

February 16, 2020 • Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

## “God Is Making All Things New”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



1 Corinthians 3:1-9

*And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building.*

The Apostle Paul seems to have spent much of his time thinking about, praying about, and writing about unity in the church. Or the obvious lack thereof, which was evidently as apparent in his time as in ours.

To the church in Corinth, he writes: why do you say you're a follower of Apollos or of me? he asks them. Why are you dividing yourselves up in this way, he asks? It just shows me that you still don't get it, he writes. I'm trying to teach you what it would mean to leave behind the ways of this crazy chopped up, bifurcated, polarized world and put on the mind of Christ. We're just two different teachers, Apollos and I, he explains. Servants. With different roles to play but all to accomplish the same purpose. I planted the seed in you, Apollos watered it—but it's God who gives the growth. We are God's servants, Apollos and I, working together. You are God's field, God's building.

That image of the planting and the watering and the growing took me back to something one of our youth counselors, Emily Payne said, in her Youth Sunday sermon a few weeks ago. She told us about her love of gardening and how, after waiting and waiting, her application for a plot in the Santa Monica Community Garden was finally accepted. Dream come true! She's learned a lot, she told us, about how to approach it, how to plan what she plants. And she described the way in which "companion plantings" support one another. It's such a beautiful image for ministry and life in the church.

In case, like me, you're not a gardener, let me describe how this works. Companion planting in gardening and agriculture is the planting of different crops in proximity for any of a number of different reasons, such as pest control, pollination, providing habitat for beneficial insects, maximizing use of space, and to otherwise increase crop productivity.

I think that's a description the Apostle Paul could well have used to describe new disciples of Christ in the church. We've been "companion planted" here by God to maximize the mission and ministry of the church in the world. We're so much more together than we could ever be on our own. We're stronger, more productive, less vulnerable to error and temptation or dejection. We're a safe home for pollinator bees who multiply our efforts and witness. Servants, working together. We are God's field, God's garden plot. Companionally planted.

Well, things are a bit rocky these days in the part of God's garden called The United Methodist Church. I'm not sure how "companionally planted" we feel. Nevertheless, there are some hopeful signs starting to sprout and I hope many of you will be able to stay after worship today and hear some of my reflections on that. There's a lot of watering and tilling and fertilizing still to be done before we can arrive at an abundant harvest, but I'm convinced that God is working through God's servants to bring forth life, and dare we say, life in abundance.

It's oddly comforting to remember how hard this work is, even in the church, from Paul's time until now. Maybe we shouldn't be so surprised or dismayed to see how we're still divided into the Apollos and Paul opposing teams. Kinda how it's always been. The question remains—what are we going to do about it?

Listen to these words from the Constitution of the United Methodist Church—yes, our form of governance is modeled on that of these United States and we do have a Constitution!

“The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world. As part of the church universal, The United Methodist Church believes that the Lord of the church is calling Christians everywhere to strive toward unity; and therefore, it will pray, seek, and work for, unity at all levels of church life.”

I'm sorry to say that those words remain more aspirational, as we'd say these days, than descriptive, more a vision of the garden we hope to be and present to the world than of how things actually are in the plot of ground that has been gifted to us for our tending and tilling.

But then....so it was in the time of John Wesley's founding of the Methodist movement. Pretty much like that early church in Corinth, all cranky and divided up and fighting about the wrong things.

So John Wesley, in wisdom, tried a new approach to church. It was new in his time and it's still a pretty good model for us as well. A little Methodist history here:

In one of his accounts of the origins of the Methodist movement, John Wesley tells of the counsel he and his brother gave early on to those who embraced their fresh proclamation of a life-changing gospel, and who were encountering opposition from those around them because of their new-found faith:

“One and another and another came to us, asking what they should do, being distressed on every side, as everyone strove to weaken, and none to strengthen their hands in God. We advised them: “Strengthen you one another. Talk together as often as you can. And pray earnestly with and for one another, that you may ‘endure to the end and be saved.’”

The Wesleys immediately began organizing their hearers into small groups for this very purpose: that through talking together, and praying earnestly with and for each other, they might be strengthened in their Christian faith and life and “help each other to work out their salvation,” as Wesley put it.

The practice of talking and praying together, especially in small groups meeting regularly “to watch over one another in love,” continued throughout John Wesley’s lifetime and beyond, and is thought to have been a major factor in sustaining the character, strength, and effectiveness of the Wesleyan movement.

Imagine that! Talking together, praying together, watching over one another in love. In Wesley’s day, it wasn’t optional. “Class meetings” as they were called then, were an essential and mandatory part of being in the Methodist movement. We just might be well served by returning to this practice in our day. What a gift this could be, what a witness, not only in the church but to the world. Faithful people, not all of one mind by any means, talking and praying together, watching over one another in love.

The Apostle Paul, over and over again in his letters to the Corinthians and to the Ephesians, stresses this very thing. He continually calls the church to examine how we talk *with* and *to* and *about* one another, that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts might be acceptable in the sight of God. In his letter to the church in Ephesus he writes: “let us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members one of another.”

That sounds pretty close to being “companionally planted.”

Let me add here a few observations about that church community in Ephesus, to whom this letter was apparently written. Let me remind us here that this bunch in Ephesus was a mess. Angry, quarreling with one another, bitter. They were a motley crew made up of former Jews who saw Christ one way, Gentiles who understood him quite differently, and others who were just trying to figure it all out.

The writer of this letter to them had evidently observed it all and describes their “garden” in terms of lying, anger that festers in the heart, stealing, evil talk, bitterness, wrath, wrangling, and slander—all of which grieve the heart of God. As has been noted, if you had had any dealings with this bunch you’d not be eager to join this First Church of Ephesus! No thank you.

The Scripture writer is trying, through his words, to impose some sanity, to ratchet down the angry talk, to cause them to be quiet long enough to reflect on their common humanity and the desires of God’s heart for them. It’s not unlike parents separating fighting siblings, imposing a time out, so that anger can be set aside.

The Scriptures remind us, over and over again, that God is making all things new, even now. That there is a whole new way of being in community. A new way of speaking to and with and about one another. A new way of living together. It starts with speaking and prayer with one another, watching over one another in love. And from there, the Scripture pushes deeper, going inside our words, behind our words, deep into the heart of our words, to get at what’s in our hearts.

We are to be imitators of the great love of God in Christ Jesus—in our sanctuaries and church community, “on the stage of a global village, and on the front lines of all human relationships.”

We are God’s field, we are God’s building. What would it mean for us to understand ourselves as “companionally planted and partnered with and for one another? What more might we be doing, even now, to witness to God’s new creation of love?

AMEN

#### Notes:

Preparing Ourselves for General Conference: A Word from the Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships, March 11, 2015.

Preamble and Division One, Article VI; *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012),

“A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” para. 5, in *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 9, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, edited by Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 256.

Bishop Gregory V. Palmer. “Church Dividing Issues.” *Circuit Rider*, August | September | October 2018.

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