

January 19 – February 16

Somos del Señor (We Belong to Christ!)

Our first lectionary worship series of 2020 grows out the Epistle assigned for these weeks. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians was written in part to deal with a divided church. The letter is addressed to those who are "called to be saints" and then proceeds to ask us to consider our behavior in light of this call. In this season that includes Human Relations Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Korean American Day, Human Trafficking Awareness Day, Black History Month, and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we seem primed to consider our diversity and yet oneness in Christ. Join us as we declare "Somos del Señor."

January 19, Human Relations Day (MLK Monday, Jan. 20)

[I Corinthians 1:1-9](#)

Somos del Señor: You Are Not Lacking

The salutation of I Corinthians contains a wealth of material for preaching and worship, not least is the enthusiasm with which Paul addresses his readers and hearers. He is not building them up to take them down later, but instead trying to remind them of all that they share as a part of the body of Christ. While there is correction to come, it can happen only in the context of the abundance of the body. This is where we must begin to build our unity.

Planning Notes

HUMAN RELATIONS SUNDAY (January 19, 2020)

Liturgical Resources

Year A

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: A wilderness beckons us: a desert, a barren place,
yet a place of blessing and discovery.

Many: Jesus, steady companion, accompany us,
as we enter new territory, the frightening places,
the exciting places, those that evoke memories of past spaces,

and those that give us hope for the future.

One: Jesus, our wise and well-traveled guide,
lead us into this new land,
give us boldness and courage to follow you.
Give us your vision and wisdom.

Many: Walk with us through this time of liminality and uncertainty.

Help us to trust that we are in a space where all things will be made new.

(adapted from: Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Worship and Song: Worship Resources*, p. 12)

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious Spirit, Holy One, we gather in this place to remember, celebrate, and acknowledge once again our common call to ministry and service in your church. Our gathering celebrates anew and always, Jesus' inclusion of women and those on the outskirts of society in his earthly ministry. We come, as always, from various places in life and ministry, some that are joyful and others that cause us pain, some that are fulfilling, and others that cause us to question the fitness of our response to God's call, even some that are so in tandem with the world's oppressive systems that we wonder where you are in the midst of all the turmoil that overshadows the work we do. But beyond it, all we come in the sure and certain faith that in gathering together, we experience your enlivening, empowering presence, and above all, your grace that never ceases. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, now, throughout our time together, and all the days of our lives. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, we pray. **Amen.**

Written by Dr. Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, Ernest and Bernice Styberg Professor of Preaching

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LITANY OF SENDING

In the spirit of the women who survived the middle passage, withstood and overcame the oppression of enslavement,

We go forth, heading North.

In the spirit of women who dared obstacles and challenged unjust barriers and forged new peoples in new lands,

We go forth, heading South.

In the spirit of women who refused to be browbeaten and held back and opened new paths for others to follow,

We go forth, heading East.

In the spirit of women who refused to be shut out and who demolished boundaries to open new spaces for sisters unborn,

We go forth, heading West.

We go forth, moving in all directions, moving at the directive of the Holy One, moving boldly and courageously in the assurance of divine guidance, anointing presence, and enabling power; in the spirit not only of our ancestors in the sistahood, but at the direction of Sistah Wisdom, Sofia, who calls each and all to in-courage-her for the sake of God's glory.

We go forth!

We go forth!

Thanks be to God!

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A TRI-LINGUAL READING OF PSALM 22:22-31 (NRSV)

FRENCH

PSAUMES 22:22-31 La Bible du Semeur (BDS)

²² Délivre-moi de la gueule du lion!

Préserve-moi des cornes des taureaux! Oui, tu m'as répondu!

²³ Je proclamerai à mes frères quel Dieu tu es, je te louerai dans l'assemblée.

²⁴ Vous tous qui craignez l'Eternel, célébrez-le!

Descendants de Jacob, glorifiez-le! Descendants d'Israël, redoutez-le!

²⁵ Il n'a ni mépris ni dédain pour le pauvre dans l'affliction,

il n'a pas détourné son regard loin de lui. Non! il a écouté l'appel à l'aide qu'il lui lançait.

