

A few weeks ago, I had a marvelous time when I went out with the Sunday school to give a lesson on Baptism. We went to the parlor, and I was afraid you could hear us all the way out here. We sang, talked, laughed, and I confess, we got the floor pretty wet as the water was blessed! We wondered why we use water when we join the church family. As you know, I always say that it is a sign of God’s love pouring down on us. But I realized in talking to the little ones that that was still a bit abstract. Then the thought occurred to me – why do we water **plants**? They got that right away – “so that they will grow!” they said. So, as little Emma volunteered to be our baptismal child, water ran down her face into her smile as we all cried “Grow, Emma, grow!” It was great fun.

You can imagine my delight when I picked up the readings and saw the imagery Paul used to describe the growth of the early Christian community – a process of planting, watering, and growth. Paul knew how to use metaphor in his teaching, much like Jesus. He takes something that is always something of a mystery, such as how we grow in faith, and uses language we can get our minds around.

Now the context of Paul’s words is **dissension** in the Corinthian church. People were lining up behind their favorite leaders rather than focusing on the **common good of all**. Sound familiar? We human beings are really good at breaking off into “us” and “them”, aren’t we? Whenever challenged our default mode seems to be separating ourselves from one another and often demonizing our differences so that we can feel justified in our own way of being. It’s called self-righteousness. We end up thinking not only “Boy, are you different!” but that difference makes you bad or wrong or even evil! (Reminding me of an ancient Judaic prayer that men said upon rising – “Thank you, God, that I was not born a woman!”) But, before we begin to nod and distance ourselves from “people who do that”, let’s step back and own a few things about how we get there.

We can start with another metaphor of Paul’s. “And so, my brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food...even now you are not ready.” Okay, let’s agree that Paul sounds a bit patronizing. No one ever singled Paul out for his tact. But he is acknowledging something that we rarely acknowledge in the church. We think that we know what faith is and who God is, especially if we grew up in the church, but in fact, the things we say we know are really **only invitations** to explore deeper and wider. Spiritual growth is a **lifelong process**, perhaps extending even beyond this life, and it is in the process that we grow as human beings as we deepen into the being of God.

We begin with mother’s milk...something our young bodies and minds are ready to digest. In the faith community these are the guidelines and metaphors we can understand as children and beginners, something we can wrap our minds and hearts around. At the beginning of our journeys, we are given basics, rules and guidelines, to plant us, to ground us and keep us safe. The book of Deuteronomy teaches the Commandments which lead us toward

this secure and harmonious life. The **basics**: Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not covet the things of your neighbors. Honor your father and mother. You get the idea. It is like telling the two year old **thou shalt not touch** the hot stove without going into the thermodynamics of it all. The young need milk. Or to use another of Paul's metaphors, here is the planting in solid soil, the giving of a sturdy foundation from which to sprout.

Now, just as there is a time to live and a time to die, there is a time to be nurtured and held by the basics and a time to burst beyond them. To find that God is more than a great rule-maker in the sky, to become, as Paul would say, a "spiritual people" ready for solid food. Much of the deservedly bad rap that church gets is when we mistake the early foundation for the whole, the rules for mature spirituality, and get stuck drinking only milk our whole lives. What was once healthy begins to stunt our spirits and we become small and constricted in heart. Never mind the clogged arteries! Our churches become little lifestyle enclaves where we all are meant to think and act alike, rather than organic farms with life sprouting up all over the place!

So what does it mean to be a spiritual people? Essentially, it means to grow beyond that default mode of dividing and distancing, beyond our penchant to separate and categorize, certainly beyond our wont to demonize and see difference as evil. No, there was a reason we developed that capacity. As infants we cannot distinguish the difference between ourselves and our surroundings. As far as we know, we and our mothers' breast are one. As we develop, we begin a process of separating out – this is me, this is not me. It serves our growth, our sense of self, our developing brains. But there comes a time when it no longer serves either our lives or the life of the world, and we need to embrace a larger mind, a deeper heart, a spiritual truth, where we cannot only imagine, but experience the **oneness of all creation**.

When Jesus was asked in Matthew which commandment in the law is the greatest, you know his response. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It is **love** that brings us into this larger mind, where we do not default to difference, but find ourselves deeply connected. It is love that moves us into this deeper heart in which we experience our neighbor as ourselves. **Not** just "like" ourselves but **as** ourselves...we are one. It is through love that we know the earth as our mother, and our God as the great open heart who creates, embraces, and nurtures the whole.

And **this** is why we baptize into faith community. Because this journey from mother's milk to solid food is one we must take together. There is no such thing as a completely individual journey into love. It is only in the bumps and strains, the laughter and tears, the challenges of being in relationship with one another, that we find our spirits challenged and our hearts stretching – stretching wide enough to find ourselves beloved among the beloveds.

I have often been asked. Why do we need the church? The people can sometimes drive you crazy! Well, my dear friends, at that moment something is being asked of you. You are being asked to stretch a little further, grow a little deeper, in awareness, in insight, in patience, in trust, in **love**. Why would you

choose to do that? The truth is – the wider we stretch for one another, the more we will find all the parts of ourselves at home!

And in this home, **together** we teach the rules of harmony. **Together** we sometimes break them and learn reconciliation and forgiveness. **Together** we break **through them and grow in wisdom and understanding**. Together we plant, water, and grow, while the love of God rains down and springs up within us. The community of faith, the church, is a spiritual discipline that teaches love. May we at First Church stay open to its lessons as we grow into the deeper and deeper into the heart of God where all of us are one. Amen.