"God, Give Us Growth"

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – February 12, 2023
Lesson: I Corinthians 3:1-10

God, your love is dynamic and your Spirit moves among us. Help us recognize your presence, to listen for your words of hope, and pay attention to the ways in which you bring us new growth in our lives and communities. May we respond with open hearts and minds to receive and hands to serve. Amen.

I have no doubt that the Apostle Paul deeply loved the church communities he helped form. He also had big expectations of them. Out of love, he called these communities to live up to their highest ideals – the ideals he taught them, ideals grounded in the way of Jesus.

We know from his letters that the church in Corinth often struggled to live up to these ideals. And so, they asked Paul for help and he responded.

At the beginning of today's passage, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are still young in faith. He calls them "infants in Christ" who have needed to be fed with milk because they weren't ready for solid food. This might sound a bit paternalistic for our modern sensibilities, but this metaphor is important because Paul is setting the stage for the message he is about to offer, which is essentially that the Corinthians need to grow. Not only do they need to grow up (because they *are* acting a bit childish) – but they also need to grow together as a community and to grow deeper in their faith (two forms of growth that go hand in hand).

Throughout his letter, Paul contrasts this idea of being "of the flesh" rather than of the Spirit or of Christ. If you remember from Pastor Dave's sermon a couple of weeks ago, Paul also talks about the wisdom of this world versus God's wisdom. This is a similar idea. Paul contrasts the ways in which people form groups that are in conflict with each other, and hierarchies that lift up some people over others – versus the ways in which people can and should collaborate and share leadership in community.

Essentially, the Corinthians are falling back into common, but destructive human patterns, rather than living up to the ideals of faithful community that they have been taught. Their current problems are evidence of this. They have formed factions and there is unhealthy competition, jealousy, and infighting between groups.

"I belong to Apollos," say some. "I belong to Paul," say others. It's sort of like team Edward and team Jacob! It's silly. To this, Paul basically says, "leave us out of it!" "This is not what we intended."

Paul and Apollos (who was one of Paul's proteges) were partners in ministry, working together. The saw themselves as servants of God and servants of God's vision for Christian community. They certainly weren't trying to pit the Corinthians against each other.

In order to try to help mend their fractured community, Paul offers two metaphors for faithful community.

One, the church is God's field. Paul planted the seeds of faith in the Corinthian community. And Apollos watered them. They both had a common purpose – to nurture and care for God's field, God's garden. And it was God who gave those seeds of faith life, those seeds of loving community, growth. And God is growing them still.

Two, the church is God's building. Paul laid a solid foundation for the Corinthians – gave them a start, gave them something to build upon and the tools to use to build up God's church "with care." And, by the way, you can't build up God's church with care when some people are acting like hammers and treating others like nails. The Corinthians needed to be reminded that this church community was to be built together – that collaboration, not competition, is what would get them where they needed to be.

These metaphors also point to some important theological truths:

One, this is so much bigger than the Corinthians and Paul. We are God's field; we are God's building. You and I, this community, our city, nation, the world, life itself, belongs to God, and is beloved of God.

Two, these are dynamic and living metaphors for faith development. Faith, in both individual and communal expressions is not fixed or frozen in time. Faith is much more fun and fruitful when it's not rigid, but is instead open to new growth. Faith grows like a garden. Faith is built over time – piece by piece. Faith is always in process. Like a garden, faith needs nurturing – watering, pruning, fertilizer. Like a building – a church or a house, faith needs upkeep and maintenance, decluttering, cleaning, and maybe even a major repair or a remodel from time to time. Faith is dynamic, not fixed.

Paul didn't want the Corinthians to fight with each other, but not because he wanted them to be static and superficially peaceable. He didn't want them to just walk on eggshells around each other and never solve their problems. Rather, he wanted them to work through their issues. He wanted them to grow deeper roots and broader branches together. He wanted them to continue to really build their church community together – using the tools of love – to be a temple of praise and thanksgiving and a home where God's Spirit is felt, God's love is experienced.

Paul's personal faith was strong and drove his sense of mission. But Paul also saw everything through the lens of community. In his understanding, the church community is the central expression of Christian faith. And our individual faith and individual lives are always in relationship with one another. This is right in line with the perspective of Jesus, of course.

Paul's focus in his ministry was on these local churches he planted because that is where he believed that the Kingdom of God would take root in his time. And it did, but perhaps not in the way Paul expected. In fact, Paul would be astonished that we are here and still talking about him today because he (and many of his contemporaries) believed that the return of Christ was imminent and they would see the fullness of the Kingdom of God ushered in during their lifetimes in a dramatic way.

