

February 26

The Firm Foundation

I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Paul, in writing to the congregation in Corinth, was writing to a church in crisis. They were being pulled in several different directions by various leaders. They had many questions about various topics. Paul attempts to answer them and to help them grow in faith. From this letter we get an early discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit, how the gift of love is the most important of all the gifts, as well as Paul's understanding of death and eternal life for those of faith. Today's scripture is early in the letter where Paul is setting up an argument for all that is to follow. He lets them know that his teachings about Jesus Christ were the solid foundation. Now others are building upon it; some doing a good job as far as Paul is concerned and others not so well. He challenges some of the so called wisdom of the day that seems to contradict what he initially said. He reminds them that even if his message seems foolish it is the wisdom of God. He further reminds them that each individual is part of God's holy temple so that we need to continue to build our lives on the firm foundation of Christ. We should not get too caught up in what any one leader might say, especially if it seems to move us away from that solid base. He ends this part of his letter with the rousing affirmation that you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

Now, what does this mean, in practical terms for us today? Here is what I see this passage telling me. All of us live with certain norms and values defining our lives. Within our family we have certain rules, like we don't talk politics. With friends we have certain agreements, like we don't order wine with dinner when we go out with...because she is in recovery. Every church has their own set of norms. There are many reasons we are different from Lutherans, Episcopalians or Baptist and they are not just theological. There are reasons we do church differently here than some other United Methodist Churches. When you first came to Sequim and went church shopping only in part was theology driving that search. You attended churches to figure out what were their values and emphasis to see if it fit with your faith experiences. And these boxes of norms and values keep expanding outward. The Sequim community has its own identity different from other communities around us. The State of Washington has its own. And

on and on. All of these norms and values can be collectively called the wisdom of this world.

What we need to understand is that there are many forces asking us to build our lives in certain ways, ways that families, groups and society have stated to be meaningful and purposeful. The world uses very powerful tools to keep their structures in place. Let me share three that I see at work in people's lives.

Conformity. We want to fit in. If it is a group we self-selected, we initially chose to be with those people because we liked them and were comfortable with them. There is strong internal pressure to not rock the boat now. If it is a group, like a family that we have to be a part of, the pressure to behave and not cause ripples is also massive. Conformity stifles creativity and change. It is very good at keeping norms constant.

Fear is the second tool that keeps norms stagnant. When we think about doing something different we become fearful. What will others we care about think? Will this cause me to get into trouble? Will I be excluded from the group? Or to use Paul's terms, "Will I look foolish?" When we choose to do something different from the wisdom of the world, the fear and its resulting friend - shame of appearing foolish - is powerfully used to get us back into line.

A woman writes about how she had been working with her daughter, age 12, to feel free to express herself. Mom needed to run an errand at the mall. It was one of those crazy mornings when showers hadn't happened. She said, "I pulled on some sweats, pulled my dirty hair into a ponytail and with daughter ran off to do the errand. As we got to the mall my daughter reminded me that she needed new shoes for gym. As we came up the escalator to the shoe department I saw two women, impeccably dressed with their two daughters just a bit older than my daughter similarly attired, trying on shoes. One look at me from the moms told me I did not measure up. I was feeling guilty when out of the corner of my eye I saw my daughter begin to dance to the music being played over the store speakers. Not only was she dancing she was doing the robot. I saw the mothers frown and saw their daughters were about to say something." Her daughter looked at her and said, "Mom, did I do anything wrong?" At that moment it

would have been easy to give into the fear and shame. Instead the mom said, “Yes, you forgot this move and started dancing the robot with her!” She opted to be foolish by the world’s standards. By the time the song ended the other mothers and daughters had left the shoe department.

Finally, the world uses doubt to keep us in line. Even when we try to move beyond a norm and we get past the fear and feelings of shame often we rethink it. We see the breaks in our routine, in our connections and we doubt whether or not we did the right thing. Then we turn around and go back to what was comfortable and easy. We let the wisdom of the world dictate our lives.

Think for just a moment about the people Paul was writing to. They had already moved out of conformity. To be a Christian meant you had to set aside long patterns of believing and belonging. They had to have conquered their fears and doubts. They knew how to build on the foundation of Christ. Now they were dealing with an even more challenging problem. It was not about a radical break with the past where all was new, but within this new community, figuring out what to do, what to believe and whom to follow. All of these worldly tools were at stake. If you don’t believe the way I do you might not be a part of us, you will be seen to be foolish and so they doubted.

Paul said, “Forget about what everyone is saying and get back to the basics. Remember what I first shared with you and then use the tools of God to build your life. You are part of God’s temple. You belong to God.

What are the tools of Christ? The first of these is that you are unique and wonderfully made. I recall the poster that was out a few years ago that has a slightly disheveled kid with the words, “God doesn’t make junk!” Instead of conformity, Christ wants you to appreciate who you are. If your uniqueness is not valued, it is their problem not yours. Remember, all these first Christians had to step out of conformity. They had to be unique, different. Unfortunately, we no more than embrace our uniqueness and find a new group when that groups demands conformity. This was part of what was happening with the Corinthian church. To see if the new call to conformity is helpful in keeping us on the right path and allowing us to grow, we need to move on

to the next tool. That is the tool of love. Where the world uses shame, guilt and fear to keep us in line Christ tells us we are loved. Love embraces our uniqueness. Love causes us to celebrate the uniqueness of others. Love moves beyond fear to giving us the freedom to risk, to try new things and to grow. Yes, there are foundations, Paul was clear about that, but also room for growth.

Finally, when we embrace who we are as God made us, know we are loved, we are then convinced that we are on the right path. We know we belong to God. Conviction, as long as it doesn't become mean spirited towards those who disagree with us, is the glue that holds our building of faith together. It allows us to weather the storms of life and keeps us centered in God.

In closing I want to share a story. It is similar to what happens in many churches. The churches of town decided to work with the city on providing cold weather shelter when the temperatures got extreme. One church stepped up immediately but were soon overwhelmed by the number wanting shelter. It was decided that a second shelter was needed, for women and children while the other would be for the men. I recall the Ad Council meeting where one of our members came asking that we consider being the women's shelter site. You should have seen the eye rolling. They knew Cindy had a big heart but she was always a little short on specifics, such as what would it entail, what would it cost, who would run it and so forth. Yet, Cindy was such a bright spark that no one could just shoot her down. She was willing to think outside the box and because the church loved her they supported her, at least a bit. What the council did was form a committee to study it. We all know this is often the way a church uses to kill programs they don't want but are too kind to say so. Cindy, I believe guided by the Spirit, didn't hear "study it" but instead "form a committee to do it." She recruited a couple of people who would manage the space when it was opened, found out about the funding, got people to volunteer to spend the night and recruited a whole group of people to provide food, if needed. And, because God has a sense of humor, a cold snap happened just a week or so later, before there was another Ad Council. Cindy calls up and says, "It is cold tonight, I have told the team to get ready. We can open, can't we?" There was a need, help was available, I said "Sure" knowing what the next Council meeting was

going to be like. We were open not one night but for an entire week. I went with dread to the next council meeting and to my surprise everyone there was talking about how awesome it was that our church stepped up to help. When it came time to approve being a shelter site, instead of contention, we heard stories of transformation. Uniqueness, love and conviction built on the foundation of Christ led to new programs, growth and change.

So, remember the world's wisdom will try to get you to conform using guilt, fear, and doubt to keep you in line. God reminds you that you are unique and loved and invites you to risk, to grow and to be transformed. Change is always hard but in Christ we find the tools to build a strong house that will survive the storms of life because we have built it on the foundation of Christ, using the tools he calls us to use.