

1Corinthians 3:10-23

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. 14 If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. 15 If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

18 Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written,

“He catches the wise in their craftiness,”

20 and again,

“The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise,
that they are futile.”

21 So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, 23 and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

FIRM FOUNDATION

I've always admired people who build things. Whether it is an heirloom piece of furniture or a large building, there is something satisfying about creating something that will last a long time.

And we are fortunate enough to have people in our own congregation who design and create things. Among other creative folk we have engineers, architects, master carpenters, handymen, and woodworkers.

What is the most important part of any building project? All good builders have the same answer. It is the foundation.

I asked an architect in one of our Bible studies this question, and he said that in Florida before any building project begins he orders a core sample that goes

down several feet. Experts in the lab examine the sample. They want to be sure that particular piece of land is suitable for building.

You might not believe this, but some pieces of land in Florida are not suitable for building! It reminds me of an expert of another sort who said that we should build our house on the rock instead of the sand.

Master builders know. The importance of the foundation cannot be overemphasized.

And of course the trouble with a bad foundation is that you don't know there's a problem until the time of testing comes.

Perhaps that sinkhole opens up and swallows your beautiful home.

Perhaps a hurricane blows through and you learn that the shingles on your house were attached with staples instead of nails.

Then it's too late. You might escape with your life, but your home will be ruined.

THE CHURCH'S ONE FOUNDATION

Paul is telling the Corinthians that the same thing is true when it comes to building a church. Jesus is the foundation, the only foundation. You're building in the wrong place if you build anywhere else.

Now certainly most Christians would agree with that. It's like affirming motherhood, apple pie and the American way of life. Sure, Jesus is the foundation. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ the Lord. We sing it all the time. Right?

But, what we sing and what we practice are often two different things. A church is always in danger of adopting the values of the culture instead of the values of the gospel. Sometimes our mistakes are easy to recognize. But, sometimes our mistakes are subtle.

Using religious language we justify almost anything. The church can become nothing more than a tool for promoting our own desires and need to win at all costs.

That's what happened at Corinth. The church was becoming competitive. Some said I follow Paul. Some said I follow Apollos. Some said I follow Peter. They bragged about who had the most knowledge or the greatest spiritual gift.

I see this same spiritual imperialism in the church today. We want to boast about who has the tallest steeple or the purest doctrine. We turn faith into a competition when in reality true faith is about cooperation and mutual support.

THE TIME OF TESTING

We might not even notice that what we say and do are out of touch with the heart of the gospel. But, then the time of testing comes and cracks begin to appear in the wall.

That's what had happened in the Corinthian Church. Cracks were beginning to appear in their fellowship. In a time of testing divisions had developed over leadership, fellowship and worship style.

Why had this happened? Paul said that the root cause was a poor foundation. The Corinthians talked about Jesus, but they didn't make Jesus the measure of what they did and said.

We all know that there is still conflict in the church. We differ over politics. We fight about who is qualified to be a leader in the church. We quarrel about what color we should paint the fellowship hall.

The letter to the Corinthians is an ancient letter, but the conflict described in this letter seems very modern and familiar. Last week we said that the times may change but human nature doesn't change. We human beings are prone to conflict. The story of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel are also our stories.

But, there's more to it than that. I have observed that sometimes conflict in the church seems to take on a life of its own. Anxiety and cynicism run rampant.

And usually the trigger for such conflict is a time of testing.

Perhaps there is a new minister who doesn't connect with the people. Maybe there's a down turn in the economy that leads to a budget crisis. Sometimes a church begins to lose members at an alarming rate.

Many of you have been through trials such as this. I know that some of you still bear the scars of church conflict and dissension.

But, these tests are minor compared to what other Christians have faced and continue to face around the world. Think about those churches that face political and religious persecution. Think about Christians in lands where it is illegal to be a Christian and proclaim the faith.

REBUILDING AFTER THE STORM

You would think that the churches that face such severe pressure would be even more conflicted. But, sometimes just the opposite is the case. Ironically, in some cases the more Christianity is persecuted the more it flourishes.

