

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
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Spiritual Maturity

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6th Sunday after Epiphany

It's been quite a week. Two difficult meetings, one on Monday, the second on Tuesday. Wednesday we had snow, remember the snow? Wednesday night one of the girl's friends was over during supper. That night she was hit and dragged by a drunk driver in a pick up truck after attending a Memorial Service for another young woman, aged 26, who had died of a heart condition. More snow Thursday and Friday, or is it just my memory now giving out? And then the monumental news that the people of Egypt prevailed upon their leader to leave. It's been quite a week.

I wonder what the weeks were like for Paul in Corinth. Corinth was a port city like St. John's. It was an important stop for trade between Europe and Asia, just as this city has been a stop between Europe and N. America. It was greatly influenced by all the activities of a port city. When Corinth became wealthier, it also became more corrupt and more crimes were playing out; just as we see here, to some degree. It was known for its "temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, whose service gave rise to the city's proverbial immorality." (*New Bible Dictionary, p. 252*) It was also known for its ceramics and arts. I'll let you draw the parallels there.

In the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul noted how thankful he was for the Corinthian church and for the people there. He was sincere about this. But he was also troubled by the divisions in the congregation and how people were treating each other. He was also concerned about the fact that the new Christians were confusing freedom in Christ with license to do whatever they pleased. So he continued in the third chapter the sowing of the seeds of how to love God and love one another. And we have the benefit of his letter.

What I like about Paul is that he can be truthful, positive and honest all at the same time. He can be thankful, anxious, angry and patient; just like we are at times. He wants the best for the church. He uses two images to help them understand what the consequences of the divisions they were experiencing were.

Before getting to those two images, I wanted to take some time with you on the notion of “spiritual maturity.” In the Bible, and in Paul particularly, there are two Greek words used to set up a continuum of development and stages of maturity. The first word is *sarx* or “flesh.” This is the earthly part of us, the fact that we are meat, flesh and bones. Paul often uses the flesh as a symbol or code word for all that is in us which is in rebellion against God. (see Romans 8:7). This is why in Galatians 5: 19-21 he gives a list that he calls “the works of the flesh” which are translated in the Message as: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. And I could go on.

This is the flesh (*sarx*) and it is contrary to all God wants to pour into us. So this is the darkest side of humanity and the anti-life giving side. On the opposite extreme of this is the *pneuma* or “spirit (of God)” side of life. This is the part of us that becomes alive when we agree with God, and say “yes” to Jesus Christ. We get the word “pneumatic” from this Greek word, which we use today when we are talking about tools which operate with the assistance of pressurized air. So while the flesh sucks, the Spirit blows into us the wind and the power to bring life, truth and all kinds of wonderful things. The second list in Galatians 5 is commonly known as the fruit or product of experiencing the Holy Spirit. The list there is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

The spiritual gifts that Paul will later talk about in 1 Corinthians are *pneumatika*, life-giving, building up the church and others kinds of gifts, from the hand of God. So we have these two sides within us, both the “flesh” and the “spirit,” which tend to be in disagreement, if not at war. And so Paul says he is frustrated because people don't understand this. They don't understand why they are quarrelling and at odds with one another. It is as much an internal conflict in each individual as it is in the community, between individuals.

He uses two images. The first is breast feeding. Did you hear about the woman in Montreal who was told not to breast feed in a children's store?

She later had a couple hundred moms in that mall breast feeding, to prove a point.

This is not about the mom's side of the story. This is about taking the baby's point of view. The baby is just looking to be satisfied, less cranky, less noisy, full of comfort and content because they have the attention and are feeling good. The baby only has the capacity to consider herself or himself.

But this is not maturity, this is infantile, by definition. And that's what Paul is calling the Corinthians. They keep trying to look out just for #1, not for others, not for the church, just themselves.

In the twelve step groups, a person has to first become clean and sober before they can help or consider others. Otherwise, all there is in their lives is their addiction, which often leads to criminal activities. It is most certainly the reason for escalating crime patterns in this city.

But once you are clean and sober, the program exhorts you to service, within the 12 step group, the larger community and the national and international movements of which they are apart. Spiritual maturity is like that. First you need to know for sure that you are in relationship with God, having given your life to Jesus, said "no" to your sins and rebellion and "yes" to God's life working in you. Then as you are secure in that relationship, you can serve the church and others, knowing that you are not doing that to earn your relationship with God, but rather flowing from your relationship with God. If you get this turned around, it can be fatal. Many think they are Christians by the good deeds they do. In fact, it is first what God has done for you that you receive, then you are empowered to give out of the love you have received, rather than trying to earn that love and never knowing if you have God's love and favor or not.

God's message of the good news that Jesus can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves is like a seed that is planted in the garden of our souls. And this is the second image Paul uses. There are many farm workers in a large farm operation. Each one usually has a specialized job. In the case of Corinth, Paul was a seeder, a person who sowed seed into the soil that someone else had already worked. Apollos made sure it was watered and didn't dry out, which is a problem in most parts of the world. Here the problem is too much moisture, but that's another story. The point Paul was

making was that each person on the farm has an important role. But in the end, neither the person sowing, nor the person watering, nor others preparing the soil and weeding and harvesting, but God who makes the crop grow. Eugene Peterson puts it well in the Message, "Planting and watering are menial, servant jobs at minimum wages. What makes them worth doing is the God we are serving. You happen to be God's field in which we are working."

And so we are once again encouraged to agree with God, to agree with one another in God's work, and to be thankful. We cannot well measure others' spiritual maturity. But we are responsible for our own. This means being aware of any issues in our lives that keep us rebelling against God and God's ways. And where we find these issues, asking for help, and not keeping silent.

All of us have the *sarx*, the flesh. But the good news for those of us who given ourselves to Christ is that the flesh is diminishing while the Spirit is bringing more and more life to us. Let us keep trusting the Spirit of God who wants our best and the best for our congregation, as in Corinth, so here in St. John's. Let's choose to trust the Spirit of God with our lives and our decisions.

Let us keep our ears open to God, to God's word in the Scriptures, and to one another.

Let us pray.