

February 16, 2020 Christ Church UCC

Scripture Psalm 139:1-6 I Cor 3:1-9

One of the greatest joys of my life right now is being a grandma!

It's true that as you parent, you relive your childhood memories, and as you grandparent, you relive your parenting memories.

Our first child was only 6 ½ months old, when she pulled herself up, holding onto the edge of the coffee table and started taking sliding steps around the edge. She stood there with the biggest grin a baby that age can muster, while I stared in horror – babies are supposed to crawl before they walk, right? That gives parents a chance to child proof the house.

Well, I did what any respectable working mother would do – I picked that child up and sat her down in the middle of the room, and said, “sit!”

But she didn't listen – she was determined to be an early walker. Within 2 months, she went from sitting to walking and skipped crawling all together.

Children who are early walkers fall a lot. They really don't have the muscles and the balance to do what they want to do. And so she took her wobbly steps falling into everything – by her first birthday, she had more bumps, bruises and stitches than should be allowed.

If you have been around babies, you can relate to what Paul is telling the congregation in Corinth. He tells them that they are “infants in Christ.”

An infant relies on its mother for milk. Its young body cannot cope with solid food – a baby has no teeth to chew with. As babies grow, they begin to sit up, crawl, stand up and eventually walk. They wobble and fall down, get up and try again. Mushy foods are added to their diets and eventually they get to explore what their parents are eating. As babies grow into toddlers, they work to make sense of their worlds. They learn to engage the people around them, they laugh, they cry and they have tantrums.

You can understand why Paul was attracted to this metaphor. Paul gave birth to this congregation in Corinth and he obviously loves them very much. He had founded the church there not many years before, and now, they had reached the squabbling teenage years.

But he also sees that they are struggling with how to spiritually grow into the Christian life.

In Paul's time, the place of great teachers and philosophers was significant. These leaders were a source of knowledge. But certain members of the early Corinthian church were aligning themselves with particular teachers. “I belong to Paul” or “I belong to Apollos”. They are arguing with each other and exhibiting destructive behaviors – they are wobbling and falling down on their spiritual journey.

Paul confronts this behavior. Their quarreling and jealousy are destructive to the community. Paul has a vision for their community that reaches far beyond where they are.

Is Paul trying to insult them by comparing them to infants? I don't read it quite that way. I think Paul is trying to challenge them that they still have a long way to go, a lot of growth to

embrace, before they can become the community he desires for them to be. Paul is frustrated with them – he was hoping they would be farther along - ready for more serious nourishment, more responsibility and accountability than when they first began.

Now, I am guessing that you are not all that different from me. Like me, you are here in worship, seeking to be a better disciple of Christ, a better person in the world. We are here, hoping that getting up on a cold February morning and going to church will help us along our path of discipleship.

In fact, for the last month, Ed has been leading you through an exploration of how to be on the path of discipleship. You have been exploring what it means to be growing in discipleship – some of the actions that are required of disciples, etc.

You have considered the reality of our “addiction” to sinful ways. What it looks like to give that up through vulnerability to each other, learning from our past mistakes, and tasking ourselves to commit to the choice of being a disciple – and realizing that we have to make that choice over and over. You have been very focused on what is required of you and how to go about doing it.

So focused, in fact, that Ed and I thought this might be a good week to step back for a minute and consider this passage from Paul. Paul acknowledges that sometimes our spiritual journeys are filled with baby steps. And that’s OK. Because it’s not all about us or what WE are doing. It’s about God and what God is doing.

With the second half of the text, Paul shifts the imagery from that of nurturing human life to that of nurturing plants. Let’s take a moment and look at this image.

If you have worked a garden, you know that having the appropriate tools helps. Having knowledge or experience in gardening is a big boost. It helps to know when to plant, what kind of soil is most productive, whether or not you need to spray for pests, how to keep the squirrels from eating your harvest, etc.

Having some familiarity and experience is a big boom. If you don’t have that knowledge – knowing someone who is more experienced is great – they share their knowledge and it guides you. Community gardens are wonderful ways for beginners to start out – other gardeners suggest the right tools, share information and skills. Often there is a friendly bonding process between those who work together in a community garden.

