

# *The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Brian K. Ballard

February 16, 2020

## Corinthians 3:1-9

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

## **The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling<sup>1</sup>**

We are called to be united. This is not a sentimental hope, but a bedrock commitment of the church. There is one church, one hope, one God. Of course it's up to you to enact this unity. When you make the decision to seek unity, only then will you grow in faith, and live a life pleasing to God.

Now, I must confess, I really believe this, but it scares me. I really believe that unless we choose unity, unless we choose to set aside jealousy and quarreling and divisions, we will never grow in faith, we will never hear God's voice; we will never become disciples. This scares me because divisions offer convenient, carefree, platforms on which to belong. And they're easy to belong to. At first glance, divisions are welcoming. "Come, join us," they say. "The world is complex, confusing, maddening, we'll help you make sense of it all. We'll insulate you from the pain, we'll simplify the story, help you understand." And I must confess: at a time when the world seems to be moving so fast, when the news changes each time we refresh the screen, when little makes sense and much makes me fearful, it is tempting to take refuge in a division filled with my type of people.

Divisions disguise themselves as the solution to our confusion and loneliness. They present as warm, safe havens. Yet the only thing they guarantee is a hindrance to your growth. Divisions produce permanent immaturity because they isolate us from God and stifle our development. When you become dependent on your division to make sense of the world, you give up taking care of yourself. What's more, you relinquish the role God intends for you to occupy. You cannot be God's disciple and follow another, more convenient, master.

When you choose to subscribe to a particular division, other people will treat you differently. Others must cater what they say to you because they know you will defend what you've been instructed to defend. They avoid certain topics. In the passage I read a few minutes ago, the Apostle Paul does just that.

---

<sup>1</sup> The title for this sermon was borrowed from a short story by the same title by Ted Chiang. It can be found in: Ted Chiang, *Exhalation: Stories* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2019) 185-230.

He chooses to not speak to the Corinthians as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ, because of their division. The people lost their ability to claim their own position before God when they split into factions. Now they must be coddled. Before they will be ready to learn anything about God they have to learn to simply exist alongside one another.

Paul laments to the Corinthians, “for as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh...are you not merely human?” Or, as we would say, if it acts like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it is a duck. If you act like a divisive human, then that is what you are. You cannot pretend to be a person committed to the reconciling love of God while choosing to reside within your group alone. Your world gets smaller when you can only listen to and defend your side. Pretty soon you can’t see God because your own group is taking up all the sight line you have left.

The Corinthians got into this situation in much the same way that we do. The problem with the Corinthians is not their desire to grow in faith and become disciples. They are going to church, they are following people in authority in the church. The problem is that to fulfill their desire, they have been seeking the wrong kind of wisdom from the wrong sources. They want wisdom that makes them better than other people. They want to be right, which means that other people are wrong.

A few years ago I found myself at dinner with an older couple who had been married over sixty years. The wife was in her late 70s and a self-proclaimed firecracker. She would tell me stories about marching during civil rights and fighting for LGBT equality in the 1960s as if these things were common small talk. Her husband was different though. He was quieter, more conservative theologically and socially, and more cautious about how his words and actions would be interpreted. Once I heard him say, “I don’t often agree with her.” While we were eating I asked them, rather abruptly as it turned out, “How do you do it? How have you been together over 60 years and you disagree on so many key issues? How can you sleep in the same bed and not agree on these pivotal pieces?” Amidst my outburst they both kept eating and exchanged that quiet, wise glance at each other as if to say, “are you going to take this one?” A minute passed before the husband responded with a short,

simple statement, “we both agree that we could be wrong.” I said nothing. She stated it as well, “we could be wrong, you can’t be certain.” After more silence I responded, “but you’ve dedicated your lives to these things, you’ve wagered everything...” Again the husband said, “yes, and I believe it to be true, but I could be wrong.”

It’s been said that the opposite of “faith” is not “doubt” but “certainty.” To have faith is to believe in things we cannot see, to profess as true claims that we cannot say are one hundred percent certain. Clinging to things we can see, and making them the bedrock of our existence, is much more immediately satisfying but it is not faithful.

