

Growing and Belonging

a sermon

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February 12, 2017

I Corinthians 3:1-9

So, there's this old story of a church pastor. It's probably entirely made up. Yet I suspect it's rooted in reality.

It goes something like this:

One Sunday morning, the pastor of a church preached a sermon. And afterwards, as the pastor shook hands with departing parishioners, he heard the expecting things like "Nice sermon, Reverend," as well as chit-chat about this and that.

The next Sunday, the pastor rose for the sermon. And he preached ... *the exact same one*. There were a few sideways glances among those in the sanctuary. But afterwards in the greeting line, there was the same mixture of bland compliments and small talk.

The next Sunday, when the pastor entered the pulpit to preach, the people heard, again, the very same sermon! A number of people shifted around uncomfortably. Some coughed. A few muttered. Most all sat in stony silence. No "Amens" or "Preach it, brother" that day.

At the end of the sermon, the tension was pretty high. And then the pastor said: "Yes, I've been preaching the same sermon, three weeks in a row. *And I'll keep on preaching it until you get it!*"

Some versions of the story have the minister being told to leave that very day.

Now, even though many pastors might fantasize about doing such a thing, you may be relieved to know that most realize this would be a very bad idea. I am among them. I, too, think that it would be unwise and unkind to do this.

Really, it's kind of the preaching equivalent of those signs some people have in their offices or cubicles: "The Beatings Will Continue Until Morale Improves."

Yet, *I have heard* that the story makes sense to some people. *I have heard* that it has the ring of truth for them. *I have been told* that some churches appear to be slow in understanding the practical implications of the good news of Jesus Christ. *I've heard it said* that some church people are slow in changing their behavior to conform more fully with the gospel, despite frequent communications urging such change.

That's just what I've heard. Apparently, this really happens. Whadayaknow.

I've begun to suspect that when *I* revisit certain themes in my sermons, when I repeat the urging of certain changes in behavior or perspective, then I am quite likely repeating it all because *I* need it, that *I* am slow to get what I am saying.

And that's because I have come to realize that the kind of change the gospel calls forth from me has been slow and difficult. I suspect that it's *supposed* to be slow and difficult, at least for me. I see now that this is all about spiritual growth. It's about spiritual maturity. It's about "growing up" as a Christian. And spiritual maturity is long, and it's slow. Spiritual maturity takes

a lot of time
and a lot of work
and a lot of prayer
and a lot of repentance.

So fret not, dear people. I am not talking about you.
Or maybe I am.

A number of times in my years of preaching, here and elsewhere, I've had it happen when someone, or a few someones, will come up to me after the sermon and say that they just *knew* I was talking to them. And I tell them the truth: that I did not have them in mind. Even so, they heard something that day, something they were supposed to hear, something specific for them.

That's always a blessing, yet a bit unsettling as well. You see, God has this wonderful yet scary habit of showing up, so that people hear the good news, and they see themselves in its light, and they feel the breath of the Holy Spirit, and they know what they must do.

And yet, the equally unsettling thing is that sometimes God does not move in this way, not always, certainly not on demand. God sometimes beckons in silence, demanding change inaudibly, leaving a blank space for us to fill in because our spiritual growing demands that we do so, or at least try.



Paul had been repeating himself. Or, at least, others thought that he was repeating himself. There were some around who thought that the Apostle Paul never moved on from saying the same basic things, over and over. That's how they remembered him, when he had been among them, teaching them the gospel, back when their church community was young and new.

It was only a few years later, but growth had been rapid and impressive. They were no longer, some of them thought, the same as they were. They were bigger. They were better. They had grown. They were mature.

So when they thought back to their time with Paul, some did so with a bit of dissatisfaction. Because Paul's preaching now all seemed so basic, so plain ... especially when compared with *Apollos*, the one who came after Paul. In their eyes, at least for some of them, Paul did not compare so well.

And that's because they wanted the *deep*. They wanted the *new*. They wanted Paul to be

more creative,
more exciting,
more relevant,
more inspiring...

like *Apollos*, their model of spiritual excellence, to whom they felt so connected, with a feeling of such deep affinity that it was as if, in their minds, they *belonged* to *Apollos*.

Yet not all the Christians there felt that way. Some were very fond of Paul: their beloved first pastor, the one who got them started as a community of Jesus Christ, the one who first proclaimed to them the gospel and led them to faith. They didn't appreciate it when anyone criticized Paul or even suggested that he was not

creative enough,
exciting enough,
relevant enough,
inspiring enough.

Because for them the model of spiritual excellence was *Paul*, to whom they felt so connected, with a feeling of such deep affinity that it was as if, in their minds, they *belonged* to him.

Paul knew what was going on. He knew that he had his fans and his detractors, and he knew that Apollos also had his own, both fans and detractors. But he also knew that this wasn't about him and Apollos, their relative strengths and weaknesses, their effectiveness, their "leadership qualities." There was something else going on here, and it was with those Christians, those who were arguing about spiritual leaders past and present. *They* had a problem, a *spiritual* problem reflecting a shocking lack of spiritual maturity.

