

Words for God's Church: A Field, A House, A Temple
I Corinthians 3:1-16

Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth forming and shaping this community with the news of Christ crucified- laying a strong foundation for their life together. But after some time away he received news that there were troubles. From what he had heard they were acting like babies needing to be nursed or spoon fed and unable to think for themselves. He thought they were past all that but whatever had been reported to him made him wonder and he told them so!

No doubt when Paul went into a new community to preach the gospel he did spoon feed the community. He began by sharing his own experience of conversion and then sharing who Jesus was and why his life mattered. Paul knew what it was to nurse a community until they could eat solid food. The problem was he thought the Corinthian church was past this stage but the bickering that was going on showed that they needed more lessons. And so he reminded them that they were all servants and each servant had a role in God's kingdom.

To explain Paul used three images - a field, a house and a temple. The first is an image from farming or gardening. To farm or garden you have to have a patch of ground - a field. He began by using himself and Apollos, who was a leader in the church in Corinth, as examples. Paul said

"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."

Think about this image a moment. When a decision has been made to grow something someone

has to plant the seed. Paul's whole ministry was about planting the seeds of faith. As the leading missionary of the early church Paul spent his life traveling around the Mediterranean planting seeds - telling the story of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. He planted seeds in every community where he preached. He believed that was the role God had given him. And yet in every community he left behind servants - believers - to water the plants. To encourage and help others to grow. In Corinth that was part of Apollos' task and it was just as important as Paul's task. For if a seed is not watered it will shrivel up and die. If new believers are not encouraged and taught and allowed to let their roots grow deeper into the ground the new life that Christ provides will not sprout. That is why the community matters because we need a place for people to grow and learn and put down roots.

One of the most amazing things about planting seeds is to watch them begin to grow. Remember as a child planting a seed in a cup of soil and placing it near a window to get sunlight. Daily we would return to see if it had grown. First a small sprout would come out of the ground and then leaves appear. It's like magic and yet what we know is it is all part of God's creation. It is the way God intended it. God gives the growth. All we can do is provide the right environment for that to happen - the field where the seeds are planted.

The second image is a house or a building. Every house is built on a foundation. Paul is very clear that the foundation is Jesus Christ. And yet God used Paul like an architect to design the blueprint. No building that will last can be built without an architect who provides a plan. That was Paul's role - and at the heart of Paul's plan was the desire to design communities where Christ's love is seen, heard, felt and shared. That was his life's work. But a plan alone is not enough. You need builders who come in and put up the walls and do the carpentry work. If you have ever built a house or remodeled you know how many different people it takes to build a structure. That was Paul's point. Every person was important and each person had a specific task that was needed. They were God's servants working together to build the house. All were needed and everyone mattered.

In addition Paul points out that the materials used were crucial. “*Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.*” Just as builders today know that an inspection is coming the same is true for the community of faith. If the materials are not the best possible there will be consequences - often tragic. I like the way Eugene Petersen says this in the Message:

Take particular care in picking out your building materials.

Eventually there is going to be an inspection.

If you use cheap and inferior materials, you'll be found out.

The inspection will be thorough and rigorous.

You won't get by with a thing.

If your work passes inspection, fine;

if it doesn't, your part of the building will be torn out and started over.

But you won't be torn out; you'll survive - but just barely.

Note that - if we use the wrong material that part of the building will be destroyed but we will survive. But the point is that the materials we use and the care we take in building on the foundation of Jesus Christ matters. Paul was cautioning them to be careful and thorough as they built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ to build a community that would last - that could withstand the struggles that would come. And that required using the best materials and working together.

The final image is the temple. The temple was the place where God’s spirit dwelled. Paul was not talking about the temple in Jerusalem. For a shift had happened. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to dwell with the people of God. As the church spread believers came to experience that God’s Spirit was present with them wherever two or three are gathered in Christ’s name. That is what Paul was telling them. They - the community of faith - were the Temple. The you in these verses is the plural you - like saying Y’all are the temple. No longer did the Spirit of God only dwell in a building. Anywhere that the people of God gathered God was present in their midst. This is why the

community mattered so much. Watering the community mattered. Using the right building materials mattered. Because those who came into the community - who developed a relationship with Jesus Christ - embodied God's spirit to the world. And it is through the work of God's Spirit that the body of Christ continues to grow and change the world.

As I was working on this sermon I was thinking about the work the Pneumatrix team has been doing over the last year. We have learned much about the changing landscape in which we share the gospel. Much that is similar to the radical changes that happened following the day of Pentecost for the early Christians. Paul's three images provide us some things to think about as we move forward into the future.

The first image is the field. Paul saw the scope of the Roman Empire as his field. A much larger field than Jesus ministered in. The fact that he was a Roman citizen gave him access to spread the gospel in powerful ways. His message was not always accepted when he went to the synagogues - something he did in every community he went to. Paul's message called much of what the Jews held dear into question and challenged the leaders to think differently. And yet instead of standing still and digging in his heels determined to convince the Jews to change after sharing the gospel with them Paul always went looking for a new field in which to share the gospel.