The Corinthians cling to Paul or Apollos as the “right” voices. They see them, align with them, repeat their sound bites, and retweet their remarks. They won’t even listen to the other side. But the individual personalities of Paul or Apollos are the wrong sources for the meaning they desire. The sound bites disappear in the next news cycle, the retweets fall as newer posts replace them. The comfort immediately felt is revealed to be hollow and wanting. To be comforted they need to cling harder, to increase their certainty, to squeeze the life out of vessels that will never offer suitable sustenance. They can’t even entertain the chance that they could be wrong.

The Corinthians, like us, must progress further, past picking personalities and preferences, all the way to the one source that gives authority to Paul and Apollos. They must seek God, who is the only one capable of bringing growth into their lives. If they want to grow in faith, if they want their lives to have meaning, the Corinthians need to stop trying to be right or better than others. They must surrender their meaningless categories to God.

In Kathleen Norris’ book, *Amazing Grace*, she describes a heated exchange between a seminary student and an Orthodox theologian.<sup>2</sup> The theologian had just finished his lecture on the development of the church’s creeds. The student asked, “What can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the Creed?” The Orthodox priest responded, “Well, you

---

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books: New York, 1998), 65. This story was brought to my attention in a sermon by The Rev. Dr. M. Craig Barnes.

just say it. It's not hard to master. With a little effort most learn it by heart." Thinking he had been misunderstood, the student tried again, "What am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed like the Virgin Birth?" He got the same response. "You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it. You just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually." The student raised his voice. "How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?" The priest replied, "It's not your creed. It's our creed." It belongs to the Body of Christ.

Nothing could be further from the experience of our divided world than to commit to something that does not come from the source you ascribe to. Why do we stand in worship and repeat the confessions of the church? Why don't we all say whatever we individually believe? One person could stand up and say, "I miss reading from the King James Version." At the same time another could stand and say, "Please keep politics out of the church." Simultaneously a third could be saying, "I think it's time we rethink the Iowa caucus." Each of these would be true from your individual sources. But the point of worshiping God is not to say things from your individual source. It's to surrender to a bigger, wider, more encompassing source, the love of God that includes each and every one of us, and compels us to do likewise.

We belong to one another. We are not our own.

This truth is a fact of faith: we belong to one another. We are not our own. But I confess I know the truth of feeling all too well. I know that while I confess the faithful truth that we're all one, that we belong to one another, that we must submit to a power greater than our political parties or individual interests, that I also know the truth of feeling anger towards others for their stances, frustrated by the choices made by people, vexed with confusion at others particular choices. The two truths exist together and often our anger wins out.

It's tempting to end the conversation here, with anger. We've reached the height of division and it's easiest to simply end with a generic, "let's try to be united," which means, "let's just stop talking because we know it's going to hurt our feelings." It's hard to talk to those who think differently than us. We

resolve to keep politics out of church. To not speak about the things that burden our minds with our family and friends. In an effort to maintain our grip on certainty we choose to believe the fiction that God has little or nothing to say about the state of our world. Or if God does, then God can only speak through our divisions. God occupies second place behind our earthly factions.

In response I offer a few other truths. The truth of fact is that God is not interested in our divisions. The Spirit of Jesus Christ can still be found in the homes of the pro-choice and the pro-lifers, the capitalist and the socialist, the Republican and the Democrat. The truth of fact is that we live together as God's servants, one and all, and that this is good for us. The truth of feeling is that God's love is stronger than any division we might make, and that love can comfort us during the most divisive of times. That feeling is different. It's built on faith, not certainty. But it stretches deep into our bones, encompassing every part of us and our world. There is no part of us that God does not want. If this sounds unrelatable or too lofty, it's because you've yet to taste the solid food of faith.

“We are God's servants, working together,” Paul concludes, “you are God's field, God's building.” At our best, we are servants, all of us. Before we claim political parties, club memberships, or even sport team affiliations, we are God's servants. From this truth we can grow. When the divisions and quarreling subside, when we choose to widen our frame of vision, to see everyone as another servant, then we can grow in our faith. Then we can receive true spiritual food. Then we are transformed and grow in wisdom and mercy and grace. Then we become the people we are so desperate to be. We could be wrong about a lot, but we'll never be wrong about how much God loves all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.