



## Growing Together

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1 Corinthians 3:1-9  
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Every week I meet over a cup of coffee with different members of this church and the larger community to hear stories and questions about where the Holy Spirit is calling them and their gifts to engage in the world. It's the best and my most favorite part of this holy work of ministry for me and this past Wednesday night was one of those holy moments when I met with: William, Stephen, and Emmett, not over coffee but over pizza. As a part of their participation in the God and Me curriculum, they were required to meet with a pastor to share what they had learned over the last few months. So we met, and over the hour together they inspired me with their enthusiasm and excitement to share of their faith and their values. Values they learned as boy scouts such as being trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. The values of being a girl scout are pretty similar too: honest and fair, friendly and helpful, considerate and caring, courageous and strong, responsible, respectful, making the world a better place for all people. Traits that are claimed by the scouting programs but are also foundational to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

As we were wrapping up our conversation I told the three boy scouts how proud we were of them as a church for living out the values of their faith especially at such a young age. As I said this, one of the boys looked at me and said "I'm really proud of myself too." He was beaming with self-confidence and joy, ready to go out into the world to grow and share of the gifts that God had given him. He was confident in naming who he was as a child of God and unashamed in his growing faith. I told him he should consider going to seminary if he enjoyed theology so much, he may take my job here one day. He laughed, but I saw a spark in his eyes when I said that to him, the Holy Spirit was at work. On my way home as I listened to the news, I prayed for that spark to burn brightly. We needed his light. I prayed that he would not have to grow up too soon, but that he would grow deeper in his connection with God.

I prayed that for all of us and for all of our children. I know many of you have prayed similar prayers too in the executive actions taken over the last couple of weeks against our most vulnerable.

We've been reflecting on spiritual gifts over the last few weeks through the words of Paul to the Corinthians, yet I wonder what letter Paul might write to the community of First United Church of Oak Park. I mean, Paul wasn't known for sugar-coating or mincing words. Here in the beginning of chapter 3 he essentially calls the Corinthians a bunch of little babies. Like an older sibling to an annoying little brother or sister, he tells them they just need to grow up already. Or at least that's one way to read it and probably primarily how Paul meant for it to be heard. But I also wonder if there is a bit of a parental tone in Paul's voice here too, explaining for the first time the realities of life to a child who has to grow up a little too soon. Whose identity, values, and very life will inevitably be met with barriers and borders; here Paul might be not telling them to grow up but simply giving them the talk of how to survive in the midst of deep division and competition.

The Corinthian church he's writing to has already found itself influenced by these deep divisions of their time-- using himself and Apollos as an example of competing public speakers. In Roman culture, giving speeches was one of the great competitive 'sports;' and people divided up according to their loyalty to different orators. Moreover, such divisions were further deepened by a culture that was profoundly shaped by notions of superior and inferior, insider and outsider, honored and shamed. Thus, by critiquing the church's division over which orator is superior and honorable, Paul is at a deeper level critiquing the church's accommodation to these values of the culture and calling them to a new way.

But instead of throwing down a debate with Apollos, trying to convince the Corinthians to follow him, Paul calls for reconciliation and invites them to embody a surprising alternative to the surrounding culture. He leads by example, by stepping out of his pulpit and taking on the title of gardener, laboring in God's vineyard. In doing so, he calls the church in Corinth to move beyond the social divisions of superior and inferior, insider and outsider, honored and shamed and to embody the way of a disciple of Christ. One who has committed their life to breaking down walls of exclusion, preaching the gospel of radical love, living out the Good News of resurrection. Such categories of division have no place in God's realm. Thus, Paul's theological vision leads to the cultivation of radical Christian practices that embody an alternative to the surrounding culture. To co-work with God in the field of the kin-dom is yes about living in resistance, but it is also about living as a force of radical love.

In a church and society that are deeply divided today, Paul's call to this kind of discipleship remains critical, challenging, and even still is a path of living in real resistance. I know I don't have to tell you too much about it, you've witnessed and even been victims to the waves of brokenness and separation our country has felt especially over the last few weeks. In our own version of a Roman regime, there are walls being literally built to keep people out, borders of insider and outsider being enforced at airport check--points, social divisions of superior and inferior being signed on a dotted line on the daily. The call to resist, to shout in defiance, to demand an alternative way have been the spiritual gifts called for at such a time as this. Yet after the crowds at the marches have dispersed and the chants have quieted, the call of discipleship remains.

