

## Power and Wisdom

### 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, <sup>3</sup> 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? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

<sup>5</sup> What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup> I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup> So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. <sup>8</sup> The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. <sup>9</sup> For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

In our scripture Paul is working to counter factions in the Corinthian community that have formed around claims of superior wisdom attributed to various religious teachers. Paul's response to this situation has been to deny that human wisdom, however exalted, has any ability to attain reliable knowledge of God (chap. 1). Paul argues instead that it is the Holy Spirit that equips human beings to know God truly (chap. 2), rather than rhetorical-philosophical cleverness.

### **P. Mark Achtemeier**

But why do we divide up into camps? We see it all around us as in the religious world we divide up into Catholics and Protestants. In England the division is Catholic and Anglican. In the Mainline Protestant world, we divide into Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, and Baptist. The we divide into Bible-based, Evangelical, Missionary-focused...and the divisions go on and on. We have been a part of or heard of churches that have split because of the personality of the preacher. When we had a consultation last fall with leaders of this congregation, we were told that we are right for division and a take-over.

In our politics we are known as a divided country. Our legislature is divided left and right; progressive or moderate; those who trust politician and those who have no use for persons who have experience in government positions. There are so many other reasons we divide into different factions. Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche community, suggests that part of our warring nature is that we all carry a deep wound of loneliness that is not easily overcome, and that this wound is so much a part of our human condition that we cannot escape it, try as we might. We want to belong in the worst way, so we join communities, but they always tend to disappoint us. He further claims that we have carried these wounds since childhood. From our warring behavior Vanier may be right!

These wounds were much in evidence in the church Paul founded in Corinth. The people of the church of Corinth, it seems, wanted desperately to belong. They must have had mainline Christian leanings, because they divided up into groups with buttons announcing, "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos" or some other charismatic leader. In Paul's view this rivalry betrayed a misunderstanding of the gospel. Paul came preaching Christ and him crucified, one who identified most deeply with our human woundedness, reconciling us to God—a God who alone can give a sense of who we are and whose we are as beloved people of God. In Paul's view, the Corinthians are acting like children, "as infants in Christ." The image of childhood here is striking, because if Vanier is right, it is in childhood that we learn to build walls of protection that can be dismantled only by acts of tenderness and care.

Commentator Roger Gench, remembers vividly one of his own first experiences of real loneliness as a child. His parents had taken him and his brother to visit their best friends in Atlanta, Georgia. It was the first time he had ever been that far away from home. The son of his parents' friends took him and his brother to the local pool. When he arrived and got in the water, he was scared to death. The water was

not the problem, for he could swim just fine; it was what the water represented. Suddenly he began to sob uncontrollably. The lifeguard could not console him. The son of his parents' friends could not console him. He said his brother, of course, thought he was being stupid! Upon hearing of his meltdown, his parents could not figure it out. They said, "At home, he swims like a fish!" The key, of course, was the words "at home." He was a long way from home and in unfamiliar territory. It was an experience of real loneliness. He wanted desperately to be with his parents, but also to be at home. Loneliness is a wound not easily healed.

In my life I have a few memories of loneliness. You know I had 8 older siblings, so I was always surrounded by people. But even as a small child I remember the fear and loneliness the first time I realized that my parents had gone away for a time. It may have only been for a few hours, but it seemed like an eternity. When I went to college I had a terrible period of homesickness! I had a true meltdown when I spoke to friends who were returning home the following week. I also remember my loneliness when my mother called to tell me my youngest sister would not be returning to my university while I was studying for my advanced degree. Very few of us are immune from loneliness.

Vanier tells a story about a severely disabled man named Daniel, whose parents did not want him; much like the young boy with autism who died last week, frozen in his father's garage. This man, Daniel, ended up in one institution after the other. Even after becoming a part of L'Arche, a community that specializes in helping people like Daniel, he would hide his anguish behind hallucinations. As Vanier puts it, "He felt guilty for existing, because nobody wanted him as he was." "What we must do," said Vanier, "is walk with [the wound] instead of fleeing from it. We cannot accept it until we discover that we are loved by God just as we are, and that the Holy Spirit, in a mysterious way, is living at the centre of the wound."

