

“We are God’s Servants Working Together”

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Several years ago, the Center for a New American Dream held an essay contest for entrants age 17 and under. Out of more than 1700 entries on the topic “What I really want that money can’t buy,” Erika from Tennessee submitted the following essay:

“What I really want that money can’t buy is unconditional love. As a kid, I need to know that no matter what happens, no matter what grades I get – I will be loved. So many of my friends have parents who work all the time. They are not sure their parents love them, I guess because they are not there. I want to know that I am loved, because my parents are there. Just by their presence, I feel that I am loved.

My dog, Casanova, loves me. Sometimes I yell at him, and sometimes I hug him. But no matter what I do, he always wags his tail and comes running up to me. He has unconditional love.

My parents love me and buy me many things. But what tells me they love me the most is when they listen to me. Things are great, but what I really want is their time. What my friends really want is their parent’s time. Maybe go for a walk, and talk. Maybe a bike ride and a lecture talk about money. If you just do stuff together and smile, I will know you love me. I do things with my mom a lot, but my dad works and sleeps. I know we need the money, but I wish he would do more things with me. What I really want is for all parents to just spend time with their kids. America would be a happier country.”

The first time I read this essay was the Monday morning after Christmas – a month ago. We had celebrated Christmas as a family the weekend before Christmas when my daughter and son-in-law picked up my son from college on Saturday morning and came to our house for the weekend knowing that the following weekend – Christmas weekend – with 7 services in 3 days, I would be here more than at home.

The weekend before Christmas we had our immediate family Christmas on Saturday night and our extended family Christmas for the last time at my Mom’s house on Sunday afternoon. My Mom has since moved into a new addition on my brother’s farm house – the house she was born in. The last Christmas in the house I grew up in was a solemn one and exhausting with my brother’s brood of small children and grandchildren crawling up on me and competing for my attention. I was once again reminded of why we stopped after three!

I watched my three grown children interact. Rachel, now extremely knowledgeable in elder care, talked with her grandmother about what services were available. Nathan, with one semester of college left, struggling with who he is and what he wants to do and out of guilt I wonder if I spent enough time with him when he was younger. Micah, the free spirit, with little boys bringing their toys to his lap to play with him. I ask myself as I think most parents ask themselves, “Did I spend enough time with them while they were growing up? Do I spend enough time with them now?”

Erika’s last two sentences hit home. “What I really want is for all parents to just spend time with their kids. America would be a happier country.”

Then I read the text I'm suppose to preach on this weekend in which Paul is responding to his parishioners in Corinth who are criticizing him for preaching too simple a gospel.

Paul responds with these words in verse 1-4 . . . 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. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for 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? ⁴For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

He sounds like a parent. Here's Paul, the "women should be quiet in church" guy, who suddenly finds himself in a nurturing role, responsible for the care and feeding of newly formed churches and baby Christians. Much to his dismay, welcome to parenthood, their growth doesn't always proceed according to a neat, orderly plan. Paul's frustration can be heard when he makes reference to their need for baby food which in the first century can only mean being nursed at the breast since there were no bottles filled with formula.

"I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready!"

Just like the father who's eager to introduce the shiny new two-wheeler while his child clings to training wheels, Paul is disappointed that the Corinthians aren't moving forward with their spiritual growth. Paul is done with baby steps and is ready to pack away the diapers. His

impatience is obvious: “I’m ready to move on, why aren’t you? When are you going to grow up? When is this going to get easier? When will I be able to trust you on your own?”

To which many of we parents respond, “Welcome to our world!” Paul is discovering that sometimes children need some extra time and extra help to grow up. Which is why every time we celebrate holy baptism, as we welcome Cole into our family this morning, we all are promising to give some extra time and help to Cole and all our children as they grow in years.

Parents, grandparents, child-care workers, and caregivers of every kind know that caring for another human being can be a frustrating experience that requires vast patience. Child rearing isn’t so much a linear exercise in which a child progresses neatly from one accomplishment to the next as it is circular in which there’s one step back for every two steps forward. Paul has entered into the realm of caregiving and like parents everywhere, has discovered that tending to a person’s needs and encouraging physical, emotional, and spiritual growth is a challenging undertaking.

Paul, of course, wants only the best for his flock:

- He envisions the day when his young churches will gain some maturity and grow in independence.
- He dreams of the time when there will be less sibling rivalry and more unity.
- His goal is fewer arguments about status and more willingness to work together.
- He yearns for less whining and more appreciation of their blessings.

- He would like less self-absorption and more outward awareness along with more compassion.

These are all values Paul was passing onto his student Timothy, as those same values have been passed onto Tina, a daughter of this congregation, a daughter of each of you who helped her grow up in this family of God. We will continue to support her as she responds to her calling to ordained ministry when she journeys to seminary this fall.

In other words, Paul wants these children to put aside their childish ways. Much to his dismay, it isn't a smooth transition from infancy to childhood to young adulthood but rather a gradual process filled with ups and downs.

Looking at his newborn church, Paul is frustrated that the people aren't responding to his lessons; they aren't learning as quickly as he thinks they should. Like any good parent, he has noticed the warning signs of bad and risky behavior. He's concerned about the company they're keeping. Their choice in role models doesn't meet his approval. These young Christians are allowing themselves to be influenced by the newest fads and the flashiest speakers. Instead of relying on God, they bend to the latest ideas they hear. They're in awe of Apollos and overwhelmed by Paul by completely missing that it's "God who gives the growth."

Sometimes children get sent to their rooms. Sometimes they need a little TLC. Sometimes they need to review the most basic lessons, yet again. Parents and caregivers may have to repeat instructions many more times than we believe are necessary. But all the while,

whether it be in our homes, our classrooms, our worship time, in our Bible camps; we are building the strong foundation necessary to progress and grow as disciples of Christ.

That strong foundation was being built when I turned 18 during my last semester of high school. I told my grandfather I should be able to stay out as late as I wanted. He agreed. He told me as long as I made it home in time to milk the cows in the morning, he was O.K. with it. But he said that because my car was only 11 years old, it still needed to be home by midnight.

So parents and grandparents take heart. Sunday School and Confirmation teachers take heart. Stephens Ministers, Parish Nurses, and Homebound Communion Carriers take heart. All caregivers can take heart in these early words to the Corinthians from Paul. Even though we continue to strive for spiritual leaps of faith and maturity for both ourselves and our care receivers – there will be times of frustration and anxiety when we have to circle back to the foundational lessons of our faith – the lessons of unconditional love and forgiveness – that are necessary to meet the challenges ahead.

In verse 6 and 7, Paul makes it clear that while we do the planting and watering, it is “God who gives the growth.” While we do the care giving and parenting, it is “God who gives the growth.” “For we are God’s servants, working together” to love our children, to raise and nurture our children, to forgive our children, to teach our children what it means to love and forgive one another as we have been loved and forgiven in Christ. And it is through the gifts of love and forgiveness that we are truly healed of whatever is ailing us.

“We are God’s servants working together to plant and to water but it is God who gives the growth.”

May the peace of God . . .

#641 – All Are Welcome