"Infant Talk"

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Think back to the sitcom "Everybody Loves Raymond." Whenever Ray Barone walks in and sees Debra working in the kitchen, he calls her by some silly nickname — baby bop, bubble wrap, doodles, jambalaya, jelly cheeks, lucky pants, monkey, puddlepants, sniggles, twinkles. It was his thing, what he did. These goofy names or words were terms of endearment, even if they made no sense at all.

Most couples use *some* sort of intimate language. "Honey," is the most common. Except in the South where everyone is "honey," this term of endearment is usually reserved for one's special someone. Similar words are "luv," "dear" and "babe."

"Hey you" is not an intimate expression. Especially when it's followed by "Bring me a beer."

This kind of "infant talk" in a marriage can be a sign of intimacy and a healthy marriage or not, depending on your tone and body language. Usually when we use infant talk, we're in a good mood and use it lovingly.

Infant talk is a topic of today's 1 Corinthians text, but the mood is quite different here. Paul addresses the recipients of his letter as "brothers and sisters," but says he feels compelled to speak to them as infants. This kind of talk is not an expression of vulnerability on his part or a desire to bond; it's more in line with a scolding.

He has to talk to them as spiritual toddlers.

He's heard about the jealousy and quarreling. So he said to them: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me ... that there are quarrels among you" (1:10-11).

Following up on that in today's reading, Paul says he cannot speak to them as spiritual people — by which he seems to mean, as *spiritual grownups*. Instead, he must speak as though they were "infants in Christ," spiritual beginners.

Paul's not really into infant talk.

He doesn't like to talk to adults in infant talk tones or limit himself to subjects that only babies can understand. It irritates him and worries him. These big babies need to start growing. As it is, they're still taking the verbal equivalent of milk rather than solid food.

Apparently one of the squabbles in the Corinthian church had to do with which teacher — Paul or Apollos — gave authoritative directions for their faith. The Corinthian believers were becoming groupies and arguing about their preacher preference. Paul, however, sees this as a kind of idolatry, and seeking to speak simply, he points out that both men contributed to their understanding, but that "God gave the growth."

Paul's situation he's addressing reminds me of my last congregation in Nebraska where we had 3 pastors on staff. We all had very different preaching and teaching styles. The

visitation pastor, by far the oldest, preached at an occasional funeral and occasionally on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. The associate pastor was a chaplain in the Army reserves, about ten years older than me, and would preach about half of the remaining Sundays he was there. So, I was averaging two weekends a month plus many funerals and wedding sermons as the youngest pastor on staff, but the senior pastor in terms of my title.

Parishioners occasionally called the church office to ask who was preaching on the upcoming weekend. One of us was a little more boring than the other two and people were trying to avoid him. I instructed our secretary not to tell people who was preaching and if they questioned her to transfer the call to me. People stopped calling.

When Paul responds to this kind of situation in Corinth, he says he has to talk to them as "infants in Christ".

"Now boys and girls, my lovelies, we *all* luv each other here, and Apollos luvs you and you know that I luv you, so let's all hold hands now and sing 'Jesus luvs me this I know,' and let's try to get along, because both Apollos and I, well, we really want you to know that God luvs you, too! And we're all God's beautiful children. So, let's all grow together in God's wonderful grace, you sweet little babies!"

Paul perhaps had in mind his own spiritual journey. Elsewhere in this same letter, he speaks of maturity in a way that makes it sound like an arrival point: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways" (13:11).

If only it were that simple. There is truth to what Paul says, of course, but adulthood is not a threshold we step across at some predetermined age. Biological maturation does not automatically equal emotional or spiritual maturation. A person may be able to vote, drink and drive; doesn't mean he or she is mature.

Even adults can act like kids. It's not uncommon to see in adults such childish behaviors as selfishness, tantrum-throwing, impatience, name-calling, bullying, gossiping, keeping score and getting even, over-dramatizing, shirking blame, avoidance behavior and problems with impulse control – we all know who I just described!

Many of us have moments of maturity and immaturity throughout our lives, but in difficult or serious situations, we might strive for mature responses.

There's a difference between keeping our childlike awe, wonder, excitement and playfulness about life and keeping our childish insistence that the world revolves around us.