And Paul certainly had his concerns and critiques about the Roman Empire, but I don't think he was necessarily trying to reform Rome on a grand scale. Like Jesus, he was committed to nonviolence and wasn't trying to start a revolt. Instead, he was leading a different sort of countercultural movement. But it was still risky.

The imperial system afforded its citizens and residents a certain level of freedom as long as they followed the rules. But they couldn't change the rules. And bending the rules too far could and would get them killed. And, whether or not his goal was to challenge Rome's power and control, Paul was ultimately executed by the state.

But Paul and his collaborators believed that if the Kingdom of God would come to fruition, as they hoped, then God would take care of Rome in the end. And it is important to note that Paul and his contemporaries weren't waiting for the end of the world (period). It wasn't the destruction of the earth that they hoped for. They longed for the end of the world *as they knew it*. And like REM, they felt fine – because they believed that the imperial system of domination, oppression, and control would be replaced with a just and peaceful society, saturated in God's love.

And so, if that's where they were headed, then they might as well start now. They might as well live as if the Kingdom of God was already here. They might not be able to change the whole world, but Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to live out the values and vision of the Reign of God in their community (where they did have the agency and influence to do things differently).

Paul challenged them: don't fall into patterns of competition, factions, fighting, posturing, jealousy. That is a waste of the precious time you have. Instead, build this church community as if building the Kingdom of God was up to you. Use this community as training ground for whatever the future may hold. Take the higher, harder road of love – love that collaborates, serves each other, shares leadership, respects one another's various gifts, and cares for the vulnerable.

Be a role model, Corinthians, Paul encouraged. Use whatever time you have left to build upon the foundation you have been given; use it to grow in God's love.

What Paul and the Corinthians imagined would happen in their lifetime didn't come to pass (at least not in the way that they expected). But Paul's message is timeless and still relevant to us. We are called to practice our faith in community. We are called to form relationships that are grounded in love. We are called to strive for collaboration. We are called to build upon the foundation we've been given. And, with God's help, we are called to keep this garden growing – with ever deeper roots and broader branches.

And church can still serve as a training ground for us. We come together to worship, learn, and serve together. Through our collective spiritual practices, we are taught, strengthened, and inspired to apply what we have learned in other parts of our lives – our families, places of work, communities, and broader world.

Like a good workout routine, we build our spiritual muscles by using them. And this is true of the spiritual discipline of collaboration. We learn to work together by doing so. We learn to listen to one another by doing so. We learn the give and take that is necessary in community over time. We learn that forgiveness is necessary sometimes along the way. We learn how to make decisions together and how to discern next steps when there are big or challenging decisions to be made. We put processes and procedures in place so various voices may be heard. We make corrections along the way when needed.

For every community, church or otherwise, this is an ongoing process. The work of community-building and collaboration never ends. I'd say we do a pretty good job of this at our church. And I trust that we will continue to grow in this practice of collaboration too.

Our context is different than Paul's. And that comes with a call and a challenge, I think. Paul and his contemporaries didn't have much power and agency to change the ways of Rome. But we do have more power and influence in our society. We may not always feel like we do, but we do. And so, I think that challenges us to take what Paul taught even further into our broader society.

The beauty of mutually supportive community and the power of collaborative effort is something we have to offer to the world. We can bear witness to this to others. We can practice this both at church and in the other communities we are a part of.

Now, as much as ever, our world needs growth in its ability to collaborate. It's frustrating how much our society struggles to have civilized conversations about difficult issues. It's frustrating when people with more power want to suppress the voices and perspectives of those with less. It's frustrating when policy makers listen to the voices of corporations, but not working people. It's frustrating when some white people don't want to listen to and learn from the perspectives and experiences of people of color; when wealthy people don't want to listen to the voices of those with less; when straight people don't want to listen to members of the LGBTQ+ community…

The fractures run deep and the polarization is real. How can we build bridges across the divide? How can we bring people together? It's not easy.

I don't think we can begin to tackle the really sticky issues in our society until we can build a big enough coalition of people who are willing to collaborate on a better way. And that will require us to brush up on the history, to really listen with compassion to the experiences of others, to think beyond our own limited perspective, and to open ourselves up to new ideas about community-building, social services, and how we might better keep our communities safe and thriving.

I think we can do better, as a nation and as a people. And I think it's going to take people who are willing to be courageous, humble, open-minded, open-hearted partners in this collaborative effort. And I have to say, friends, that you are well ahead of where the Corinthians started, so I think you are definitely up to the task.

And so, I pray that God does continue to bring us growth – as individuals, as a church, in our various communities and groups, and as a world. May we grow deeper roots to soak up God's abundant love and broad branches to share it widely. Amen.