

1 Corinthian 3.1-9

“Together We Are Strong”

***“For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field,
God’s building.”***

In our bible study this week, one of the versions we read from translated the words; “God’s field and God’s building,” as “God’s garden.” I like that as a metaphor. The church is not a building, or a set of programs, but a garden that provides new life to the world.

This passage reminds us that this adventure we are on as St. Paul’s Church is not all about us. As a faith community, we are in this business together with each other; past, present and future, and with God. Remembering that it is not all about us can be liberating. We don’t need to try and figure it all out by ourselves. The future of the church is not about our creativity or even our hard work. It is about learning how to work with God to create the garden that God is already working on. This frees us from worrying about doing church and allows

us to be the church. This is an important reminder. Coming to church needs be something that brings us joy, not something more we have to do.

My first full time gig as a minister after I graduated from seminary in 1988 was First United Methodist Church in Madera, California. I was hired as the Assistant Minister. My primary responsibilities were youth, Christian education and church growth. They had taken a bit of a risk by hiring a second full time minister. Part of my job was to find ways to grow the church so that they could pay for my salary.

At every board meeting they obsessed about how they were going to pay my next month's salary. As a young, idealistic, recent seminary grad full of ideas about what the church could do in the world this was discouraging. I really did not want it to all be about money.

I eventually did help lead that church through a church growth program. It was successful enough to get me promoted by the Bishop to my own parish a couple of years later. At the time, we believed that

if we just tweaked a few things a church would grow. Update the nursery, a fresh coat of paint on the fellowship hall, pave the parking lot and have a well funded youth program and growth was guaranteed. In those days, I don't think any of us could have predicted the kind of decline that the church in North America was about to experience.

In the 29 years since my graduation, I have served seven pastoral charges as a minister, and I have been a member of five other churches as a lay person. One of constants among all those churches was decline, declining revenue, declining people resources, declining influence and declining relevance. Had I known that decline was going to be a prominent theme throughout my ministry I might have considered a different profession. Perhaps as an undertaker.

When I started this journey, I was equipped for an ever-growing church. The church was going to change the world. My seminary education did not prepare me to deal with decline. Even my last kick at seminary in 2005 at Vancouver School of Theology did not offer me any

courses on managing decline, or evangelism which is the one way that Jesus suggested to grow a church. Vancouver School of Theology seemed almost oblivious to the huge elephant in the room, even as their own institution was hovering on the edge of irrelevancy and extinction. In the year that I was there, despite a major redevelopment program that created millions of dollars, they still had to let go two thirds of the staff and facility. Two years ago, they were forced to sell their building to the University of British Columbia and move into a much smaller facility.

Over the years, I have taken many different courses on how to deal with decline and how to resurrect the church. All of them have been interesting and even helpful. The most recent one was with John Pentland in April last year. Despite all those courses and all my fretting about the future of the church, I have not been able to stop the decline in any one of the churches I have served. I find this quite depressing. I do not want to be the one who turns out the lights for the last time. I

have also occasionally wondered whether it is my leadership style that is to blame. Maybe, if I worked a little harder, or I was a little more intelligent, or a better leader, then the church would be great again. Maybe, I would be able to stop the decline. I find Paul's reminder that it isn't all about me helpful. His reminder that the future of the Church is in God's hands, not mine, thank, be to God!

I have learned though all this that if we focus on decline and just surviving than our fears will overwhelm us and our demise will be inevitable. When we focus on just trying to keep doing what we have always done then smell of desperation and death gets stuck in our clothes and nobody wants to be around us. On the other hand, if we focus on God and God's abundance we will find new life. This attitude of positivity and openness is attractive, like a breath of fresh air and people are drawn into the community. We might not stem the decline, but we will find new hope and new direction. We will begin to dream again and find our way forward.

One of my favourite books on this subject is titled; Dying Church, Living God: A Call to Begin Again. It is written by Chuck Meyer. Meyer suggests that the way we have been doing church is dying and probably needs to die. It has served its purpose and it is time to move on. The church has been redefining itself throughout its history. He goes on to argue that God is still very much alive and doing new things in our world. Meyer calls us to let go of trying to save the church and become open to what new things God is doing all around us.

This week I learned about a new program called Blessings in a Backpack. It is a group of people concerned about kids having enough food for the weekend. Most schools in low income areas have a free breakfast program during the school week so that they get at least one more meal a day. But what about those same kids on the weekend. So, they get donations, put them in backpacks and give them to children on Friday to take home for the weekend. I think it is a brilliant idea. It is not sponsored by any religious organization that I am aware

of, and yet I see God's love flowing through it. Where else is God at work in our community? Grace Place? Shelter House? The Urban Abbey?

Paul challenges the people of Corinth to let go of trying to hold on to the past. He reminds the people of Corinth that it isn't all about them, or even him. What he did in Corinth was good. He planted. What Apollos did was also good. He watered. But, it was God who ultimately gave the growth.

Paul comes to us today to reminds us that it isn't all about us. It isn't about our creativity and our hard work. Those are important, but being the church is about working together with each other and with God to create the garden that God is already growing. As we continue this Annual General Meeting, let us trust that God will continue to work in us and through us as God has done in this place for over 145 years. Let us commit ourselves to being open to embracing the new adventure that God is already doing in our world. We are gardeners

and field workers labouring with God. You are the vineyard, the garden,
the house where God dwells.” **Amen.**