²⁶ Grâce à toi, je te loue dans la grande assemblée,

j'accomplirai mes vœux devant ceux qui te craignent.

²⁷ Que les malheureux mangent, et qu'ils soient rassasiés!

Oui, qu'ils louent l'Eternel, ceux qui vivent pour lui! Que votre vie dure toujours!

²⁸ Aux confins de la terre, tous les peuples du monde se souviendront de l'Eternel. Tous, ils se tourneront vers lui, et toutes les peuplades se prosterneront devant lui.

²⁹ Car l'Eternel est roi, et il domine sur les peuples.

³⁰ Tous les grands de la terre mangeront et l'adoreront, et ceux qui s'en vont vers la tombe, ceux dont la vie décline, se prosterneront devant lui.

³¹ Leur postérité, à son tour, servira l'Eternel et parlera de lui à la génération qui viendra après elle.

SPANISH

22 Anunciaré tu nombre á mis hermanos: En medio de la congregación te alabaré.

23 Los que teméis á Jehová, alabadle; Glorificadle, simiente toda de Jacob;

Y temed de él, vosotros, simiente toda de Israel.

24 Porque no menospreció ni abominó la aflicción del pobre,

Ni de él escondió su rostro;

Sino que cuando clamó á él, oyóle.

25 De ti será mi alabanza en la grande congregación;

Mis votos pagaré delante de los que le temen.

26 Comerán los pobres, y serán saciados: Alabarán á Jehová los que le buscan: Vivirá vuestro corazón para siempre.

27 Acordarse han, y volveránse á Jehová todos los términos de la tierra;

Y se humillarán delante de ti todas las familias de las gentes.

28 Porque de Jehová es el reino; Y él se enseñoreará de las gentes.

29 Comerán y adorarán todos los poderosos de la tierra:

Postraránse delante de él todos los que descienden al polvo,

Si bien ninguno puede conservar la vida á su propia alma.

30 La posteridad le servirá; Será ella contada por una generación de Jehová.

31 Vendrán, y anunciarán al pueblo que naciere, Su justicia que él hizo.

PSALM 22:22-31 (NRSV adapted)

²²I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;

in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

²³You who fear the Lord, praise [God] !

All you offspring of Jacob, glorify God; stand in awe of God,

all you offspring of Israel!

²⁴For God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;

God did not hide God's face from me, but heard when I cried to God.

²⁵From you comes my praise in the great congregation;

my vows I will pay before those who fear God.

²⁶The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek God shall praise the Lord.

May your hearts live forever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations shall worship before God.
²⁸ For dominion belongs to the Lord, and God rules over the nations.
²⁹ To God, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before God shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for God.
³⁰ Posterity will serve God; future generations will be told about the Lord,
³¹ and proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that God has done it!

CLOSING LITANY

ONE: Children of God, you have heard God's voice calling.
How will you respond?

MANY: "Speak, your servants are listening!"

ONE: Saints of the Most High, God has commanded you to
heal the sick, set the captives free, and bind up broken hearts.
How will you respond?

MANY: "Speak, your servants are listening!"

ONE: Leaders of leaders, God is calling you by name, commanding you
to go forth with power and authority. God has promised to be with you always, even till
the ends of the earth. How will you respond?

MANY: "Speak, your servants are listening!"

ONE: Beloved, hear the voice of God declaring that you are chosen people,
a royal priesthood, are you listening? How will you respond?

MANY: “Speak Lord, your servants hear!”

ONE: Sisters and brothers, be assured of this,
God will not call you to go where God cannot keep you.
So, go from this place determined to
live everyday like it is your last,
love God and God’s people unconditionally,
and look forward to hearing God say,
“I am making all things new!” (Rev. 21:5).
How will you respond?

**MANY: Here we are Faithful Shepherd,
Speak to us, we are listening!**

ONE: ASHE’!

ALL: ASHE’!

