

1 Corinthians 3: 1-9 “Healthy Foods and A Mature Palate” Rev. Janet Chapman 2/19/23

I was 20 when I preached my first sermon, trying to put into words what I thought of our scripture. I won't forget the feelings although I've long forgotten what I said. I was so nervous, my hands wouldn't stop shaking. I was a junior at Northwest Christian College (now called Bushnell University) in Eugene, also the alma mater for Ellis & Gloria. Once a year, NCC sent out current students to Christian Churches across the West to be guest preachers and I was sent to Polson, Montana, off Flathead Lake. That Sunday was so traumatic I swore I would never grow up to be a preacher. It should have helped that NCC provided guidance, ideas on things to think about and say, and to always remember that ultimately, God will provide the growth. Well, I wasn't convinced and when a cute local college guy was given the responsibility to show me around Polson and proceeded to take his pick-up and drive me right into the lake, which is what they did in town for fun, I determined that was the only redeeming quality to the whole weekend. This year, it will be 40 years and I have avoided this scripture at all costs. I figured it was finally time to grow up.

Like the church in Corinth, I had some maturing to do. Paul describes the Corinthians differently here than he did in the first chapter where he expresses gratitude that they weren't lacking in spiritual gifts. Now they are babes in Christ, having been breast-fed while he was with them and now, they still are not weaned. They behave according to human rather than spirit-led inclinations, revealing their childishness in both action and word. Paul uses the example of how they approach their community leaders and speakers, putting them up on a pedestal and trying to argue who is better, like someone might do to celebrities in our time. What was going was sort of like that incident 13 years ago when Taylor Swift was receiving a Video Music Award and Kanye West, or whatever his name is now, jumped on stage and began ranting about how good Beyonce's video was. (Remember when that was the most controversial thing Kanye had ever done?) He pit the two artists against each other, trying to establish some kind of loyalty camp in which neither artist was interested. Maybe he learned it from the Corinthians, but Paul is trying to set the record straight – “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” Paul and Apollos

were't celebrities that you could gain status by just associating with them, but they were "servants." "Servant" is Paul's favorite self-description and he uses it to chide the Corinthians about their incessant need to be among the popular crowd, to be known as having the greatest preachers, the biggest budgets, the largest membership, and the most influential ministries.

A story is told about a high-powered corporate executive who was admitted to the hospital and promptly demanded a hospital suite with all the amenities, closest to the Nurses' station, and a direct phone line to contact his doctor. He barked orders left and right and if he received any guff, he responded childishly, "Don't you know who I am?" When he said that to a small mild-mannered lady, she left the room. She went to her computer screen, typed his name in big, bold letters, printed it on bright yellow paper, and attached it to a hospital bracelet which she then wrapped around his wrist. "What's this for?" he demanded. "That," replied the woman, "is so we don't hand you off to the wrong mommy when you're ready to go home because you're acting like a spoiled baby!" Maybe she was cut from the same cloth as Paul who uses the imagery of the cross to get the Corinthians' attention. Like a scalpel, the image of the cross is to perform surgery on their spiritual and cognitive organs in order to bring them back to health. They have been consuming too many sweets, taking in too many unhealthy attitudes, to the point that their spiritual teeth are rotting from the inside out. They pride themselves on being spiritually rich and already basking in God's kingdom so the servanthood of the cross brings them back to reality. Developing maturity in Christ means we admit we don't know it all and to stop pretending we do. It means remembering that just when we think we have graduated from the school of experience, along comes a whole new experience. Someone once said the trouble with the world is that the stupid are darned sure of themselves and the intelligent are full of doubt. That can be both good and bad news for us, because the message of the cross is meant to destroy spiritual elitism at its roots.

Using farming or gardening imagery, Paul likens his and Apollo's work to different necessary tasks in sowing and nurturing the plant. "I planted, Apollos watered." Such work needs to be done in order for things to grow, but these roles can be assigned by the field's

owner to just about anyone. Though they are agents of the process, neither has ultimate power over the seed or the germination process. For it is God who gives the growth. As I look back, I think that is why I struggled with this text 40 years ago. I was at a point in my life where I wanted to be someone important and I believed I knew how to make that happen. I didn't want to go to po-dunk Polson, I wanted the big assignments, the big churches, the big names, and I certainly wasn't going to be a lame preacher whom nobody ever heard of. I was a product of the 1980 movie, "Fame," as Irene Cara's song goes, "Remember my name, fame, I'm gonna live forever, I'm gonna fly high." It set the tone for what grew into phenomenon like American Idol and all that followed. Then somewhere along the way, we begin to mature from baby food to solids as we learn from our experiences and mistakes. We begin to understand that although we have different roles in the process of germination, we all have a common purpose; the Greek literally reads, "They are one," there is no distinction, no competition, no better than or least than; we are all one in and with God.

A few weeks back, I returned to Selma where I served for 10 years and had supervised a young seminarian, Chad, who was working as our youth minister. He also was out of my alma mater and reminded me so much of myself. He never wanted to be a preacher, but wanted to surround himself in the very important ministries of youth. I told him back then to be careful when you say "never" to God because God has a great sense of humor. He told me at this last visit, he has been called to be Selma's full-time preacher and he had finally accepted. It was hard to keep the tears at bay because I knew exactly what he was saying, and it had nothing to do with either of us and everything to do with God. Another young man from po-dunk Bonanza, Oregon, that Chad went to college with came to sing at the Selma church while we were both serving there. He had formed a band while at NCC and told us he didn't care how many people came to hear him sing, he just had to sing; we were glad he didn't care because there weren't more than 20 people who showed up but those 20 loved it. As I understand it, he still holds to that approach trying to keep God as the anchor through all the storms of his life. Some would call him a celebrity as Ryan Stevenson was interviewed on Sirius XM's the Message this week, but he would shudder at that, still trying to hold onto Paul's admonition toward servanthood. Recording under Tobie Mac's record label, Ryan went

15 weeks with the number 1 Contemporary Christian single receiving a Dove Award in 2017, for "The Eye of the Storm." Yet it is my prayer for Ryan that his fame doesn't reach his spirit but instead he keeps that po-dunk, small town humility which reminds us all that we are working together as God's servants. I share his song with you now not to glorify his achievements, but to bring together what it means to grow healthy and mature as followers of Christ.