

February 13, 2011

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

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. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling 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. 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; you are God's field, God's building.

Genesis 2: 8-9

⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

THE GARDENER AND THE ASSISTANTS

Some of you may remember that I like to garden. I try, I really do, but it seems that I just do not have enough time to put in the kind of garden I would really like to have, with flowers and vegetables and trees and beautiful plants everywhere.

Sometimes I plant seeds only to find that I don't water regularly enough or pull the weeds enough for the seeds to sprout and grow to maturity, and I end up with dead, brown little sticks poking up out of the ground.

I do better with planting larger plants, especially trees. I have put in two plum trees, one apricot tree, and two pineapple guava trees, and they seem to be doing well.

But the problem with trees is this----I will not see any fruit from those trees for at least a couple more years. It takes a long time for fruit trees to mature. You have to be patient.

You have to keep watering and fertilizing and caring for those trees for a long time before you can finally eat the fruit of your labors! And if I had planted those trees from seed! Well, maybe the next generation would taste the fruit, but maybe I would never have the pleasure!

In our scripture reading from First Corinthians this morning, Paul writes about the history of the church in Corinth in this way---

Paul had planted the seed. He had shared the gospel and taught about Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and made the first converts there. He stayed a while, about 18 months, before moving on to plant the next church, and when he left, Pastor Apollos took over for him.

Apollos watered the seed that Paul had planted.

Without planting the seed, the church would not exist.

Without watering, the church would have died.

So Paul and Apollos both did what they were called by God to do---they taught the people and nurtured them in the faith.

And yet, as Paul points out, it was not the church of Paul and it was not the church of Apollos! It was the church of God!

Paul and Apollos had each done their share, but without God, the church would be nothing, because it was God who gave the growth.

Without God, Paul's words would have fallen flat. The seed would have hit stony soil and shriveled up, laying there on top of the soil where the wind would blow it away or the birds would eat it.

Without God, the water that Apollos poured over the seeds would have just washed them away, or run right past the seeds without nourishing them. Maybe it would have drowned them, rotting the sprouting seeds instead of helping them to grow strong and healthy.

Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

Paul did not see the long-term effects of his labor. He

In our lives, too, we may never know the final effects of all that we do.

We do the best we can with the talents and the opportunities God has given to us.

We plant the seeds of faith within our families and communities. We live as the light of the world and the salt of the earth the best we can.

We try to balance acts of piety and acts of mercy, both public and private. We never know who will be affected by our words and actions, but we are faithful to God's call for our lives, faithful in prayer and action, faithful to being God's beloved children.

All of this plants and waters more seeds than we might be aware of. Those seeds are in the hearts and minds of everyone who knows us, seeds that will grow a deep relationship with God, our creator.

They may lie there for a long time, dormant, or they may grow quickly in front of our eyes.

The growth is not up to us, but we must do our part. It is up to us to share the gospel with those around us, whether it's by word or deed or both.

Actions really do speak louder than words. It's been said, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

The way we live plants more seeds than all the talking we will ever do.

The way we live also pours water on those seeds. We can live life abundantly, lovingly, generously, humbly.

But it's not ALL up to us! No matter how poorly we plant or how many mistakes we make with the watering, it's not up to us.

God gives the growth.

We are called to do our best, and then it's up to God. When others around us begin to grow in faith, we praise God for that growth. We don't pat ourselves on the back.

And when we don't see growth, we shouldn't blame ourselves or others, either.

Some seeds, as any gardener can tell you, take longer to germinate than others. Some seeds are radishes, ready for harvest in a few short weeks. On the other hand, growing a fruit tree from seed means years before harvest.

Sometimes we may never see that harvest. This doesn't mean we failed. It means that God is still giving the growth.

We need to plant the seed with love and prayer, and water the seed with nurture and compassion and more prayer, being faithful to that care, to the part we play in the lives of others.

And if we have planted well and watered faithfully, God will give the growth.

We are only the assistant gardeners. We need to remember that God is the master Gardener. We need to rely on God for the growth.

When we teach our children that Jesus loves them,
when we reach out to help the poor and needy, when we
share with anyone else what God means to us and has done
for us, then we are planting.

And when we love others and live out our faith in visible and
tangible ways, when we look for and find Christ in others,
then we are watering.

And the growth happens not only in others, but also in
ourselves!

Some of you have asked me what I envision as the future of this church.

Pieces of it are clear to me, but a lot of it is not, and that's because growth is happening underground, in the roots of this congregation.

And because I am only human, what I foresee as the harvest of this place, of our work in ministry together, is not only incomplete, it may be wrong.

This is my hope and prayer ----that together we will grow in the knowledge and the love of God and Jesus Christ, and that, empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, we will make a difference in the world by sharing God's love with others.

This sounds very nebulous, I know. It says in the United Methodist Book of Discipline (our book of church law) that we are called "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

And that is what I've been talking about.

By planting seeds of faith and hope, by watering them with love and prayer, and by relying on God for the growth of those seeds, I believe with all of my heart that we will be making ourselves into better disciples of Jesus Christ and that we will be making a difference---transforming!---the world.

As we grow in our discipleship, we will plant more seeds and become better at watering those seeds.

As we become better at relying on God for growth, we will grow spiritually more and more.

I ask you to join me in praying every day for Linda Vista United Methodist Church, that together we will grow in discipleship and in loving God and neighbor. Please pray that God will open our hearts, minds and souls so that we may serve with all our strength.

If we pray together, we will be watering the garden that has been planted here. Our roots will go even deeper, our branches will spread wider, our fruit will be sweeter and more people will taste that fruit.

Even if those of us here today never see the fruit, it is our calling to tend to God's garden here in this place. It is our calling to nurture the faith in each other and to plant the seeds of faith in everyone who comes to us.

It is our calling to water everything with love and prayer.

Let us do our part the best that we can.

And then let us pray to have the patience and the faith to trust that God is giving the growth.

Amen.