Written by Cynthia Wilson
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Other Resources:

Africana Worship Book: Year A, Copyright © 2006, Discipleship Resources, 214-223

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Celebration by Dr. Valerie Bridgeman Davis

LITANY: *"The Diversity Among Us"* by Rev. Trudy D. Robinson

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Preaching Notes

Greetings! There is so much in the words that we use when saying hello that we often overlook the complexity. We can tell, for example, when someone is genuinely glad to see us or when our appearance is a burden. We know whether we can continue from where we left off the last time together – whether that was a day ago, or a week, or ten years – or whether we have to start all over and repair what was broken. When we are summoned into a superior's office, we know whether we are in trouble or in line for a promotion. When we greet our children, we know whether they are just happy to see us or awaiting a promised punishment – "just wait until your father gets home" or "we'll sit down and discuss this when your mom gets back!" A greeting is often laden with meaning beyond the words.

The introduction to the first letter to the Corinthians is no less laden with meaning. Don't be upset that the lectionary assigned "only the greeting" for this week. We could do a whole series on these first nine verses. But before we get too carried away, let's take a look.

On the one hand, the salutation is standard Paul. From me and maybe someone else, to you, grace and peace! But none is exactly the same. He uses the labels as a way of setting the tone. "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes." This may sound like small talk before he really gets to the point, but he's already there.

The church in Corinth is a church divided. We can debate what is actually going on and probably not all agree, but that there is division, factionalism, and an air of elitism seems undeniable. Paul wades in by establishing his credentials. He's an apostle, not just a traveling preacher off the street. At the same time, he doesn't want to play the elitist game with them. He's an apostle, yes, but called by God. This isn't something he's done; it is a call. It is by the will of God. So, he is both flexing his authority and giving an example of humility in action. It is a lesson he hopes to return to more than once in this letter.

He also mentions Sosthenes in his salutation and calls him a brother. Actually, he calls him, “our” brother. Is that an editorial we? Or does he mean the brother of those reading as well as the one writing? Is Sosthenes supposed to be a connection between them? We can’t be sure who this Sosthenes is, as not much is said about him. But there is a quick reference in Acts (18:17) of a synagogue official in Corinth who was beaten by a mob that wasn’t getting the justice from the Roman proconsul that it sought against Paul. Earlier in that chapter, there is a Crispus, who is called the official of the synagogue, who became a believer because of Paul. Is Sosthenes the next in line, and this was a warning attack? Or is Crispus and Sosthenes the same person? It’s not really clear. But if Sosthenes is one who became a believer because of Paul, but was once a leader in the Jewish community, then he could be a link that Paul wanted to use with the Christians in Corinth to remind them of their beginnings and their commonality and connection.

Then, having introduced himself and his “brother,” he turns to the audience. “To the church of God that is in Corinth,” he says. Sanctified, called and together. Those are the words he uses to describe his readers and hearers. Sanctified, not by their own efforts, not by their own hand, but by Christ Jesus. Called, as he is called, to be saints, to a way of living, a way of being. Together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. A part of something much bigger than themselves, bigger than their church, bigger than their collection of churches in Corinth, bigger than their egos and their divisions and their attitudes. Paul is gently and pastorally putting them in their place as he greets them. Grace and peace, he says.

“I give thanks.” That’s how he begins his conversation with them. Having identified everyone, having reminded everyone of their place, he expresses gratitude. This isn’t avoidance, let’s be clear; this isn’t softening them up for the blows to come. No, this is a strategy; this is an approach; this is the life of the follower of Jesus. Begin with gratitude. One of the revelations in Diana Butler Bass’s *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (HarperOne, 2018) is that there is a gratitude gap. Apparently, we are good at being grateful when things happen to us, but we find it more difficult to let that gratitude shape “our larger common life.” We live in a general state of dissatisfaction (Bass, xix).

Paul attempts to show a different way of living. He is grateful for the life they live in Christ. He gives thanks for the faithfulness of God at work in them. And this is evidenced by the reality that they are not lacking in any spiritual gift. What an incredible statement. We could argue that Paul is writing this whole letter because of a lack of spiritual gifting. Humility seems in short supply, we might argue. Peace doesn’t seem to reign in their hearts. Paul seems to avoid many problems here in such a statement --not the least of which is that gratitude doesn’t seem to be shaping how they live together!