They were babes in the faith, Paul told them.

Of course, that's what they were when he had first known them, which is why he back then had to speak to them about the most elementary things in the simplest ways he could find. They were *babies*, spiritually, and so he had to start them out on spiritual food appropriate for spiritual babies:

warm milk rather than steak,
pureed vegetables rather than pizza and wings,
Gerber rather than Progresso.

That's how it was then, when they had first come to faith. And one would think that they would have grown since then. But Paul saw that they had not, not much. They were still immature. They were still spiritual infants.

The proof was in their behavior. Their behavior was that of the spiritually immature. Because of how they were behaving, because of their actions, because of what they were doing and saying to and about each other, their church had split into factions:

some for Paul and some for Apollos,
this side and that side,
us and them,
them and us.

It bothered Paul: the arguing, the disunity, the mistrust, the lack of love. But what seemed to bother Paul most about it was that his people, they were focusing on him and Apollos, rather than on God,

as if *they* had saved them,
as if it was in *them* that they had their truest identity,
as if it was to *them* that they belonged.

Like the (perhaps fictional) Christian convert from some years ago who slipped up with his testimony and shared that he had been saved by Keith Green at a Jesus Christ concert (you might have to think about that one for a moment), the spiritually young Christians so loved by Paul had gotten things backward,

focusing on the servants rather than on the master,
substituting the ministers of grace for grace itself,
showing that they still were so far from where they needed to be.

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.

What had happened there was that their growing and their belonging had gotten all messed up. They looked for their belonging in human leaders, and for that reason their growing had come crashing to a halt. But they needed to know, deeply, that they belonged to Christ, and then they would grow: in him, from him, to him, because of him.



Paul's dear ones, the Christians in the ancient city of Corinth, had made the mistake that Christians make so often, even today. They thought that the strength and the glory of the church is in its human leaders. And with that mistake comes another: the dividing of the church into factions, parties, traditions, denominations. "I am of Paul. I am of Apollos":

The subtle tug of hero worship.
The enervating pull of a dead traditionalism.
The alluring idolatry of our own tribes and histories.

Really, none of this is new.

I am of Paul. I am of Apollos.

I am of Lotz, or Buteyn,
or Otterness, or Spencer,
or Ryder, or Pater.

I am Trinity.

I am First.

I am Brighton.

I am Reformed.

We here aren't typically tempted toward hero-worship, as it seems were the Apostle Paul's dear ones in Corinth. Our temptation through the years has not *tended* to be about glorifying certain leaders, although it has been known to happen. Rather, our temptation has been more about

the groups to which we belong,
the people we have known,
our shared stories,
 our shared connections,
 our shared traditions.

We have tended to make our identity so much about these, and to find in them and in their perpetuation our belonging.

Yet in that kind of belonging there is no growing, not the growing that is most real and that we most need, not spiritual growth.

I must say, of course, that the traditions that have formed us, the people who have guided us, the memories that continue to bless us, these are not bad, they are not idolatrous temptations to be denied. God has used these for our good, and we are right to be grateful for them. I sure am.

I believe deeply that the Christian traditions in which we find God has placed us can (and often do) lead us to know Jesus more deeply, love him more dearly, and follow him more truly.

I wonder, though, whether we might tend to get stuck in our traditions, burdened by our biographies, closeted by our shared stories so we fail to share them with others and in turn learn *their* stories so we might be shaped by them.

If we are to grow, my friends, we must grow spiritually. Any numerical growth will be meaningless, and perhaps even impossible, without spiritual growth. And that kind of growing won't happen by building our belonging out of our own histories and personalities and activities.

Our spiritual growth requires that we accept our belonging as the act of God. It demands that we receive our belonging as the gift of Jesus. And then it will mean that we seek our growing in an ever deeper expression of our belonging to Jesus,

growing in him,
dwelling in him,
following him,
obeying him,
living and loving like him.



The kind of change the gospel calls forth is typically slow and difficult. It may be that it's *supposed* to be slow and difficult. This is so often the way it is with spiritual growth, with "growing up" as a Christian. Spiritual maturity is long, and it's slow. Spiritual maturity takes

a lot of time
and a lot of work
and a lot of prayer
and a lot of repentance,
and a lot of forgiveness.

But we are not alone in our growing. Nor are we left all alone in our growing. It is God who gives the growth. And it is God who is with us,

perhaps beckoning in silence,
demanding change inaudibly,
leaving a blank space for us to fill in
because our spiritual growing demands that we do so,
or at least try.

Yet maybe God will show up, powerfully, unmistakably, so that

we hear the good news,
and we see ourselves in its light,
and we feel the breath of the Holy Spirit,
and we know what we must do.

Let us embrace the belonging we have in Jesus, and seek our growth in him.