There was a saying in the early church. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. In other words, the more the Romans persecuted the early Christian community the stronger they grew.

You see when you might have to die for your faith you take it more seriously. You make sure that your faith stands on a firm foundation.

That's why we have the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed in our Book of Confessions. Early on the church had to decide what was foundational for the faith. It wasn't just a matter of preference. It was a matter of life and death.

And so when there is conflict in the church over what seems like petty matters, it might be good for us to ask a more basic question.

What is really important in our lives? Have we built our church upon the foundation of Jesus, what he taught and what he did? Or have we built our church upon something else?

In my opinion, conflict in the church can be an opportunity as well as a problem. Anxiety and uncertainty can cause us to question our smug, pat answers and look at what we really believe as opposed to what we say we believe.

No don't misunderstand. It's not that people deliberately deceive themselves and others when it comes to faith.

It's just that over time, little by little we make compromises with the world. We put ultimate trust in things that do not have ultimate value. Idolatry creeps into our life "on little cat's feet" (like the fog of Carl Sandburg's famous poem)!

And one day when the storms of life bear down upon us we find that the walls are cracking, and we are not the strong Christians that we thought we were.

Storms, as many of us in Central Florida know, can be quite damaging. I still cringe when hurricane season approaches.

The flaws in our own church building became quite apparent when the storm hit. But, sometimes I look at the new roof and the refinished rooms and think,

“You know, in some ways the storm did us a favor. It made our church building stronger. It made us take care of some things that we had been neglecting.”

In the same way when the church faces great difficulty it can be an opportunity to really listen to what God in Christ is telling us. It is an opportunity to rebuild the church upon the one true foundation and get rid of all those things that have been weighing us down.

A CHURCH THAT IS FALLING DOWN

We’ve noted that Paul was pretty harsh with the Corinthians. He told them that they were acting like children and needed to grow up. They thought that they were wise, but in fact they were quite foolish.

In chapter after chapter of his letter the Apostle details all of the things that they were doing wrong. Those foolish Corinthians never seemed to get it right. What hope did they have? How could such a fracture church in such a hostile world make it?

It reminds me of something that William Willimon wrote in his preaching magazine, Pulpit Resource. Willimon not too long ago gave up the ivory of towers of Duke University to take on a new role as a bishop in the United Methodist Church in Alabama.

Things don’t seem to be going so well. Willimon wrote,

“I am a member of a church that has been in danger of falling down lately. Perhaps you have heard. There are charges of sex abuse by the clergy. One was sent to jail for stealing money that he was supposed to be protecting... Our problems are nothing new.

I was talking with a Lutheran bishop some time ago. The man seemed depressed to me. I asked him how he liked being a bishop and he said like is not the right word to use...

He said it wasn’t the hard work.

It was that as a bishop, he had a front row seat on everything that was wrong with the church. He spent too little time talking to clergy who were productive, faithful, and engaging, and too much time talking to clergy who were unfaithful, difficult, and depressed.”

I know what Willimon means. My new job at Presbytery often gives me a better view of what is wrong with the church than what is right with the church.

But, I think Willimon and his Lutheran friend make a mistake in categorizing clergy into those that are faithful and those that are unfaithful. It's a mistake that we often make not only when it comes to clergy but also when it comes to everyone in the church.

SAINTS UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Even though the Corinthian Church was about as dysfunctional as a church could get, Paul does not think that they are beyond reach.

He refers to Corinthians as those who were called to be saints and are sanctified in Christ Jesus. (1 Corinthians 1:2-9) Paul says that these Corinthians had been given every spiritual gift.

Remember saints are not perfect people. Saints are holy. And holy means those who have been chosen by God for special service.

And as we've already read in Paul's letter this sometimes means that God chooses the foolish and broken people of the world to make this point; the power of the gospel lies in the message and not in the people who proclaim the message.

Sometimes when we use the wrong material to build the church, when we head in the wrong direction, it's necessary for God to tear us down so that God can build us up the right way.