"There's a little boy in the biggest man," writes psychologist and priest Eugene Kennedy, "and he is forever trying to get out. ... He looks with wonder at the world; his eyes are bright and inquisitive, and when you ask him a question, it is the truth that comes out because he has never mastered the deceitful arts. ... His playful energy and his transparent openness are incorporated into his grown-up style; his presence disarms us because he neither attacks us nor raises defenses before us. ... That's ... the little boy in the big man ... who is earnest and good and never wants to hurt anybody."

But, says Kennedy, there is another little boy in a lot of us, an "obstinate little boy who long ago put his head down against growing up, preferring to hold on to his childhood strategies to get his way. ... he is rather a hostile little fellow who cannot get himself out of the foreground in any view he takes of the world. ... it is self-infatuation and self-absorption more than any kind of healthy self-respect that marks his attitude toward himself."

Kennedy has personified this narrative by making the centerpiece of it a man, but we could no doubt make a similar point if we began, "There's a little girl in the adult woman, and she is forever trying to get out."

Kennedy concludes his narrative about the child within us by saying that when dealing with others, it's "good to be able to tell the difference between the good boy who has become a man and the spoiled boy who has never gotten anywhere." Then he added, "I think the children Christ let come to him were of the first variety, and it may just be that the little child who 'will lead them' is not literally a little child at all, but a grownup who has never lost the best aspects of being young and innocent."

Some of what both Paul and Kennedy were talking about can be described as emotional immaturity, and no doubt there's some overlap between that and spiritual immaturity.

Here are some symptoms of *spiritual immaturity*:

- holding the belief that faith will make you prosper or at least protect you from great troubles,

- thinking of prayer as a shopping list of requests,
- struggling with the same weakness with no success (what an earlier generation of Christians called "besetting sins"),
- expecting ongoing spiritual highs,
- hanging your faith on a human leader,
- believing that the main reason for going to church is for what you receive,
- having the blinding certainty that your understanding of faith is right, and therefore anyone who sees faith differently must be wrong.

Some symptoms of *spiritual growth* include:

- understanding that faith is neither a guarantee of prosperity nor protection from troubles, but a certain knowledge that God is with you,
- using prayer as way to make yourself vulnerable to God,
- having more success in the struggle with besetting sins but also a greater understanding that salvation is not something you earn — it is the gift of God,
- hanging your faith on Christ, despite how human leaders serve him or fail to serve him,
- realizing that going to church is both for what you receive and what you give,
- grasping that others' understanding of faith doesn't have to be wrong for yours to be God's truth for you.

Paul is not the only early church teacher who needed to address this problem of getting stuck in spiritual infancy. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews said something similar to his readers: “You have come to the place where you need milk instead of solid food. Everyone who lives on milk is not used to the word of righteousness, because they are babies. But solid food is for the mature ...” (Hebrews 5:12-14, CEB).

So, our prayer could be for growth in our spiritual digestive system, so that we can handle the solid food of mature faith.

Saint Paul was probably not the kind of person who used baby talk, even to talk to babies, let alone another adult. He no doubt cared for the church at Corinth, but he can’t bring himself to be emotionally expressive about it — and when he does talk about love, it is certainly not about warm, fuzzy feelings (see chapter 13).

So, he’s not too happy that the church at Corinth resembles a nursery full of screaming children, hitting each other and refusing to share. Therefore, he isn’t about to share some deep, theological themes with the Corinthian Christians. When you think of Paul’s doctrinal letters, you think of Romans and Ephesians, but probably not his letters to the church at Corinth. Yes, he talks about the gifts of the Spirit, but he uses a simple metaphor of a body and how it all works together — not what anyone would call deep and profound. “See, boys and girls, the hand doesn’t argue with the eyes, and the ears are happy to let the legs do their thing, and the whole body gets along just fine! Isn’t it just wonderful! Can you be like the ears and the eyes, the hands and legs? Of course you can, boys and girls. I luv you so much!”

Yeah, the Corinthians were special.

In any congregation, there are always people at different stages of the Christian life. So, let our final words here be these from Hebrews 6 (as rendered by *The Message*): "So come on, let's leave the preschool finger-painting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art. Grow up in Christ. The basic foundational truths are in place: turning your back on 'salvation by self-help' and turning in trust toward God; baptismal instructions; laying on of hands; resurrection of the dead; eternal judgment. God helping us, we'll stay true to all that. But there's so much more. Let's get on with it!" (6:1-3).

May the peace of God . . .