While our faith often calls us to march and chant in the streets and resist divisive powers, our journey of discipleship doesn't stop there, it's just the beginning. It can't be the end of the road if we are called to follow Jesus all the way. In fact, it's that kind of resistance that got Jesus crucified in the first place; and we know that wasn't the end of his story too, so we will not allow for it to be ours as well. According to Paul, our marching must lead us to places to do the work of planting seeds of hope even in the face of hopelessness, our dismantling of towers of oppression must lead us to build new homes for peace and justice to dwell, our road of discipleship must lead us to a life committed to living and breathing the resurrection even as death still tries to have the final word. We are given these spiritual gifts as the collective body of Christ of marching and chanting, persisting and resisting, but we are also called to embrace, and to dance, to create, and teach, to dream and build, and prepare for God's reality of Shalom. We are called to step out of our pulpits

and pews as gardeners with green thumbs and tools at the ready to plant new life in the community-garden of God.

While Paul may not have meant for the church at Corinth to build a literal community garden, for a faith community in inner-city Philadelphia that was true. Shane Claiborne is a community organizer, activist, and founder of The Simple Way, a ministry located in the Kensington neighborhood in Philadelphia. When I was in Washington D.C. a couple of weeks ago for a conference, Shane was the keynote speaker and he shared the story of how his church literally planted themselves in this neighborhood. Fifteen years ago, Shane came to Kensington as a young college student during a time of major resistance and protest of unfair housing practices the city was engaging in. At the center of it all was a tent city that had taken over an abandoned lot; living there was a group of mothers and children who were homeless. The neighborhood had more abandoned buildings and homes than inhabited ones, there were endless waiting lists for shelters and transitional housing, the neighborhood was one of the most violent and the city would not help find safe places for these people to live away from the streets. So as an act of survival the families moved into the abandoned Catholic church building, and as an act of resistance they put up a banner that read: "How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?"

The city finally responded by threatening to kick them back out on the street. Yet, as others including Shane heard about what was happening in their own community they rallied around their neighbors and over the last fifteen years they haven't stopped. They pooled together their resources and bought up many of the vacant lots and abandoned houses. Fixed up apartments so families could move in and have a place to call home. Connected people with jobs and provided childcare for their children. They created a community of love and support, those who rallied and protested became a church. Not within that church building the city finally condemned, but a church that worships in each other's homes, feeds each other in both body and spirit, and a community that literally is committed to growing with each other. Now in that vacant lot where there once stood a tent city, now lies a community garden. A sign of their shared values together, a place to provide for each other, and a place to see the resurrection at work. The call of the protest led Shane and others to hear the voices of the marginalized, but the call of discipleship led them to nurture and grow a life together.

Now church, maybe we aren't called to be as radical like Kensington. Or even Corinth for that matter. But in our own First United way, we will hear both the call to resistance and also the call to discipleship. Our values of inclusion, of love in action, and reflecting the kingdom of God will surely be seen as a threat to the powers that value division, violence, and dehumanization. But they will also be a sign to the broken-hearted that new life is possible. The scripture that Sara read from Deuteronomy implores us to choose life, and Paul would agree, yet the call of Jesus goes further. Yes to not just to choose life, but plant, and nurture and grow life so that all may live in the reality of the resurrection. It reminds me of that quote many of you have seen on protest posters at the last few marches, it comes from a Mexican proverb, but it sounds like something Jesus could have said too: "They tried to bury us but they didn't know we were seeds."

In many ways, there are signs of growth and new life all around us, even as chaos and division try to bury and even uproot us. We have been a church at work planting seeds that will grow and be signs of new life: By learning and preparing to sponsor a refugee family with RefugeeONE. By showing up to village hall to show our support for Oak Park to be deemed a sanctuary city. By exploring our place in building peace to places in our communities affected by gun violence. By providing fertile soil for our children to grow and express their own gifts of their faith. We are a church digging our hands deep in the soil, growing in our faith, and witnessing in our discipleship to our great Gardener's plan of resurrection. May we continue to hear the call of God to live in resistance, but also the call to tend the life in the community garden. So all who seek hope, who seek refuge, who seek life may know it abundantly. Amen.