

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Some of us are born with green thumbs — able to water and plant barren landscapes into lush gardens.

Some of us are born with gangrene thumbs — unable even to grow a “Chia Pet.”

Some people are born with the ability to take things apart and put things back together. They are handy-dandy, fixer-uppers from the get go.

But in the most shallow part of the wading area of that “fixer-upper” gene pool, there are those of us who should never be allowed to handle hammers, screwdrivers, or saws. There are those (like me) who find “Plumbing for Dummies” more challenging than a dissertation on quantum mechanics.

All of us have our special gifts; all of us have our special limitations for those things fixable or tweak-able. But, as we so often fail to realize, not everything in life can be “fixed.” Nor was everything meant to be.

Cars and plumbing are areas of expertise some of us can “fix.” But soul growth or church growth, the bringing forth of new life, the conceiving of new blooms of vitality and vigor, is something none of us can bring about by “fixing” the body of Christ. New life in the Spirit only comes from one source. That source is God. Dr. Alex Abraham, a well-known neurosurgeon in northern India who is an expert in India’s 4000 people groups, 400 languages, and 600,000 villages in a nation of 1.2 billion people, echoes Paul’s words for today when he

says this: “We cannot grow God’s church. Anyone can build a church building, but only God can grow a church. None of us can grow a tree or even vegetables.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul writes, “I planted. Apollos watered. But God gives the growth.”

Our United Methodist system of itineracy models this dynamic. The success that we are having with ministries here at McFarland like the free store comes about because the seed of an idea was planted while Matt Hampton was here. Will Lauderback and Ginger Isom and I have watered it and encouraged it and God has given growth not only in the number of people who are served by this outreach ministry, but in the number of volunteers who make it happen as well. And we won’t mention the space that it has expanded into as it has grown. I can’t forget a comment that Marvin Mills made as they were bringing in more clothes racks to accommodate the increase in clothing. He said, “I never would have believed that this would last 6 months when we first started. Now look at it.”

And it is all because the Holy Spirit is at work here.

Our system of itineracy keeps pastors moving throughout their careers. There are positives and negatives to that system. Some would ever argue that it is an antiquated relic that needs to be retired. Perhaps that is true. But one outcome of the system is a visceral understanding of the idea presented in our lesson today about servants together in the fields of the Lord. Paul argues that our attachments are often to the wrong things: to a human pastor, to a position, to a building. No pastor works in a vacuum, but builds on ministry and mission that others directed long before arriving on the scene. I am reaping the benefit of what Matt and Will and Ginger and those who came before them planted and

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration from [sermons.com](http://sermons.com). Used by subscription. Accessed 2/15/2020.

watered before I came on the scene a year and a half ago. And, that will continue long after I'm gone. Sometimes, the key to overcoming short-term conflict like Paul is addressing with the church at Corinth is taking a longer view. And God's viewpoint stretches into eternity. You don't get much longer than that.

Paul makes a shift at the end of our text for this week. He's all about growing things, babies and milk and solid food; and then fields and planting and watering. But then at the very end, he throws in a building. It seems odd, until you go on reading. Verse nine is a metaphor hinge, or pivot. He swings from one to the other. It's a great technique; it keeps you from getting bogged down on one image that can't carry the weight of the argument alone. But it works or works well only when there is at least one common element of both images. In this case, there are many, but the one that Paul seemed to emphasize is that they are both labor intensive.

Well, maybe that wasn't his most important element. Maybe he was really more concerned about the progressive nature of the metaphors. They built or grew; they developed along the way. The starting place was not the ending place; the originating state was not the ending state. However you want to describe it, Paul was stressing that there was more to come. And he wants you to grow. He wants the church in Corinth to grow, certainly. That's why he is writing. Finally, a pastoral letter that says, "Stop acting like children!" How many pastors have wanted to write such a thing? Here it is.

Paul goes back to the beginnings, remembers when he first arrived and there was so much he wanted to say, but couldn't because they were infants in Christ. But he met them where they were, feeding them milk, teaching them the "*abc's*" of the faith, knowing that they would progress to more substantial

matters. Even now, he argues, they are still not ready, because they are acting like, well, children, quarreling, being jealous.

Here is a good description of what Paul means when he speaks of being in the flesh. It isn't necessarily a specific sin or types of sin. But it is doing that which hinders the growth of faith in the individual or the community. These selfish behaviors, even if done for good reasons, are of the flesh because they work against the common heart and mind of the body focused on the mission of the church.

So, then he turns back to the dividing issue as he sees it: this allegiance thing. Would it be fair to say that his response is basically, "we don't have time for that?" Maybe that's a bit simplistic but given that he then moves on to the mission field, it seems not too far off the mark.

There are those who argue that Paul is all about grace; grace and not works. And certainly his theological center is on salvation by grace through faith. But there is work to be done, of that he seems clear. There is work not to earn our place but work because our place has been given. We serve because we've been served. We love because we've been loved. All that we do is in response to what Christ has done in us and for us.

The life we are called to live is an active life. We are workers in God's field. We are laborers on God's building. That's what binds it all together.

It is God's.

We are God's.

Dividing up, choosing sides, setting up opposing camps only hinders the mission, says Paul. There is no room for "us and them" in a church that is at work in the field of God.

Of course, this is more easily said than done. The church in Corinth struggled with it. And we struggle with it today. Our United Methodist Church is divided, perhaps terminally. And the “can’t we all just get along” approach doesn’t even seem like a good bandage for the broken bones all around us. Paul argues that our unity is in our shared mission – the mission given him by Jesus Christ, to love God and love neighbor. Our divisiveness handicaps our ability to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Maybe we’ve tried to do it ourselves, our way, according to our leaders long enough. Maybe we need to let God give the growth. Do what we can where we can as we can, but trust that God will take what we have and what we can do and make it flourish.

Yesterday, I met with a group of around 100 United Methodists in Knoxville. We were clergy. We were lay. We were from all over the Holston Annual Conference and we talked about and prayed about casting a vision of what we would like the church to be - or more accurately, where we feel the Spirit is leading the church to be. The vision that we dreamed was of a church of “shifting margins” as retired Bishop Ken Carder described it. A church where those on the periphery and on the outside are drawn into the center. A church that is focused on the poor, the widow, the orphan and where every person is recognized as a child of God.

We envisioned a church where grace and love were at the heart of everything that we do because grace and love are at the heart of who God is.

We envisioned a church that was intricately connectional - where larger churches paired with smaller churches to enhance and enable mission and ministry into communities that are underserved.

We envisioned a church where everyone had a place at the table and there were no hierarchies or privilege based on race, color, gender, gender expression or ability. A church where we recognized and tended the image of God that resides in each one of us. A church where grace was lived out... not just talked about.

And it felt good. It felt good to be among people who loved the church and who loved God and who sought to be molded and made into the people that God is calling us to be... people who take seriously the command to love God and neighbor with every fibre of our being.

Now, we realize that this dream, this vision, won't be accomplished overnight. But we also can feel that the Spirit is leading us in that direction. It will take a lot of work for healing and reconciliation and restoration to occur.

And it can happen. It will happen. If we get out of the way and let the Holy Spirit use us to bring it about.

"I planted. Apollos watered. But God gives the growth."

Thanks be to God for the growth.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.