You can appreciate why Paul’s use of this metaphor rings true for the church community. In a church, similar to a community garden, people learn from one another. They share tools with one another. Those with more experience or knowledge can help others grow. In a community of faith, we encourage each other and a bond forms as we work together.

There is another part to gardening though, that also rings true for the church. There are factors involved in both gardening and in growing a community of faith that you can’t predict because they are not things you don’t control. Some years have ample resources, other years feel like a drought. Some years pests move in that you had no clue about – the roof begins to leak, the furnace or elevator needs a costly repair. And the “plot” that is just on the other side of the fence from yours might be bountiful in a way that your “plot” isn’t, even though all the factors of soil, rain and sun seem identical. People and church communities can be right next door to each other and still be in different stages of spiritual growth.

I had the best crop of tomatoes ever last year – beautiful big red tomatoes. But before I could pick them, the neighbors dogs hung out in our yard, and without us realizing it, took a bite out of every tomato! I had anticipated squirrels, maybe even skunks – but not dogs! I didn't even know they liked tomatoes! The fenced in yard kept the critters out – the dogs were there by invitation. Never occurred to me they would enjoy tomatoes!

Folks invest time, energy, and resources into every aspect, from tilling the soil, to weeding and fertilizing, and to harvesting the fruits and vegetables at the correct times to ensure the highest possible yield and the best stewardship of each precious plant. Even so, the gardeners themselves do not completely control the end result. Much of the result lies literally in the soil. Rain, drought, disease – can all play a part and be out of the gardener's hands.

The church functions in much the same way. Paul lays it out there: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6). The faithful” gardeners” are fully engaged in the work of cultivating disciples, but God provides the sun (or in this case, the Son) and rain and good conditions for the fledgling sprouts to grow into faithful maturity. Paul reminds the church that neither his role of planting, nor Apollos's role of watering the church makes the church grow. The growth comes from God alone. The harvest in the community of faith – is God's alone.

Paul and Apollos are not figures to be regarded with awe or to be compared with each other; they are simply servants of God with a common purpose and a common responsibility. No matter what the respective roles of Paul, Apollos, and the Corinthians, they all belong to God and derive their importance from that fact alone. In the end, it's God's field and God is the giver of gifts and creator of growth.

Now the amazing word of grace in this – *God will use whatever the Corinthians offer, even their baby steps.* Their immature spirits are still valuable wet clay in God's hands.

The process of growing in faith takes time and experience. It's often messy and complicated. It's hard work and sometimes the best we can do is baby steps. What matters is that we keep choosing God and God's ways.

God works within us and nurtures us. In the case of the Corinthians, Paul says the teachers are simply conduits through which God acts. It's God that is planting seeds and watering souls through them.

But that doesn't mean that the Corinthians (or us) don't have work to do. Paul encourages a hunger and thirst for spiritual growth while at the same time indicating that this growth comes from God. We have a responsibility to continue to work on our spiritual maturity. It's responsible for us to push ourselves, expand our spiritual diets and apply ourselves to this great challenge of discipleship.

However, we aren't going to get there overnight. And THAT is really alright. God will work with what we bring forth.

This isn't an excuse to piddle around. We are called to water and fertilize our spiritual lives – to do what it takes to create healthy viable growth. We are not to ignore what has been planted allowing it to wither.

We have choices in this. We can be part of a flourishing and fertile spiritual garden, or we can opt out and miss out on the blessings and abundance of God's harvest. This isn't easy stuff. It's hard work and it requires choosing to opt into God's work every day – choosing over and over, in the face of so much entices us to give up.

But the good news is – baby steps of faith are OK. We aren't going to build a field of discipleship overnight.

The other good news??? This is a community garden. You have this wonderful community to gather with and plumb the depths of what it means to be followers of Jesus and to share where you have seen Christ active in your lives. The companionship of sharing this journey of faith together is a truly enriching thing.

As we consider what it means to be a community of faith in this 21st century, to follow Christ and to grow in your relationship to God, don't be afraid to take the next steps, to plant some different seeds and to seek out the experience of someone who has been tilling a different garden from yours, entrusting yourself and your harvest to the Master Gardener.

And over time, we will embrace what Paul is teaching the Corinthians – in the end, God's will, not ours, is done. Amen.