But look again. You (or more properly all y’all) are not lacking in any spiritual gift. It’s a plural you. Paul is writing to the body, not to individuals. And it is as a body that they will fulfill their calling. It is as a body that they will find their strength and the ability to be blameless. It is as a

body that they will respond to the faithfulness of God. That is the only way they can respond to the faithfulness of God. I may be lacking in all sorts of spiritual gifts, but we are not lacking in them. And, Paul argues, it is time to reclaim those gifts in the life and mission of the church.

January 26

[1 Corinthians 1:10-18](#)

Somos del Señor: Same Mind and Same Purpose

Paul doesn't waste any time getting to the main point. He discusses the division and some of the sources of it. But again, there is hope in our common baptism, in our belonging to Christ. To be clear, this unity does not do away with the diversity, even the diversity of opinions and positions on crucial issues. But Paul argues that our purposes in Christ, our mind that is in Christ – namely to love God and love neighbor – can bring us to unity in mission and action.

Preaching Notes

So, why “Somos del Señor”? Why not just “We Belong to Christ”? That's what most will think and most will use as we go through this series, let's be honest. What are we trying to prove by titling the series in Spanish? Won't it sound inauthentic for most of our churches, most of our preachers to stumble over the pronunciation of a language we don't speak? Or worse, isn't it paternal, or colonial, even cultural appropriation perhaps?

Paul leaps right into the issue in our text for this week. The issue is division. The issue is factionalism. The issue is us and them, left and right, good guys and bad guys. The issue is that the church has begun to reflect the larger society around it. Rather than living as an example of what community is supposed to be, we have shifted into the same sorts of line drawing and team choosing that the rest of our culture revels in. “Now I appeal to you,” Paul pleads, stop it! Stop being a mirror and start being a lighthouse. Stop trying to blend in and start standing out, standing apart.

Then he does a little diagnosis (well, after sharing how he knows what he knows). It is hard to tell why he felt the need to include his source in the letter. Perhaps he was trying to add some authenticity to his account. One hopes it didn't cause problems for Chloe or her people!

The problem that Paul identifies has to do with allegiances. To whom do we belong? On the one hand, it seems simple. Of course, we belong to Christ; that's how we would answer the question if we were asked. But Paul isn't interested in what we say; he's interested in what we

do, how we live. And how the church in Corinth is living right now does not reflect the allegiance to Christ and Christ's Lordship.

Paul is asking for a profound humility to govern the behaviors of the body of Christ followers. He even diminishes his actions with his "senior moment" of whom he has baptized. It's not about me, he declares to them. It's about him, the Christ who calls Paul and who calls the community of faith in Corinth. So, set aside the other allegiances and cling to the one who gives life. Be like him. Be like him in his humility. Be like him in his suffering. Be like him in his death.

Paul introduces the cross in this text, but there will be more to say about it next week. For now, it is introduced as a call to humility. The cross is foolishness to the world, Paul declares. Foolish in its shame. Foolish in its embarrassment. Who would claim the cross as a symbol of anything, let alone victory? The cross is not just the worst way to die, it is the lowest, reserved for the wretched refuse. The cross is the empire's means of taking out the garbage. Who would claim the cross?

We do, says Paul. We do because we see the power of God at work. "God took what is low and despised in the world . . ." That's coming later; this is a preview. For now, Paul says, the cross is the power of God, for those of us being saved. Being saved. Those of us. There is a process here, and a commonality. We're in this together. Let's not be choosing sides; let's not be building barriers, creating an us and a them. Let's have the same mind and the same purpose.

That's the difficulty isn't it? We don't have the same mind; we don't agree on everything. Sometimes we wonder if we agree on anything. Wrestling with what Paul means here is necessary for preaching this text, especially in the current climate. Would the leader who celebrates the unity within diversity of the gifts of the Spirit really be asking the church to think only one thing? Or is the emphasis not on a particular theology or interpretation, but on a mission that loves God and loves neighbor, period? The singularity Paul calls for is vital.