There's a TV show that I love to watch. It's about a very good contractor in Canada, a man by the name of Mike Holmes. Mike has enough experience in home building to almost immediately see the flaws in any home.

The show is about Mike going into a home, finding a slew of really bad deficiencies and then getting his crew to fix everything.

But, there's a catch. In order to discover what is wrong and fix everything, Mike and his crew have to tear everything apart first.

You should see the look of dismay on the part of the homeowners when their house is almost totally disassembled in order to build it back the right way. But, it's necessary. In order to have a sound house, some big, basic problems need to be fixed.

The same is often true in the church.

The Bible tells us that God disciplines those that he loves and has chosen. But, like a good father God does not do this to harm us. God does this to save us.

YOU ARE GOD'S TEMPLE

Notice how Paul refers to these obstinate Corinthians in verses 16 and 17. Paul asks, "Don't you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ... God's temple is holy and you are that temple."

It's almost like a mother telling her recalcitrant child, "You know better than that. You've been raised better than that. You are somebody important. Act like it."

I've noticed that whenever a church (or any organization for that matter) is conflicted there is one common denominator. People feel bad about who they are and what they have done.

Like the Apostle we need to find a way to say to a church that is falling apart,

"Don't you know that you are God's temple? Don't you know that you are important to God? Don't you know that you are holy, that you have been chosen by God for special service?"

From time to time all of us get frustrated with each other. We stray from the basics of the faith and try to make the church into something that its not really designed to be. And we forget that we are God's temple. We forget that there is something holy about us.

When we forget that we are God's temple then we often become destructive in our relationships with others. We do not have the deep respect and patience that is necessary to be who we are called to be, the Body of Christ. We may even find ourselves fighting against the purposes of God. (3:16-17)

It can be a bit overwhelming when a struggling church first realizes how far it has strayed from the foundation of the faith. Sometimes we get so discouraged that we quit trying. We are paralyzed by our fears and failure.

We must learn to have faith that we can rebuild. God can take the broken and misguided places in our life and fix them.

It won't happen all at once. We didn't get where we are in a day, and everything won't be fixed in a day. But, each new day is an opportunity to be faithful, an opportunity to respond to the call of the gospel instead of the call of our own desires.

OUR ANSWER TO THE WORLD

Carl Jung, a famous psychiatrist once wrote, "I myself am a question that is addressed to the world, and I must communicate my answer for otherwise I am dependent upon the world's answer."

As disciples of Jesus Christ it is up to us to communicate Christ's answer instead of the world's answer. It is up to us to make his promises a guide for our life together. Otherwise, the world's answer will automatically become our own.

Several years ago our church took up a collection so that a church in Malawi could buy a roof for their church. In Malawi they were able to build most of their church out of native bricks that were readily available. But, the metal roof had to be imported and was very expensive.

Ruth Welch, the missionary came and told us a story. It was about a little preaching point in that country that soon became a strong church of 250. They built a little church out of brick, but they couldn't afford a proper roof.

And since they didn't have a roof to tie everything together, the building collapsed when the stormy season came.

Ruth said, "Their building was weak. But, their church was strong. The people had the faith to continue despite the setback. They rebuilt the walls that had fallen."

I wrote in a sermon,

"I believe that we need each other.

We need to have the walls of our faith rebuilt by taking our cue from the courage and dedication of these Christians in Malawi. We need to practice our faith by supplying what they lack so they might construct their own worship center.

And working together the Lord's house will be built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ and the faithful work of his saints."

I am happy to report that our little church raised the \$4,000 needed to purchase that roof. But, more was built than just a sanctuary in a Malawi. We learned what it meant to be the people of God, a holy temple designed to spread the gospel far and wide.

In the coming days you will get some more opportunities to build up the church. At the end of February we will take up a collection for Heifer International. Last

year we raised over \$3,000 dollars. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could top that this year?

And then at Easter we will take up our One Great Hour of Sharing offering. You were also very generous in your offering to this cause last year.

Let's do it again.

Let's affirm that we are one holy temple to the glory of God. Let us share who we are and what we have to build that temple on the foundation of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen.