

February 12, 2023
“Cultivating Community”
Deuteronomy 30:15-20 / 1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

So in the context of celebrating lay leadership, the gift of so much time and talent voluntarily shared in support of this congregation and this building, this community, I wanna reflect just a bit this morning on cultivating community.

In our reading from 1 Corinthians, the author, the apostle Paul, is responding to a letter received from a congregation in Corinth that he himself had founded roughly 50 years after Jesus' crucifixion. Corinth, the capital city of a Roman province in modern-day Greece, a major urban center of activity featuring an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse population.

Paul is responding to serious disagreement and conflict within what is by all accounts a fractured congregation. He's responding to rival groups within the congregation jockeying for position and power, and an emerging hierarchy that seems to be elevating the wisdom and value of some members above others. Some scholars suggest that Paul's own authority may have been called into question by leadership within the congregation.

In short, Paul is responding to a breakdown of community.

If you were on the receiving end of his letter, you might be offended by the tone. Paul asserts his authority and spiritual maturity relative to the Corinthians: “I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as carnal,” – as “people of the flesh”, as other translations put it, “as infants in Christ.”

He calls them children! He calls them out for behaving like children. For behaving as “merely human” – or again, as other translations have it, “behaving according to human inclinations?”

Right as he may be, and putting aside what I find to be an unnecessary and unhelpful and ultimately false dichotomy between carnal and spiritual, between “bad” flesh and “good” spirit (that’s another sermon for another time), the tone is kind of patronizing.

But Paul goes on to make his point, raising the bar on expectations of this fledgling Christian community. It’s not about one over another. It’s not about me or my colleague, Apollos, one above another, he says. It’s about God.

We are all servants of God and each other, diverse and variously gifted members of one body – a metaphor he goes on to describe in the same letter: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:26)

Many members, one body. Many gifts, one Spirit. We are all servants to God’s cause, which if you read even further in the letter is nothing short of love. Love. Paul’s most famous appeal to love as the governing power of their community comes in chapter 13 – you know, “If I speak in the tongues or mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

This is Jesus’ point, of course, in preaching and teaching and living as he did – as we heard last week and as he reiterates in today’s lectionary text from Matthew’s gospel, which we did not read. Set the bar higher than the mere letter of law. Go above and beyond. Aim for the spirit of it. Love is the thing.

As William Sloane Coffin once wrote, one of my favorite quotes, “It is bad religion to deify doctrines and creeds. While indispensable to religious life, doctrines and creeds are only so as signposts. Love alone is the hitching post.”

And this, following as best he can in Jesus’ footsteps, is Paul’s point. Set the bar higher than what is merely carnal, what is merely human. Aim for the holistic spirit of it. Love is the thing.

It's not about me or Apollos or any one of you above another. It's about God and the divine cause of love. "I planted," Paul writes, "Apollos watered, but God produces growth." Love produces growth. Love produces love.

"The one who plants and the one who waters are alike" – they share a common purpose – "and each will receive wages according to their labor. For we are God's coworkers, working together; you are God's cultivation, God's construction."

In that spirit, we are both God's CULTIVATED and God's CO-CULTIVATORS – works in progress ourselves, working toward the common good.

Each called to grow in love for God and for each other and for ourselves, and each called to WORK, with God and with each other, toward building and growing the divine cause of beloved community.

Community defined more than anything else by the love that binds it together.

That is the work we celebrate today.

The sweat and tears, and maybe even blood for some of the Trustees. Amen! The time and talent – not to mention tithe – that so many of you, and so many others who've come before, have given and continue to give to help CULTIVATE this community into what it is and what it will yet be.

Brick by sometimes frustrating, exhausting, and often thankless brick. Brick by brick through pandemic, through conflict, through denominational fracture, through financial precariousness, through endless and expensive maintenance needs and pitfalls, and through an evolving but uncertain future in a church building we have called home for almost 120 years.

All the planting. All the watering. All the tending and weeding. All the cultivating. AND all the harvesting. Reaping, all of us, what we and so many others before and with us have sown.

That, friends, is work – and community – worth celebrating. Amen?!

Dr. King would echo Paul's letter roughly 1900 years later: "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."

Our reading from the book of Deuteronomy, as you may know the fifth book of the Hebrew Bible, part of the Torah along with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, presents this ongoing work of beloved community-building as a matter of life and death.

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity."

The choice is yours. The choice is always yours. Not necessarily a literal matter of life and death, though sometimes that, but always a choice between that which is life-giving and that which is not.

That choice is always yours. It is always OURS.

And understand here, as in the full breadth of Hebrew scriptures, as in the pronouncement of God's commandments and both the letter and spirit of Mosaic law, as in the long arc of prophetic witness, as with God's covenant with God's people, that the choice is all about community. It's about the community as a whole. The common good.

You, collectively, will reap what you sow. We, collectively, will reap what we sow.

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses." CHOOSE LIFE so that you and your descendants may live, loving the (Holy One) your God, obeying (God), and holding fast to (God); for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the (Holy One) swore to give to your ancestors ..."

Choose life so that you AND your descendants may live. And theirs. And theirs. No less than seven generations, in the spirit of Indigenous stewardship.

Choose life, keep your eyes and your ears and your heart, your body AND your spirit, open to and centered on that which is life-giving – ON BEHALF OF your descendants. In service to the community as a whole, the beloved community of which we are each a small but integral part.

“But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish ...”

The choice is yours. The choice is ours. We collectively reap what we collectively sow. Love is the key to life.

We give thanks today for all of you who have chosen love and life in cultivating and blessing this particular community we call Calvary. And those who continue to, and who will continue to in so many different ways. Thanks be to God!

May we, together, IN faith and WITH hope, continue to choose life and love in service to each other. May we continue, as God's coworkers, co-creators, to tend the community garden – including the earth itself – with all the tools God has given each of us.

And may our vision of the common good, of the beloved community, of the ONE body and who and what belongs to it, be as inclusive and expansive as God's.

Because LIFE depends on it.

May it be so.