There is an odd moment in the text. We can clearly understand why Paul condemns the "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Cephas." But what's wrong with the "I belong to Christ"? Isn't that the whole idea? Why does he seem to claim that those touting the "I belong to Christ" slogan are just as divisive as the others?

Perhaps it comes down to the pronoun. *I* belong to Christ. Paul is about community, about being a body. His "yous" are almost always "all y'alls." The complaint is about the "in your face" attitude that separates, rather than the humility that invites and welcomes. "We belong to Christ" is an invitational phrase.

Somos del Señor is not trying to live into something that we are not. Rather, it is an invitation to live into what we could become. The body of Christ is multilingual; the body of Christ is multihued; the body of Christ is multigenerational and multigendered. Perhaps a little work in your community might find other languages to translate the series title into. Are there those of African heritage in your community? Of Asian heritage? Of European or Latin American

heritage? How can you move a little closer to being of one mind and one purpose with those for whom English is a second or even third language? How can we invite the body to be what it is called by Christ to be? We belong together to Christ. Together, we belong to Christ. Somos del Señor.

February 2

[I Corinthians 1:18-31](#)

Somos del Señor: Consider Your Call

The fools that we are called to be does not diminish us as people, but rather reminds us of the source of our strength and our wisdom. If we are able to move our egos out of the way and truly focus on the unity of the body and the centrality of the call, it just might be possible to be in mission together as the church of Jesus Christ.

Preaching Notes

“Who do you think you are?” Humility is a hard sell these days. In a time of tooting one’s own horn to excess, being told you’re nothing special doesn’t seem like an approach that will get us very far. We’re told to stroke egos, to build up the body, to make people feel significant and important. We aren’t to tell people they aren’t really all that smart, or all that strong, or going to amount to very much. Yet, that is Paul’s approach in our Epistle text this week.

We aren’t the center of this text. We’re the test case. This text is a distillation of Paul’s theology of the cross. It is not, however, a theology divorced from the realities of living in the world. Paul doesn’t present this argument as a way of avoiding talking about the issues confronting the church in Corinth; issues of rightness and wrongness, of orthodoxy and heresy, of insiders and outsiders. No, Paul dives into the debate by reminding us who we are. And whose we are.

The word (*logos*) of the cross is foolishness, he writes. At least that is how it looks to the world. It is the ultimate vulnerability, the ultimate weakness. It is a surrender of all power, all directive ability, submission to the powers that be. It would be foolish, the world would argue, to base a faith, to base a way of living in the world on such an act, on such a surrender.

We see it differently, of course. We see ultimate power here; the power of sacrifice, the power of vulnerability. And, here’s the thing, Paul says, it wasn’t an accident. It wasn’t trying to clean up from a plan gone wrong. God’s intent from the very beginning was to destroy the wisdom of the wise and to thwart the discernment of the discerning (v19). God set out to turn the normal

way of thinking on its head. And so we have foolishness. At the very core of things, we have foolishness.

What else would you call it? To win through surrender. To conquer enemies by loving them. To transform our world through humility. To lead by serving all. Foolishness. And we're just the ones to do it! That's Paul's point: we are the ones chosen to live this foolish life in the world around us. We weren't chosen because of our smarts, or our strength, or our status in society.

You can't help but take offense at that. We like to be chosen because we've got something special. We like to be the center of everyone's attention. We like to be the first one chosen for the games, the one everyone wants to sit next to during the exam. And you might be that. You might be the strongest one in your town. You might be the one everyone turns to for advice, for knowledge. You might be the one everyone hopes their kids grow up to be. But none of that matters. Not when it comes to faith. Not when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

You have something more important than strength and wisdom and status. You have foolishness at the core of your identity. And even that isn't your own foolishness; it is his. Paul says, God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus. And this source reformats our understanding of what is wise and what makes for a good life, a full life.

The preacher should not call the congregation low and despised; that's not Paul's point here. But for any who might be feeling low, or feeling despised, the good news is, you are chosen. Chosen by God who is turning wisdom on its head.

