

May 29

If You Want to Call Yourselves Church

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I Corinthians 3

[On Divisions in the Corinthian Church]

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. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³ 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? ⁴ For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. ⁹ For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. ¹⁴ If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

¹⁸ Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written,

"He catches the wise in their craftiness,"

²⁰ and again,

"The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

²¹ So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, ²³ and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Previously this season on “Sermons from 1st Corinthians” ---

“That God chose to redeem humanity by way of the crucified and resurrected Christ is what Paul means by *gospel* . . . and also by *cross* and *message of the cross*.”

“His church may decline or reject this gospel – they may attempt to improve upon the recipe, if you will – but Christ alone, crucified and resurrected, is THE gospel Paul will preach until his last breath.”

“Paul’s authority as an apostle is huge in Corinthians. Rejection of his apostleship constitutes rejection of the gospel.”

“Having Christ, you have everything you need to live the gospel and be the church. *Having* everything in Christ is not the same as *knowing* what you have or what to do with it.”

“We are utterly free to choose our worldly pretensions or the gospel. But we are not free to choose both. Paul presses this over and over: ‘You are not free to keep your pretensions and claim they are gospel-given.’”

Our resources are ours only in the sense that we disburse them according to God’s will, which is always being more completely revealed to us.

“Paul is constantly emphasizing, ‘Do what you – what we – know to be true and faithful and graceful, whether it feels true or faithful or graceful or not.’”

And lastly, for it is threaded directly to our passage today:

The Christians in Corinth wanted a religion, a faith, that could compete with important people who thought important thoughts, with powerful people who got big things done; a faith to be proud of, to brag about to their neighbors and their friends; a faith that made them feel capable, competent, competitive, and wise in a world where such things mattered.

I’ve come back to 1st Corinthians to move through it a chapter at a time, listening to the Apostle talk to his church at Corinth as if he were talking to us today, about how to be church today as honestly as we can, baring ourselves and our life together for his correction, knowing he loved the church as Christ loves it, teaching us to love one another, to serve one another, to give our lives for one another and for the sake of the gospel – in drops of energy and time (we hope, don’t we?) but also in drops of blood, should that day come, as well.

When she was still really little but big enough to talk, we offered our daughter, Mariah, a new Barbie doll in trade for her pacifier. She really wanted a new one, since the only one she had came from a yard sale. Her Barbie had no clothes and nasty hair. Mariah was so conflicted. She'd say, "Well, I want a Barbie, but I love my passy. My passy makes me feel better."

She was in that borderland where she could imagine the luxuries of childhood but still cling to the comforts of babyhood. Sort of like these Corinthian Christians imagining themselves to be a real, grown-up church – until Paul explained that they weren't. Not at all. Not even close. *You all fight with each other. You still live in the flesh. And you're in love with the idea of wisdom. All three are deal killers, he says. All three have to go if you want to call yourselves church.*

Number One: *You fight too much. You fuss and quarrel. You're jealous of each other. You're a bunch of nepios, he says. Nepios is a Greek word that means "adults who act like babies." We'd say "spoiled brats." Nepios in Christ. Spoiled brats in Christ. (There's a sermon title!) Christian spoiled brats. No such thing – right? You can be Christian or you can be a spoiled brat. But you can't be a Christian spoiled brat. It's an oxymoron. You can't be a Christian spoiled brat any more than you can be "noticeably absent," or "appear invisible," or "grow smaller," or have "an unbiased opinion." Or, my husband's favorite, be a "progressive Baptist."*

It's okay for Mariah to love her passy – when she's three! When she's 25 – not so much. When a three-year-old at church doesn't get his way, he can throw a fit and stomp away mad – that's okay. But an adult, not so much. According to Paul, that is NOT how adult believers do things. We aren't little kids. We know the difference between what we want and what is good for our life together and for the world we serve. We don't have to get our way to act as Christ would have us act. "So – grow up!" Paul says. To call yourselves *church*, you have to grow up.

No sooner does he call them *nepios* – spoiled brats, crybabies – than he switches to *sarkinoi*. Your translation might use "worldly" – which keeps the profane-ness but loses the physicality, which is important. But "flesh" or "in the flesh" is better. It needs the little twinge of *sinfulness* that "flesh" allows.

This is the second thing necessary for them to call themselves "church": *Not only are you not adults, neither are you spiritual. You are of the flesh, like people who know nothing of Christ. What's with this, "I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos"? You belong to Christ. Christ died for you. Christ saved you. I didn't. Apollos didn't. You didn't. You work for the Lord, just like we work for the Lord. So stop yakking about which one of us is better.*

Paul then spends a couple of verses and metaphors explaining why his work is ever so slightly *more* important than Apollos' – but then goes back to stand by his point: that all are equal in kingdom work. We are all servants doing the lesser work assigned to

us, making the space – Church-life together – where God’s will in Christ Jesus is being worked out.

