

Epiphany: Wk 6

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 February 2020

Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evans

[0:00] Amen. We are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.!

And we're back in 1 Corinthians this morning, as our sermon texts, as we were a few weeks back. Talk about intents. Paul is giving the Corinthian church some more of his firm talking to that he gave them before. And this morning, our passage uses the imagery of plants growing and buildings being built to demonstrate his point.

Clearly, gardening that is done poorly, and I only know this from watching others because I'm great at killing plants, but gardening that is done poorly obviously leads to poor results.

Growth doesn't happen. And buildings that are not built properly, in the right way, with the right materials, by the right person, are unstable. And sooner or later, they're not going to be standing anymore.

[1:33] My little girls are always building things with blocks. Normal wooden blocks are pretty unstable. They're pretty easy to knock over. I hear them crash into the floor multiple times each day, it seems like.

But then there are Legos. Late in the evening one night last week, Elaine heard me howl in pain from the other room.

Without missing a beat, she says, you stepped on a Lego, didn't you? Anyone else ever do that, by the way? Yeah, that's an experience you don't forget. I asked her, how could you tell that I stepped on a Lego?

She responded by basically saying that the cry of pain that comes from stepping on a Lego is a very unique and distinctive sound. The strength and the stability of Legos make for a very different result than wooden blocks.

Not only when you step on them, but also when you build things with them. Gardening well produces a different result than gardening poorly.

[2:46] A good gardener or a good builder produces better results than a bad builder or a bad gardener.

In our reading from 1 Corinthians 3 for this morning, we see two examples of attitudes with which a church might approach its life together.

These two attitudes have very different foundations and they produce very different results. And for us as a congregation, as we look towards the future, as we pray for growth, as we pray that God would continue to build us up, we need to have in mind what Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 3.

Let's look together where we see the attitude that the Corinthian church had so wrongly adopted.

And where we see a warning for all Christians and all churches in their bad example.

Paul writes, starting in verse 1, But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

[4:09] I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready. Ouch.

That hurts. So what can we tell so far of the practice of the church in Corinth? Well, we can tell that it was driven by spiritual immaturity.

Given the example that Paul uses, it must have been extreme spiritual immaturity. My two-year-old is still really little, but she still has quite a lot of growing to do.

But even she has been eating solid food for a long time. So when we look at what not to do as a church, the first thing we see in our passage this morning is the spiritual immaturity of the Corinthians.

Of course, we expect spiritual immaturity of new believers. But the problem in Corinth was apparently one in which spiritual immaturity had started to affect the entire church.

[5:20] That's a bad thing. But it's not hard to see how that happens. It could happen to any church. I mean, if we are not regularly in the Word and in prayer, if we neglect gathering together for worship, if we aren't seeking to grow in our faith in Christ, we'll end up in the same predicament that the Corinthian church did.

I'd venture to guess that spiritually immature congregations are not an uncommon thing. So it's important to pray earnestly to God, whatever congregation we find ourselves in, that we are not one of them.

Paul goes on, For you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

Again, those are hard words. Those are really hard words. What is Paul getting at when he is telling them that they are still of the flesh? What he's getting at basically is that they are acting like unbelievers.

The way they are trying to do things is showing them to be a worldly church. And a worldly church is not particularly effective for the kingdom of God, is it?

[6:53] How are they showing themselves to be worldly? Well, jealousy and strife is the answer we see in our passage. Jealousy and strife make for disastrous building material for a church.

We expect jealousy and strife in the world, of course, but when we see it in the church, it sure is an ugly thing. The Corinthians apparently fell into that perennial problem of thinking, Hey, me and my faction, we need to call the shots at all costs, no matter who it hurts, because we're obviously the ones who know what is best.

Of course, many of you have been believers and church members for longer than I have been alive. So I will defer to you and ask, have you ever seen that kind of attitude work out well?

No. No. I watched that kind of attitude work out really poorly myself early on in my Christian walk. That is not the way the church grows and is built up.

Slash and burn agriculture does not grow the church. Jealousy and strife are disastrous.

[8:18] Why is that? Well, where do jealousy and strife really come from at the end of the day? They come from pride, don't they? Isn't that the root issue, really?

And the danger of pride cannot be overstated. I'm reminded of what C.S. Lewis said about pride. Lewis wrote this, In God, you come up against something which is in every respect, immeasurably superior to yourself.

Unless you know God as that, and therefore know yourself as nothing in comparison, you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God.

A proud man is always looking down on things and people. And of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you. That raises a terrible question.

How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? I'm afraid it means they are worshipping an imaginary God.

