

GROWING TOWARDS MATURITY

Epiphany 6 Year A

Dt. 30:15-20; Ps. 119:1-8; 1 Cor. 3:1-9; Mt. 5:21-37

Gladstone 16/02/2020

I wonder how would you like it if I stood up in front of you and said: “Well guys, I reckon you’re just a bunch of babies. You have no knowledge of the deeper spiritual things of God. You fight amongst yourselves. You play one leader off against another. You’re just a big bunch of immature kids.” Well that is just about what Paul is saying here to those in the Corinthian church.

Paul obviously hadn’t read the book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, otherwise he wouldn’t be writing using such strong words. Would *you* tolerate someone standing up here in the pulpit and saying that to you? What would you think? What would you say? What would you do? Would you stop coming to church? Would you murmur among yourselves about how you think the minister has totally “lost it”. We had suspicions before but now...”

Paul, in this letter, was saying, in effect, “Guys, I would have spoken to you as mature spiritual adults, but I couldn’t, because you are acting like children. You say that you have wisdom, but you’re acting like fools. You say that you’re mature but you’re behaving like idiots.” And, you know what? Paul’s words to the Corinthians also applies to many in the Church today. Paul was addressing a problem that we also are constantly being faced with.

There is one particular aspect of the world today that is quite harmful to Christians, in this way. It’s the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired immediately. We assume that if anything can be done it can be done quickly and effectively. Our attention spans are conditioned by thirty second commercials. Lengthy novels can now be read in thirty page abridgments. We live in an instant society: instant coffee (Ewww!), instant microwave cooking, instant gratification and, as the media would have us believe, instant love. A society where you can buy the luxuries that you want, now, and pay for them later. Many Christians want instant faith and instant spiritual maturity. And many of us live as religious tourists wandering around looking at the sights, demanding our rights, but wishing to bear no responsibilities.

Religion in our time has been captured by the tourist mindset. It’s something we do when we have the time. For some it’s the weekly jaunt to church—or more realistically, these

days, once or twice a month. For others, it's the occasional visits to special services. We go to see a new personality, to hear a new so-called "truth", to get a new experience and so, somehow, expand our otherwise humdrum lives. I have known people, who, ever since they have become Christians, have attended church regularly, have been faithful members of Bible study groups, have entered fully into the church culture, but have never really matured as Christians. And it's these sort of people that Paul is addressing here in this letter. Their attitudes towards those who have ministered amongst them showed Paul that they were still immature, worldly Christians. They really had no idea of spiritual realities.

What, then, does it take to become a mature Christian? How can you and I come into a closer walk with Jesus Christ? The answer, my friends—is not blowing in the wind—it's found in the word, "discipleship;" what Eugene Peterson defines as "a long obedience in the same direction." Discipleship is a lifelong pilgrimage of obedience to God. It's not instant and it's not for the faint hearted.

While we haven't the time today, to look at the full significance of what it means to be a disciple, this passage tells us some very important things that we need to hear and understand.

The first thing it tells us, is that discipleship involves working together (vv5-9). "For we are fellow workers..." says Paul in verse 9. Some lay the foundations. Others nurture and encourage growth. But it is God who causes the growth.

Those who plant the seed, first need to prepare the soil. That's normal farming procedure. They cultivate the ground and loosen the soil ready for the planting of the seed. It's the same for those who lay the foundations of our Christian experience. Many missionaries are cultivators. Some may toil for many years with very little or no results.

The story is told of a missionary in South America who had been faithfully preaching the Word of God for 15 years—with virtually no results. Finally, he left, feeling quite dejected. Soon after a new missionary had arrived, almost the whole village was converted. He gave the credit to the person who labored for 15 years with seemingly no success.

Then there are those who plant—those who have lovingly encouraged us to take that step of faith—who have lead us to the point of salvation, the beginning of our Christian life—who have patiently answered our questions—who have shared their own testimonies with us—who have opened to us the Word of God. Each have helped lay the foundation upon which we now stand.

Next, there are those who do the watering. That is, those who have exercised discipleship, themselves. Those who have taken us deeper in our spiritual walk—who have spent countless hours with us helping us to work out the conflicts that come as a result of our new found faith—who have taken us deeper into the Word of God and shared with us God's purpose for our life. Most of us know people who have shared in our lives in that way.

In order for there to be growth in maturity, however, the disciple must first submit him or herself to discipline. It's the same with anything of value—whether it be on the sporting field, in business, in academia, and so on.

Discipline is what the authoress, Elizabeth Elliott calls, "The Glad Surrender". And she should know. If you don't know who she is, look it up on Google when you get home. Discipline is a necessary part of being a disciple and involves surrendering to another. Primarily it involves surrendering yourself to God; but it also entails surrendering yourself to others—those who cultivate, those who plant and those who water. If you want to grow and mature as a Christian you need to have some form of discipline.

It also means becoming a servant of others. Jesus said that those who want to be leaders must first learn to serve. Leadership is attained and marked by servanthood.

The disciple must also submit him or herself to correct teaching—and this is really important. There are many Christians who think they know it all. They would never admit it, but their minds are closed to learning. They see everything according to their own pre-conceived ideas. And of course there are plenty of so-called teachers out there who are really off beam, and who want to indoctrinate you to some particular nuance they are peddling.