And what IS that will? People meeting Christ; people growing in Christ; people growing together in Christ; and together doing His will in the world. We don’t do the saving, we don’t do the growing; we tend the space where the saving and the growing occur.

You know my surgeon analogy. The best doctor in the world can cut you open, fix you up, and sew a nice seam. But not a single one can turn that seam into a scar. Not one can heal you up again. Only God can do that. God is in charge. God has already done the big work – *the foundation*, Paul calls it – and we are here keeping the porch swept and the fridge full, using our minds and our muscles and our money to bring as many people to the table as we can.

Stephen came to church here in the 90’s, when he was an IU undergrad. He did four years of ROTC and is still on active duty in the Army. He’s married and has two little girls. I remember him, his freshman year, telling me about having to be outside for 6 AM runs – ten miles, with the slowest runner out front the whole way. He said it was awful. It was awful for the slow guy up front, and for everyone behind him.

Of course being the fastest – out front all by yourself – probably feels great. I have no idea. But I know this: on a battlefield, that’s just stupid. Here among us, life together – church – *staying together* – is the entire goal. It’s the point. It’s all we are here for, every day, all day long. There is no race, there is no place I’m going, that we aren’t all going *together*.

So how we are toward one another, as we go, is *everything*. How kind, how gentle, how loving, how generous, how patient, how peaceful, how sacrificial, how Christlike: That. Is. What. We. Are. Doing. Here. Friends.

It’s what we are producing, insofar as we are farming; what we are building, insofar as we are building: a community, a life together of people – people saved, redeemed, by the crucified and resurrected Christ. And *this* – this life together – it constitutes an alternative life to the world which surrounds us, inhabited by human beings convinced that they have miles to go before they sleep.

If you want to call yourselves *church*, you have to grow up. You also have to gather up. And *third*: if you want to call yourselves *church*, you have to gospel up. You remember “gospel,” right? God’s choice to redeem humanity by way of the crucified and resurrected Christ. That gospel? Friends, you do know that’s crazy talk, right? You do know how ridiculous that sounds to people who don’t hear and say and sing it all the time?

I confidently rest all that I have, all that I love and all that I am on God’s choice to redeem humanity by way of the crucified and resurrected Christ?

I bet I could get you to say that with me. [REPEAT.] And here we sit, as calm and straight-faced as if we were buying birdseed from a catalogue. No wonder the Corinthians were itching for some wisdom – some fancy language and philosophical proofs they could pull out when their neighbors started quoting Socrates.

Sorry, says Paul. *The gospel is all you got. Because it is all you need.* Friends, you only need the wisdom of this world if Success in This World is the game you want to play. Is that what we are up to, here? Is the goal of faith, the goal of our life together, to succeed at the things the world deems worth succeeding at?

No. We are here on the Lord's business. And that is another business entirely, with different goals and different rules altogether. We aren't aiming to win, are we? We aren't even especially aiming to stay alive, are we? Our aim is to be like Christ, isn't it? Our aim is to preach Christ, isn't it? Our aim is to be faithful to Christ, isn't it? Our aim is to stay together in Christ, isn't it? Our aim is to serve the world for Christ, isn't it? This is God's business. And the only way to do God's business is God's way.

Thinking about Mariah and her passy got me thinking about the things we love, the things that make us feel better – church people and your church keys. Y'all love your church keys, don't you? In fact, so many people have church keys, I'm not sure why we lock the doors anymore. You know you don't need them, but still, they make you feel better. Why, do you suppose? Deep, deep down, why is that? Maybe because the world is just so dangerous and tricky sometimes. And faith is just so . . . *slippery*? That having something hard and edgy that fits into a pocket just feels good. It says, That's my church. If I need to, I can let myself in there any time I want. And in there I'll be safe. (Even though in our heads we know that we are no safer inside these walls than out – not from the big stuff.) But that key, pressed in our palm, gives just enough shape and weight to the faith in our hearts that we can go on. Because as easy as it is for me to say, and for us to know, that in order to call ourselves church we have to *grow up* and *gather up* and *gospel up*, this world can be a really hateful place.

It's getting weirder all the time, and the scary stuff is getting closer to home than ever before. And I promise, I do not care if you have a hundred church keys, so long as you know it really is just a key. You don't need it, you don't need wisdom, you don't need the world's approval, you don't even need my approval, you don't need me; all you need is what you already have.

All things are yours, Beloved, all belong to you. And you belong to Christ. And Christ belongs to God. Amen? And amen.