[9:31] They theoretically admit themselves to be nothing in the presence of this phantom God, but are really all the time imagining how he approves of them and thinks them far better than ordinary people.

That is, they pay a penny worth of imaginary humility to him and get out of it a pound's worth of pride towards their fellow men. So why does Paul call out the Corinthians for their strife and their jealousy?

Well, because it really is that bad. A church that is characterized by strife, jealousy, and pride is a disaster waiting to happen, not something that is going to grow and be built.

Given that this reality is reflected in Holy Scripture, it's clear that it is meant to stand as a warning to all churches in all places at all times.

In their case, it worked out like this. For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? So you have one faction that says, I'm on Paul's side, you have another faction that says, I'm on the side of Apollos.

[11:00] That's obviously the way forward for the church, right? No, it's never the way forward. Is it really any of us, sorry, is it Paul or Apollos, or any human leader who builds the church?

There's a fundamental question. Is it really any of us who are ultimately responsible when the church grows in faith and is built up? If we find ourselves tempted to tell ourselves that, we need to understand that that's laughable.

The Apostle Paul, look at him, he took the gospel to the Gentiles. He was tireless in his missionary efforts. He helped kickstart the spread of the gospel all over the world. But even Paul ultimately didn't build or grow the church. And if Paul didn't, it's safe to say that none of us do either.

Which, of course, makes all of the things that tend to cause strife and jealousy look as ridiculous as they really are. Paul says, What then is Apollos?

[12:11] What is Paul? Servant through whom you believe does the Lord assign to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

All right. Here we are starting to see a positive vision of what builds, what grows the church. Apollos and Paul taught the word. They preached the gospel, but they were merely servants of God. A gardener can plant a seed and water it, but it is not the gardener who makes it spring up and flourish, is it?

So it is with the proclamation of the gospel in the building up of the church. The seed can be scattered, it can be watered, but it is not anything human that causes it to sprout and to flourish. It is certainly not strife or jealousy. No, it is God who brings growth and builds his church. Paul goes on.

[13:24] He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

What do we see in these verses? Well, one is that everyone who proclaims the gospel is on the same team, right? And we also see that God, for some reason I can't fathom, has chosen to use imperfect people to proclaim the gospel.

But it is God who does the growing and does the building. So what is ineffective in growing and building the church?

What doesn't do it? When I ask that question, I'm not talking merely about numerical growth because there are a ton of awful ways to bring numerical growth.

Like, for example, hey, let's compromise on the truth to make the message more mass appealing. Let's ignore those hard bits in Holy Scripture. That's, yeah, that's not the way to do it.

[14:37] It's not setting out primarily to entertain people and get them coming back so they can see the show again this week. Obviously, strife, jealousy, pride, factions, those don't build the church either.

Paul has made that clear in this very passage. And it's not how awesome and talented any of us are that builds and grows the church either. Paul and Apollos were used mightily by God, but it wasn't their awesomeness and their talent that built the church.

We have to come to terms with the fact that if the church is to be built, the same thing will be true of all of us. Although, to be honest, I find that a relief.

because if, for example, it takes a pastor who is full of charisma for the church to grow and be built up, then we are in real trouble here.

Having more entertaining programming than the church down the street isn't what builds the church. Successful marketing isn't what builds the church either. Having the coolest rock band or the most classically trained choir isn't what builds the church.

[16:05] Although, I love you guys, music team. But what gives growth? What is it that builds?

God is the one who gives growth. God is the one who builds. the growth. God's word at work by God's spirit is what builds the church.

This, the word of God, applied by God's grace and God's power to human hearts is what builds the church. That's it.

And God is the one who gives the growth. God's grace is what God's power is what I've been your pastor for over four years now.

What a great joy it has been. I have seen God at work in your lives. I've done my best to preach the gospel to all of you.

[17:13] I have baptized a number of you. But if you have grown and you have been built up, it has not at all been because of me.

It is because the word of God is living and active. It is because the Holy Spirit is real and at work.

And it is because the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

God's salvation. Does our pride need to help any of that along? Nope.

Pride just gets in the way, doesn't it? And as we've seen this morning, our pride is a deadly and destructive thing, both in our personal lives and in the life of churches. But here is the amazing thing. As heinous, as awful as our pride is, as offensive as it is to God, Jesus Christ went to the cross for it, to pay the penalty for our sinful pride, so that prideful sinners who call on the name of Jesus find forgiveness in his blood.

[18 : 43] As the scriptures tell us, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Brothers and sisters, let's join together this morning in repenting of our pride. Let's join together this morning in trusting in God's word and God's power to build his church. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.