If you want to be a disciple, however, you must be willing to learn. You must be willing to open yourself up to what God has to say, through His Word, and open yourself up to the guidance that others, who are more mature in *their* faith, are able to give.

Likewise, Paul says, teachers must be careful how and what they teach lest they destroy God's temple, the Church. There were a number in the Corinthian Church who by the actions of their leadership, were destroying the Church. And each of us, especially the leaders of the Church, need to be careful of this. So, while there are many people who may play a role in the development of our Christian faith, ultimately, however, growth is the responsibility of God.

We should acknowledge the many people who have in some way led us to a deeper understanding of our faith in God. Each have had and still have a part to play in our Christian walk. While this is important, the primary focus of our attention should be directed towards God, in Christ. Without the grace of God active in our lives, there can be no growth. Without the Spirit of God there can be no understanding, no wisdom and no maturity.

The bottom line is that we all need to work together, and that together, all of us are in some way responsible for each other's discipleship and growth towards maturity. Each of us, no matter where we are, or think we are, in our spiritual walk, needs to submit ourselves to the commitment of discipleship. You are never too young or too old. You are never too inexperienced or too experienced. Each of us must learn to submit ourselves, in humility and love, to each other and to God.

And as you grow towards maturity you should be endeavouring to disciple others. The Christian faith is never for us to enjoy alone. It needs to be shared and nurtured. Some of you will prepare the ground. Some of you will water. And some of you will see the fruit flourish and ripen.

Proper discipleship produces mature Christians. It may not always be easy—it may never be easy—but through the experiences of life, God is doing something in *your* life. Allow him to work so that He might be able to complete the work which He has begun in you.

To him be all the glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.

II. PROPER DISCIPLESHIP GROWS MATURE CHRISTIANS. vv10-15

Paul first used the analogy of planting a seed in the ground, watering it and watching it grow. Now he turns to another analogy; that of a building - God's building.

A. First the foundation are built. Where do we start?

The foundation is Jesus Christ. Paul laid that foundation with the Corinthian Church. He said earlier in his letter that he sought to know nothing among them but Christ crucified. He had laid a firm foundation on the cornerstone of our faith.

Each of us who has accepted Jesus Christ as our saviour should have had our faith built on the firm foundation of the cross of Christ, and all that means to us. Then:-

B. We build on that foundation

Again, we enter into discipleship. Those such as Apollos and Peter were people who built on the foundation that Paul had laid. And Paul is not criticising those men but those who sought to set them apart as having some special gift or teaching. Paul calls them "God's fellow workers."

C. What has been built will be tested.

Those who lead others astray from the pure faith will receive their just reward. That which is not solid will be destroyed, but that which is solid and pure will remain.

This all leads to maturity as a Christian, and ...

III. MATURITY LEADS TO WISDOM. vv16-23

Part of that maturity is realising that:-

A. You are God's temple. vv 16-17

This verse is often misinterpreted today. Paul is not telling the Corinthians that they need to look after their bodies. He's not telling them that they need to give up smoking, drinking and loose living, although he may discourage some of those things. The imagery used, is that the Church itself is God's temple. The Church is the inner sanctuary of God; the Holy of Holies.

They became that temple by the fact that God's Spirit came to live in them when they believed in Jesus Christ. The implication of this, is that the Church, when it is gathered

together in Jesus' name, experiences the presence and power of the Lord Jesus in their midst. It is the Spirit of God that marks them off as God's new people, His temple.

God's temple in Corinth was to be His alternative to the religious practices and vices in Corinth. But because of their worldly wisdom, their boasting and their divisions they were, in fact, destroying God's temple, the Church, in that place.

You and I need to recapture the true meaning of the of what the true Church is and just how important it is to God.

B. Do not be deceived by what appears to be wisdom but what is not.

Their foolish worldly wisdom was evident in their boasting in other men.

But Paul turns their boasting on it's head. They were saying that they were of Paul and of Apollos, but Paul is saying that they are of you. In fact, all things belonged to them because they belong to Christ. Paul draws them away from looking at men but rather causes them to focus on God.

Today we voice this same error. It is easy to turn our preferences into exclusive ones. We use slogans which take the form of, I am of the Presbyterians, or I am of the Methodists or I am of the Baptists,

That doesn't mean that we should not be discriminating, Paul certainly was, but to be "of Christ" is to be free from one's own narrowness - from one's own religious bigotry.

The testing of your faith ensures strength. It destroys what is useless. What will perish is wisdom in all it's human form. Only God's wisdom and the Spirit which enables it will remain.

CONCLUSION

Each of us needs to submit ourselves to the commitment of discipleship. You are never too old or too experienced. We must learn to submit ourselves to each other and to God. And as you grow towards maturity you should you should be endeavouring to disciple others.

Jeremiah's Complaint: Jer. 12:1-5

Rather pious

Everyone is against him But listen to what God says ...

Discipleship produces mature Christians. It may not always be easy—it may never be easy, but through the experiences of life God is doing something in your life. Allow him to work so that He might be able to complete the work which He has begun in you. AMEN