February 9

[1 Corinthians 2:1-12 \(13-16\)](#)

Somos del Señor: With a Demonstration

"Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary use words." This quote is still attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, even though historians can't find a single time he said this. It sounds like Francis though; don't you think? And he did say something similar: "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching." Some might argue that Paul was referring to a show of power, healing, or other miracles, as proof of his preaching. But maybe not. Maybe it was about the life he was living in front of his hearers. This is a call for congruence between our proclamation and our living. We claim to want to love our enemies because Jesus told us to do so, but what evidence of that love have we shown? This world is sorely in need of a demonstration of the difference the Spirit makes in our lives each and every day.

Preaching Notes

“What do you know?” There are all sorts of ways to ask that question. It could be a genuine search for knowledge. It could be a dismissal, or a taunt. It could be a question of incredulity, surprised by the object of the inquiry. It would be an expression of wonder. There are probably more ways we could nuance those words. But while that’s an intriguing question to focus on, and in many ways it sounds like what Paul is dealing with in this week’s Epistle text, it’s not really the question in the center of the proclamation.

Wisdom is the word Paul comes back to again and again. We could throw in mystery as well. Lofty words that we might call rhetoric are also present in the text. All of them point to knowledge, at least on the surface. What do you know that you can pass on to us? That may have been the question on people’s minds as they came to hear Paul when he rolled into town. What can you pass on, what can you teach, what do you know, Paul?

Paul says that’s the wrong question. Not that there aren’t things to know. Not that there aren’t words to use or stories to tell. But the premise of the question is what is giving him pause. He says he didn’t come with a body of knowledge. And he did this by choice. It wasn’t that he didn’t know stuff. He was a Pharisee; he knew plenty. He could talk your ear off with all the stuff he knew. But he chose to set all that aside.

“I decided,” he wrote, “to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” For Paul, “What do you know?” is the wrong question. The better, more proper question is “Whom do you know?” This mystery of God, this wisdom that is beyond the wisdom of this age, this Spirit that is not the spirit of the age, is a who not a what.

OK, so our content is information about Jesus, right? Well, Paul would argue, no, not really. It is something much riskier than information. It is relationship. Paul says he came with fear and trembling; he came in weakness. All he had to offer was himself and the Christ who lives within. He had no argument to make, no knowledge to pass on; he just had who he is and is becoming in Christ.

Think about this for a moment. We in The United Methodist Church adhere to a mission statement that says, “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” That’s complicated enough as it is. But if Paul is right, then we are doing it wrong when we give information to people to help them become disciples. We’ve lost something of significance when we reduce this process to information we can pass on, or even put in a pamphlet and hand out to people.

Paul says he was among the people not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and power. What does this mean? What did he offer? Here at Discipleship Ministries, we are serving the churches all over the denomination by helping create

intentional discipleship systems. If making disciples is the core reason for our existence, then we need to take it seriously and figure out ways to go about doing it more effectively and efficiently – not for the survival of the church, but because that is our call as Christ followers. So, we work within the congregation, helping one another grow in faith to become the disciples they were called to be. Paul calls them saints; remember last chapter! But we also work in our wider community, where we attempt to “see all the people” – not just our people, the people within the walls of the church, but all the people – the people around us as we work and worship; the hurting and the hungry; the distracted and the cynical – all the people. The searchers and those who don’t know there’s anything to search for – all the people.

And what do we have to offer them? Nothing but Jesus Christ, and him crucified. But again, not information about this Christ, though there is a story to tell and knowledge to share. Not a process of joining the church, though there is a family who will gather them in and help them be a part of the whole. Not levels to attain and achievements to unlock, though there are processes and systems that help us keep focused on the task. No, what we have is what Paul had, and that is nothing but himself and the Christ that dwells within.