How do you walk with wounds that are so deep and so alienating? The answer Paul gives is Christ and him crucified, who not only identifies with our loneliness, but who also carries our wounds, in order to show us the God who loves us. It is in Christ alone that we can learn we belong. By learning to live in Christ we grow into the discovery that we are loved. The image Paul uses for growth is a horticultural one: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (v. 6). Roger recently came upon another image that extends Paul's: the notion of "ecotone," meaning a special meeting ground between two different ecological communities, for example, a forest and a meadow. Ecologists tell us that there is an "edge effect" between these two ecological communities that is particularly fertile and life giving. Indeed, they speak of the "pregnancy of edges."

This notion of the "edge effect" is particularly apt for describing the experience of the community of the wounded who encounter the living God in Christ, in whom we are healed. Indeed, the sacrament of baptism is a powerfully fertile place where we encounter the edge effect. Baptism reminds us of the story of God's love that comes to us amid our woundedness to give us healing and life. Theologian John Burgess says that baptism addresses our temptation to succumb to identity crisis, wherein "we wonder who we really are" and "doubt that our lives are worth much. We see only limitations and dwell on our failures." In baptism we confront the fundamental sin of identity crisis, that "inevitable tendency to believe that we are something different from the self that God has called us to be." **Roger J.**

## **Gench**

Paul insists that not only is God made manifest in the world but that on the cross we most clearly see that Christ comes among us not among the powerful but among the weak. Too often in the church our leadership styles mimic the patterns of the world rather than the gospel. So some say that they belong to Cephas or to Apollos or to Paul. All belong to Christ. Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that

they are God's servants, God's field, God's building (v. 9). He will go on to remind them that Christ is the sure foundation upon which they have been built (3:11), and eventually that they are nothing less than the body of Christ, members one of another (12:12). We are not to lose sight of our unity and noble calling, even in the midst of our day-to-day quarrels.

The late Henri Nouwen often spoke about his journey to L'Arche, a community of mentally handicapped people and their assistants, trying faithfully and simply to live the gospel together. Nouwen, assigned to work with Adam, a twenty-four-year-old epileptic man who could not speak or dress himself, spoke of his real fears. A university professor who was far more comfortable with matters of the head than of the heart, he was assigned the task of bathing and dressing a grown man. Over time, fear gave way to something new and Nouwen said:

Somehow I started to realize that this poor, broken man was the place where God was speaking to me in a whole new way. Gradually I discovered real affection in myself and I thought that Adam and I belonged together and that it was so important.... I want you to understand a little better what happened between Adam and me. Maybe I can say it very simply. Adam taught me a lot about God's love in a very concrete way.

We don't need to go very far to find manifestations of the Christ in the midst of our lives. We just need to remember to look beyond the petty squabbles to the depths where Christ's love abounds: the spouse who tenderly cares for his wife in the Alzheimer's unit of the hospital, the child playing Nintendo on an oncology floor, the mother raising four kids on her own. We all need to look beyond our difference and see God's power and wisdom in the situations around us. **Richard M. Simpson**

Martin Luther suggested that Christians should begin each day by remembering our baptism, for in baptism one participates in the dying and rising of Christ. The water used in baptism reminds us of the story of creation, the story of the flood, and the story of the exodus. So, it is a symbol of both that which threatens and that which gives life. It also reminds us of dying and rising with Christ and sets us on a path of walking with our woundedness in order to find life therein. Baptism, in other words, is symbolic of the fertile place for life—the edge effect—when the community of the wounded encounters God in Christ, who heals our wounds.

**Roger J. Gench**

But God also gives us the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and power to be salt and light in the world.

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