfelt, are nearly desperate. They number two in the Bible but there's reason to think they've been compiled from many more.

I confess I wondered whether Paul ever wondered whether it was worth it.

I mean, if we of the church are not actually to *do* any particular thing together, then why go to all this trouble?

We have, unfortunately, become recent witnesses as to why. The Covid quarantine, its required isolation, has given us ample evidence as to what happens to the human mind and spirit when left alone to its own devices. Coupled with the internet, whose dominance in our lives was already on the rise, social distancing was simply too much for some people to manage—which is no shame on them, but indicative of what people *are* and what we need.

We need each other. We need the *real* presence of one another. Though we are perhaps the greatest challenge to one another, we are also saving grace to one another—if that mutual presence is come in love, if that mutual presence is made light by the Holy Spirit.

It's often thought that our being should undergird our doing. In the United Church of Christ, which is our denomination and my lifelong tradition, this is perhaps especially the case. The assumption is that the church is to be in order that the church might do. The UCC would have us active in the Lord, active for God's purposes, forming congregations whose being is robust enough and diverse enough to make good effect in the world.

I think this is backwards, or is at least out of balance. I think our doing is to support our being. We do things together in order to nurture our relating, we share in common task in order to make resilient these ties of love that bind in grace. Because it's a very unstable thing simply to be in one another's presence. We need something to do.

And, as it happens, the world is full of things that need in love to be done—full of injustice to be brought to justice, full of suffering to be met with mercy and healing grace. But our being together is also enough. Our mutual enjoyment and care of one another is indeed to God's aim.

So, what shall we do in order truly in the spirit to be?

I wonder.

Thanks be to God.