Paul talks about sharing an inner experience, wisdom taught by the Spirit. But he also talks about how the “unspiritual” can’t receive this wisdom or understand these gifts. So, are we supposed to talk to insiders only? Are we ultimately concerned only with those people who already have faith, already have a relationship with Jesus? Of course not. His point is, we must watch our language. We can’t lead with the language of faith. Telling someone “the Bible says . . .” won’t get you very far when your hearer doesn’t accept the authority of the Bible yet. But if our insider words aren’t that helpful, what are we left with? The same thing Paul was left with when he showed up in Corinth – nothing but Jesus. And a lot of fear and trembling. In the end, it is about relationships. Ultimately, it is about a relationship with Jesus Christ. But it might begin with a relationship with you. With us. With disciples of Jesus who know nothing but Christ and are willing to demonstrate what God is doing in their lives each and every day. This is a call to be real as we go about the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

February 16

[I Corinthians 3:1-9](#)

Somos del Señor: God Gives the Growth

Elders in The United Methodist Church submit to the itineracy system, moving from church to church throughout their ministry. Some argue that it is a system no longer sustainable in our culture that needs to be phased out. Perhaps, but one outcome of the system is a visceral understanding of the idea presented in I Corinthians 3 about servants together in fields of the Lord. Paul argues that our attachments are often to the wrong things: to a human pastor, to a position, to a building. No pastor works in a vacuum, but builds on ministry and mission that others directed long before arriving on the scene. And, that will continue long after the pastor departs. Sometimes, the key to overcoming short-term conflict is taking a longer view. And God's viewpoint stretches into eternity. You don't get much longer than that.

Preaching Notes

Paul makes a shift at the end of our text for this week. He's all about growing things, babies and milk and solid food; and then fields and planting and watering. But then at the very end, he throws in a building. It seems odd, until you go on reading. Verse nine is a metaphor hinge, or pivot. He swings from one to the other. It's a great technique; it keeps you from getting bogged down on one image that can't carry the weight of the argument alone. But it works or works well only when there is at least one common element of both images. In this case, there are many, but the one that Paul seemed to emphasize is that they are both labor intensive.

Well, maybe that wasn't his most important element. Maybe he was really more concerned about the progressive nature of the metaphors. They built or grew; they developed along the way. The starting place was not the ending place; the originating state was not the ending state. However you want to describe it, Paul was stressing that there was more to come. And he wants you to grow. He wants the church in Corinth to grow, certainly. That's why he is writing. Finally, a pastoral letter that says, "Stop acting like children!" How many pastors have wanted to write such a thing? Here it is.

Paul goes back to the beginnings, remembers when he first arrived and there was so much he wanted to say, but couldn't because they were infants in Christ. But he met them where they were, feeding them milk, the "abc's" of the faith, knowing that they would progress to more substantial matters. Even now, he argues, they are still not ready, because they are acting like, well, children, quarreling, being jealous.

Here is a good description of what Paul means when he speaks of being in the flesh. It isn't necessarily a specific sin or types of sin. But it is doing that which hinders the growth of faith in the individual or the community. These selfish behaviors, even if done for good reasons, are of the flesh because they work against the common heart and mind of the body focused on the mission of the church.

So, then he turns back to the dividing issue as he sees it: this allegiance thing. Would it be fair to say that his response is basically, we don't have time for that? Maybe that's a bit simplistic but given that he then moves on to the mission field, it seems not too far off the mark.

There are those who argue that Paul is all about grace; grace and not works. And certainly his theological center is on salvation by grace through faith. But there is work to be done, of that he seems clear. There is work not to earn our place but work because our place has been given. We serve because we've been served. We love because we've been loved. All that we do is in response to what Christ has done in us and for us.

The life we are called to live is an active life. We are workers in God's field. We are laborers on God's building. That's what binds it all together. It is God's. We are God's. Dividing up, choosing sides, setting up opposing camps only hinders the mission, says Paul. There is no room for "us and them" in a church that is at work in the field of the God.

Of course, this is more easily said than done. The church in Corinth struggled with it. And we struggle with it today. Our church is divided, perhaps terminally. And the "can't we all just get along" approach doesn't even seem like a good bandage for the broken bones all around us. Paul argues that our unity is in our shared mission – the mission given him by Jesus Christ, to love God and love neighbor. Our divisiveness handicaps our ability to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Maybe we've tried to do it ourselves, our way, according to our leaders long enough. Maybe we need to let God give the growth. Do what we can where we can as we can, but trust that God will take what we have and what we can do and make it flourish.

What would letting God give the growth look like in your setting? What vision can you proclaim that allows us to step out of our different camps and tend God's field?