What we are learning is that if the church of Jesus Christ is going to flourish we too must rethink the field in which we share the gospel. We can no longer only plant our seeds within the walls of the church. We no longer are growing the church by having children and teaching our own children about the faith. We must widen the field and that will require us to think in new ways and to explore new avenues. Because our world has changed around us while we have been doing church within our own walls.

Friends, today one third of all Americans work on Sunday. Therefore they cannot attend worship on Sunday. Their families depend on them to work. We can no longer be a Sunday only

community because we are excluding one third of our neighbors when that is all we do.

Only one third of people in the United States today are members of churches. That means two-thirds of the people around us either have never heard the gospel message or are what has been labeled the Nones and the Dones. Friends, the Nones are those persons who do not identify with any particular religion. They are the religiously unaffiliated. The Dones are a group of once-dedicated church members who have decided to stop going to church. Those two groups are increasing daily especially among the younger generations. And if we ever hope to interest them again we must first examine how we live out our faith in the world. For the church of Jesus Christ has often been judgmental instead of forgiving. Rigid instead of open. Committed to structure instead of open to the Spirit. We must live daily seeking to live as Jesus did accepting those who are different and sharing the gospel openly.

Friends, we are called to be the workers in the field - planting and watering the ground so that growth can occur. We need to take some lessons from Paul and be willing to nurse new believers if necessary. We must get back to the basics and share our faith with others. This is not just the preacher's job. Paul told the Corinthians that they were all God's servants and so are we. They were all called to work in the field. And so are we.

One of the major beliefs we came away from our study with is that every member of this church and every church needs to start planting seeds again. It is up to every one of us to talk to others about Jesus Christ and to invite them to join us in developing a relationship with Jesus. We have discovered that many here only associate with others within the body of Christ. All our friends are Christians. If that is true - and some of you have told me that - then what we need to do is increase the number of people we know. Broaden our associations. Go to some new activities. Meet new people. Get involved in communities that are not centered on church. Place yourself in new communities where you might meet those who have drifted away from the church, or never attended church. Tell them gently why your faith matters to you. Why this community matters to you. When they have

helped you and strengthened you when you have struggled. You don't have to quote scripture or remember all the stories. It is not our job to save them - that is God's task. We just need to share why our faith matters to us and what it means to us. Why and how a relationship with Jesus has impacted our lives. For Covenant Presbyterian to grow we must broaden our reach - expand our field of service and be those who plant the seeds of faith and water those seeds. And we must invite others to join us on the journey through life in our community. Friends, statistics tell us that 86% of people who start attending church do it because a friend invited them. 86%! Have you invited a friend to worship or bible study or to join you in service to others recently?

Secondly, we are called to examine the materials we are using to build our community. Once again recently we have witnessed the devastation that comes to coastal communities in the wake of hurricanes. Through the years builders have begun to build with different materials - improved materials that can withstand the wind and water. Only those buildings survive. In the same way the church is called to continue to reevaluate the materials and the methods we use to build the community of faith. That means we need to look at what is working and evaluate what isn't working. Our goal should always be to strengthen the body of Christ and to build upon our foundation - Jesus Christ crucified.

Over the past several years we at Covenant have already made some shifts in the things we value. We have become more involved in our community as we have partnered with Family Promise, begun the Day Camp program and begun to provide needed items for Bells Ferry Elementary. We continue to reevaluate what is needed in that program. Just this week we discovered that there is a growing population at Bells Ferry - one I for one find disturbing. There is a growing homeless population. Meaning children do not have permanent addresses - part of this is because a growing number of families are living in extended stay hotels and friends that is not cheap! Friends, one of the greatest needs in Cobb County is affordable housing. In response to this identified need our Fifth

Sunday collection this month will be specific healthy snacks which are listed in the bulletin and gas or grocery gift cards for the social workers at Bells Ferry to provide for those children. We are seeking to be responsive to needs as we discover them. And we will continue to do this as we seek to build community not only within these walls but in the wider community.

Finally, what we are discovering is that we must see ourselves not just as a community gathered at Canton and Piedmont to worship on Sundays but as God's servants sent out into the community to serve. God's spirit does not dwell just inside the walls of this church anymore than God's Spirit only dwelt in the Temple in Jerusalem. God's spirit dwells in each of us as we are empowered by life in community. We come together to be filled with God's spirit but friends that is not the end of the story. We are filled for a purpose. And that purpose is to go out into the world offering hope and grace, love and care, kindness and forgiveness. We can no longer be a church that only worships together. For those churches are dying all around us. We must be God's spirit alive and active in the community for through our working together as the body of Christ in the community of Cobb County God will provide the growth.

And as God's servants each and every one of us is challenged to tell the story of Jesus Christ, to invite others into our community and to live every day as a disciple of Jesus Christ offering love, grace, forgiveness, kindness and hope. And my friends, when we live as God's servants in the world God will provide the growth.