

Growing Up in Faith

1 Corinthians 3: 1-23

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

January 31, 2010

Paul's frustration shows through in his letter to the Corinthians: "You are mere infants in Christ". I have to "dumb-down" everything I say to you Corinthians; you understand nothing; what am I going to do with you?

Actually, Paul shouldn't have been surprised. Corinth is a city in Greece, and the Corinthian church would have been made up primarily of Greeks: pagan Gentiles who knew nothing of the Old Testament. Paul is a devout Jew and a Pharisee. We know from his writings that he quoted scripture all the time; in the first two chapters of this letter to the Corinthians for instance he quotes Isaiah three times and Jeremiah once. And this to an audience of pagans who have never heard these quotes before for the simple reason that they had never been exposed to the Hebrew scriptures.

Paul would feel at home in the church of our day. We live our lives in a thoroughly secular society, a society of pagans is what Paul would have called it. Hardly anyone one is exposed to scripture outside of church anymore, and hardly anyone goes to church. Those of us in church leadership often become frustrated just as Paul did, but we shouldn't be surprised either. The modern world does have some advantages over the ancient world of Paul and his Corinthians though: for example, church leaders in our day can assume that everyone in North American society can read and write at some level. That wasn't true in ancient times. Also, modern people have libraries where reading material is readily available to everyone, and book stores where affluent people can buy their own copies of books if they want to do that. We have museums that mount wonderful exhibits like the one on Darwin last year or the one on the Dead Sea Scrolls that has just ended. So yes, our churches are filled with people who are still biblical children, but the tools to help us all grow in faith are readily available if we want to use them. So that is a help and an advantage we have over those who lives in Paul's day.

Here at Glebe Road everyone is very shortly going to have a chance to use these tools. Beginning in February, Cynthia O'Connell and I will begin a 12-part series on Marcus Borg's wonderful book, *The Heart of Christianity*, where anyone who wants to can join in and learn more about our faith from one of the best biblical scholars of our day. I urge all of you to get the book, read along and come out for the discussion. We won't try to indoctrinate you into our version of the faith or even Borg's version of the faith. If we did that you would remain children, still unable to digest solid food. The objective of this exercise is to help you mature in your own faith, to grow into spiritually independently adults. Later on in this letter to the Corinthians Paul would observe that "when he was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put an end to childish things (13:11). We all need to grow into a more mature faith, and one of the ways we can do that is by coming together and talking about books like Borg's *"The Heart of Christianity"*.

When we were children we depended on the adults in our lives to provide us with all the necessities of life, and too often the authoritative and patriarchal church has tried to take on the role of adult, keeping their congregations in their child-like state. When I was in theological school I had a talk with a man who had gone to church all his life but who had never been encouraged to read the Bible for himself. “We were taught that reading the Bible was the job of the church leadership. Our job was to come to church every Sunday and do what we were told.” That approach might have worked a few generations back, but it doesn’t work anymore. Even the most religious of us don’t accept the role of “Mother Church” as it used to be called. There is a yearning among the people, especially the young, to “put away our childish things”, to grow in faith, to become adults, to think for ourselves and to own their own beliefs. In most cases the church has been slow to recognize this, and our antiquated teachings have been routinely rejected by young and old alike. The new approach to Christian Education is that we are all children, and we all need to room to grow in faith. So the style of our discussion groups is less like a lecture and more like an exchange of information and experience. Some of you may have experienced Wonder Café.com, the United Church’s experiment with on-line religious discussion groups. It’s been a great success; thousands of discussion groups have been organized by ordinary people, some with no connection to any church. There is a great hunger in society for spiritual wisdom, a great desire to grow up in faith, to become adults, to be able to digest solid spiritual food.

At Glebe Road we have often tried to adopt this new interactive approach as we seek to grow in faith together, but up to now, our success has been limited because of a lack of commitment. For most people in our secular world, church has a very low priority, and very few people are willing to spend the time and effort required to develop a mature faith of their own, As a result of the busyness of our lives, even church attenders remain like the children that Paul experienced in Corinth. When we make it to church we come preoccupied with the pressures of the week just past or the week that lies before us. When I first came to Glebe Road I published the scriptures for the following week in the bulletin so that you could read the passages in advance and come to church with some idea of where the sermon would be heading. But no one seemed to notice and I soon dropped the idea. If anyone is interested, the scriptures for the whole month are now being published in Life@Glebe on our web site so that they are available again, but we all lead busy lives, priorities are set and some things just fall off the table.

For years it seems most of us have come to church content to play the role of children, dependent on someone else to keep the church alive both spiritually and financially. And in the style of “mother church” the elders of a previous day did their best to look after their flocks so we could remain children. When we sold the manse in 1996, we gave the money away to the larger United Church to let them invest for us and every quarter the larger church sent us a cheque – our allowance if you like, to pay the minister’s housing allowance. Some of you remember Mrs. Taylor; when she died, she left us \$100,000 in memory of her husband, which was added to over the years by surplus givings. The Trustees used to invest that money themselves but a few years ago they turned these funds over to professionals and every year a few thousand dollars made its way to our bottom line. These gifts from the past have allowed us to remain dependent children. Church didn’t take much of our time and we liked it that way. No one really bothered with stewardship campaigns or fund raising. It’s gotten so bad that one-third of the tax receipts issued this year were for amounts of \$100 or less – about \$1.50 after taxes, pocket change for most of us. And why not? We showed up when it suited us, tossed a few dollars into the plate, confident

that the work of past generations would carry us through. And they did carry us through, until last year. The effects of the stock market crash came as a bit of a shock . Our investments lost value instead of continually making a profit. The people who invested our money from the sale of the manse let us know that we shouldn't expect the usual cheques from them this year because they were cutting our allowance by two-thirds. It was a painful wake-up call. That's the bad news, and you have heard me go on about it before.

The good news in all of this however, is that we are now awake, and we are growing up fast, putting away our childish things. The Trustees are starting to ask questions. Adult questions. And that's a good thing. Come to our Annual General Meeting on February 28 and find out more. It's a grown-up thing to do.

The times also seem to be changing this year on the spiritual side as more and more of us begin to ask questions about our faith and about the church. We have many newcomers in our midst who are leading the way. They are here because they are interested in their faith. Many are new to the United Church and they are asking some grown-up questions that make us all think about our community here and how we might be able to make it better. Is anyone interested in working on a Habitat for Humanity project? Talk to me after church or send me an e-mail. Are you intrigued with *The Heart of Christianity* project. Take a look at this Borg book that some of us will be reading for the next 12 weeks, and think about joining us.

Matters of faith and matters of money go together of course. Jesus certainly talked about both, and the church needs both to survive. So, ideally, as interest in one grows so should interest grow in the other. If you are interested in things of the Spirit and find others in this community of faith with whom you are able to discuss your spiritual growth, then the community of faith will become a priority for you, and if the community needs money to keep the doors open you will be more likely to respond as you are able. By the same token, if you are become aware of our financial issues, it is natural to ask, "Why is it important to spend money on this place?", and that will take you to the spiritual aspects of what we do here.

Even in our post-modern era we continue to follow in the footsteps of Paul. The foundations of the Church are laid by Christ as they always have. We are here to encourage the seed with water and care. May God give each of us the gifts of energy and wisdom that we will need to do this work.

Amen