

One of the challenges of preaching from what is known as the common lectionary, a three-year cycle of passages from Scripture that attempt to cover the breadth and depth of our faith story, is that you can't dismiss difficult passages.

Now I don't know about you, but I have more than a few verses in scripture that I wish were not in the bible. If you were to share yours with me, I'm sure we would have a substantial list, as well as the potential for a pretty challenging sermon series!

Well, throughout history folks have been trying to excise difficult passages, but Marcion of Sinope around the year 144 wins the prize for me. He decided that anything related to the Hebrew Scriptures or the God of Israel ought to be excised from what we know as the New Testament! I remember a professor suggesting that if Marcion would have taken scissors to the New Testament and cut out all references to the Hebrew Scriptures and the God of Israel, the pages of the text would have been rather holey! (I was just seeing if you were with me this morning!)

You see, Marcion believed that Jesus was the savior sent by God and that Paul was Jesus' chief apostle, but not much else. I'm not even sure how Marcion knew that Jesus was the Savior without any references to the Hebrew scriptures, but no need to solve that mystery today, because the early Christian church declared Marcion's methodology heretical. Bottom line, my friends, we can't cut out what we don't particularly like from scripture! We have to wrestle with the text given to us.

So, back to the challenge facing us today in our text, as Apostle Paul isn't very complimentary of the Corinthian believers this morning! As we heard, he calls them infants or babies in Christ! Remember that the Corinthians had years under their belt in living the Christian life, how could they possibly be only babies after all that they had been through?

So, attempt to walk in the shoes of the Corinthian believers who are reading this letter for the first time. They are people who left their raucous life style and dramatically changed their everyday lives in response to Apostle Paul's preaching and teaching, as he was with them in Corinth for a year and half. Once Apostle Paul left, the Corinthians continued to gather, growing in faith through house churches where they studied scripture and broke bread together.

Yet, like any faith community I have ever been a part of, they had a few squabbles every now and then. Yet, from the tenor of Paul's letter, it's apparent there were more than a few squabbles. Groups within the church were actually competing against one another. They argued over who was the best at following Jesus – those under the tutelage of Apollos or Paul or even Cephas, as we read earlier in Paul's letter.

Now Paul's letter to the church at Corinth starts out pleasant enough, for he writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Jesus Christ, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind - just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you - so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Nice enough, right? If I imagine being a Corinthian hearing this letter for the first time, I feel pretty good about myself. I feel pretty good about my house church's walk of faith, for according to Paul we have all we need and we don't lack any spiritual gift! I might even think, "Wow," we are walking our talk and living in Christ as expected of Christians.

But, then Apostle Paul changes his tune and what he writes to the Corinthians is difficult to swallow. From the mountain top compliment, "You don't lack any spiritual gift," he drops the bomb, "You aren't spiritual people in Christ!" As a matter of fact, he says, "You are just mere babies in Christ!" Can you hear and feel the audible gasp that echoes throughout the home where this is being read, stunning everyone in attendance.

Have you ever been called a baby or a kid when you were long past chronologically qualifying for these titles? Have you ever been scolded to grow up?

Even our children who are a mere four to seven years past infancy didn't like being called babies this morning! We can only imagine this morning how difficult it was for the Corinthians to take in what Paul was writing to them.

But, then suddenly, Paul's words became all too clear. It's as if Paul looked them directly in their eyes through his text, with his written word resounding with audible authority in their hearts - the way in which you live and move and have your being doesn't look anything like Christ crucified! Your jealousy and quarreling is an affront to Christ. You are acting like babies, like spoiled brats, like arrogant children.

You are infants in Christ! I can only feed you milk and certainly not any solid food yet! You are flesh rather than spirit. Now flesh, according to Paul, means worldly. He is basically saying that the Corinthians are living according to the fallen nature of humanity, rather than the reconciled nature of humanity through Christ in God. You are allowing your arrogance, jealousy and quarreling to get in the way of proclaiming Christ crucified with your very life, says Paul.

I wonder, if you were a Corinthian what would your gut reaction be? Would you be angry and obstinate, disagreeing with Paul's conclusion listing just how you follow Christ? Or would you be convicted to the core of your being and repentant?

Paul's basic summation is that the Corinthians are having an identity crisis. There are placing their identity in all the wrong places, in their human teachers either Paul or Apollos or Cephas. Instead of placing their identity securely with Christ crucified, they are identifying with earthly leaders. These not so new believers have forgotten their core identity, as God's beloved sons and daughters.

Paul drives this point deeper with an agricultural metaphor. Remember, that 1st century Palestine was an agrarian society. Your earthly teachers may plant the seeds of faith and water the seeds of faith, but they can't cause faith to grow in and through you. Maturity or growth comes from God alone, says Paul.

Like the people of God poised at the edge of the Jordan, ready to enter the promised land, the Corinthians are faced with a choice. Will they claim their identity in Christ alone and thus choose life? Or will they clamor after earthly leaders, whether Apollos or Paul or Cephas – and choose death? Will they walk the way of God's commandments, decrees and ordinances and choose life? Or will they turn away to their own ways and the ways of the world and choose destruction? Will they walk the way of Christ crucified or continue to be mere infants in Christ where their egos get the best of them? [Pause]

So, what about us and these texts? What do Paul's words to the church at Corinth have to do with us today? Are you wishing that Paul had not called the Corinthians babies or at least if he did that it wasn't officially recorded in our scriptures? [Pause]

“For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you... are you not behaving according to human inclinations?” For as long as you grab for what makes you feel good or makes you look important you are acting like babies. For as long as you are content only when everything’s going your way or you are the one making all the decisions are you not placing your identity in someone or something else besides Christ?

Christ crucified is the clarion message of Apostle Paul to the Corinthians and to us gathered here today. Christ, as the elders and deacons heard yesterday in our gathering’s opening worship, “didn’t do anything from selfish ambition or conceit. He didn’t claim the special privileges that were rightly his, rather he emptied himself, he humbled himself and lived a selfless, obedient life looking to the interests of others.”

These Christ like attributes didn’t describe the Corinthians at all, which gained them the not so complimentary title of “babies in Christ.” What about us? Do we deserve the same title?

Let me take a risk today and boldly claim that we do. At least I know that I do. I know that although I claim Christ, I’m far from exhibiting Christ like attributes every moment of everyday. I’m susceptible to my ego. I’m susceptible to the gods of our culture that clamor for my attention and can be easily lead me astray by the lure of comfort and security.

And gathered communities of faith are not any different and neither is this one. We all need a wake-up call, a reality check and Apostle Paul provides one this morning. He is asking us pointed questions: Are we, as a church, demonstrating Christ-like attributes to our community? Are we looking to the interests of others, rather than our own? Are we willing to empty ourselves for the sake of others? Are we selfless? [Pause]

An identity crisis within the church happens when we place our identity in something else besides Christ. When we place our identity in our denomination – PC(USA), our locale - Redlands, our worship style - traditional, our buildings, our financial health, our size, our pastor or anything else, we forget whose we really are.

“Who are we?” was the opening question of our leadership gathering yesterday. From our text, today, Apostle Paul proclaims that we, as a church, are God’s servants. We are planters and waterers of the seeds of faith. What makes church worth doing though is the God we are serving. Friends, this church is not so much about us, as it is about what God has equipped us to do together for others. We have been called together for a purpose, even though we’re still babies who need to do some growing up!

Unfortunately, though, there is no blueprint for our future together other than to be a church that lives faithfully the attributes of Christ crucified – humble, selfless and looking to the interests of others. The question is, will we dare to do so, even at the risk of losing our life? Amen.