

## **“Separating or Sowing?”**

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

YOUTH SUNDAY SERMON 2011 ~ 9<sup>TH</sup> GRADE G.I.F.T. CLASS ~ 2/13/11

*(ANNEKA, MADELINE and SEAN are seated by the lectern; GRIFFIN, JACOB and CHARLIE are seated by the pulpit; GORDON is at the pulpit; IAN, BEN, SOPHIE, MARTHA are in the back of the sanctuary.)*

GORDON:

### **Corinthians 3:1-9**

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup>I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, <sup>3</sup>for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? <sup>4</sup>For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?

<sup>5</sup>What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup>I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup>So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. <sup>8</sup>The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. <sup>9</sup>For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.

So – the Apostle Paul writing to the early church 2000 years ago – writing to the city of Corinth, part of the Roman Empire, and in this very new, very small church, Paul is dealing with a conflict in the church. It’s an argument about who likes Paul best as a leader or who likes some guy named Apollos better. Is this something that you care about? Or for the purposes of this day, when a group of 9<sup>th</sup> graders living in Holland, Michigan reads this passage, do they care? Well, the short answer is no! Reading the Apostle Paul can be challenging enough for many biblical scholars, let alone for a typical teenager, so it’s not surprising that our 9<sup>th</sup> graders, bright as they are, did not initially make a lot of sense of or feel a lot of connection to this

passage that we read from Corinthians. But we got there, got to the point of making some sense of and connection to Paul and Apollos and Corinthians, and what we share with you this morning will hopefully help you to see how and why.

Let me tell you something that our youth, something that these 9<sup>th</sup> graders do care about, something they wonder about: I hear from our youth all of the time, their questions and wondering and concern about what it means to be a Christian in a world where not everyone else is a Christian – in a world where there are different religions, where there are different ways of being a Christian; a world in which people don't practice any religion at all, and in which some people are quite opposed to religion.

ANNEKA: How do you know which religions are right and which ones are wrong?

*(goes to back of church)* (Gordon: "That's a good question!")

GRIFFIN: If Christianity is the right religion to get to heaven, then is everyone else going to...you know where? *(goes to back of church)*

(Gordon: "That's a good question!")

MADELINE: What about people who don't believe in God or aren't sure what to believe?

*(goes to back of church)* (Gordon: "That's a good question!")

JACOB: What about differences in Christianity? Are some churches right and others wrong? *(goes to back of church)* (Gordon: "That's a good question!")

SEAN: How do we know that what we believe is right? How can we be sure?

*(goes to back of church)* (Gordon: "That's a good question!")

CHARLIE: Does God love everyone, or just Christians? *(goes to back of church)* (Gordon: "That's a good question!")

*(Anneka & Madeline & Sophie at back of lectern aisle; Charlie & Griffin & Ben at back of center aisle; Sean & Jacob & Ian at end of pulpit aisle)*

GORDON: Those really are good questions! Perhaps those are things you wonder about too, perhaps some more than others. I appreciate that these young people are willing to share those questions with me, with us. Maybe those are things you wondered about when you were a 9<sup>th</sup> grader, maybe not. It seems to me that it has sometimes been the case in the past in the church that such questions were not encouraged...or even allowed! But you can't REALLY not allow such questions, the questions are still there, they're just kept quiet. So it's great that we can encourage our youth to ask such questions...but the problem is they're not only good questions, they are challenging questions! Am I supposed to have the answers to all of those questions? Do you? No wonder such questions were discouraged or not allowed! But one thing I have found in listening to such questions, is that I appreciate that these are not just theoretical questions from our youth; it's more serious, more urgent than that. Part of what our youth see is that religion in general, and perhaps Christianity in particular, doesn't have the best reputation. Maybe that is true for them, and it is certainly true in what they hear around them in the world, from friends – that religion is often seen as a negative thing rather than positive. Just ask our youth about some problems with religion, and they will give you a list very quickly:

ANNEKA: Religion has been the cause of so much violence, so many wars – and it still is today.

MADELINE: Religion is just a way of one group of people saying "we are better than you" or "God likes us more than you".

*(Anneka & Madeline & Sophie come down the lectern aisle with the black cloth and begin to unroll it and hold it up in the aisle)*

GORDON: And as religion is used that way, seen that way, you can start to see what happens...and there's more:

SEAN: Religion is something that tears people apart. It divides families and communities and nations.

JACOB: Religion is used to brainwash people and control what they do – there are cults that harm people and ruin their lives.

*(Sean & Jacob & Ian come down the pulpit aisle with the black cloth...)*

GORDON: And as religion is used that way, the division grows...and there's more:

GRIFFIN: Religion is used just to benefit a particular leader or group. It takes advantage of people just to make someone else more powerful.

CHARLIE: Religion can be used to put down others and tell them they aren't loved or important – it can lead to people hating others or even hating themselves.

*(Griffin & Charlie & Ben come down the center aisle with the black cloth...)*

GORDON: And the division grows...

Look what we have here – it's a picture of division – an image of religion gone wrong. I know there aren't any fights or violence breaking out between you'all...yet! But when we see how people are divided, you understand better how violence happens: divided into your own group – not able to see the others – not connected; that's how misunderstanding and superiority grows, and violence follows. And what this really brings us back to is...Corinthians! This is an image of what Paul describes as religion gone wrong: one group saying they are with Paul, and another with Apollos; and then there is division and resentment. It's just this one little situation, but it is exactly the kind of thing that grows into the big problems we see with religions: people divided from each other, and violence between people, in the name of religion.

It's a bleak image – a discouraging point of view that our youth can express. But it's not the whole story – these 9<sup>th</sup> graders are also very quick to list the good in religion. And it's remarkable that for every bad thing you can say about religion, you can see the opposite possibility for good as well.

The 9<sup>th</sup> graders can't use the mics right now! But these are the things they see as positive expressions of faith:

- \* faith in God helps us to help others; faith supports what is good in society
- \* religion can bring people together and make us more understanding and accepting
- \* faith in God supports people in difficult times and gives healing and hope
- \* faith in God gives you forgiveness that you need in your own life
- \* faith in God helps a person find a good way in life: gives guidance and purpose

\* religion can promote equality and peace

So, we have this bleak image of religion, but the same thing that divides can also be a source of good. Even this image could be seen as divisive, right? Using black as bad, dark as negative – but what if we turn this image into something else:

*(all lay the cloth down on the aisles)*

what if we see faith instead as dark rich soil...beautiful black earth that gives life...

*(9<sup>th</sup> graders come back to pulpit/lectern (Charlie, Griffin, Sean, Jacob first go to communion table where they will be ready to distribute 'seed cards') ~ 8<sup>th</sup> graders to back )*

This is the image from Corinthians! Paul says that instead of division, true faith in Jesus is about planting the good news of God's love; and God's uses the seeds we sow for good. Our job is to plant good seeds of faith, and God makes good things grow. Take a look in the front of your pew Bibles, you'll find a "Seeds of Faith" card. Take that out...you'll see words like Service, Forgiveness, Peacemaking, Love, Kindness...

*(We want everyone to have one – raise your hand if you need one – 9<sup>th</sup> graders pass out extra cards, then come to Pulpit/Lectern).*

This is what we are called to do to show what true religion is as followers of Jesus Christ – don't those look like strong seeds: sow those things in the field of life and God will make good things grow.

As you have your seeds, listen to what our youth say it looks like to believe in Jesus in a way that unites rather than divides:

**Anneka** – Being a Christian means that you believe in God, and follow Jesus' teachings. There will always be different ideas and interpretations, but what's important is that you use your faith for good. You need to follow through on your idea of living how a good Christian should. *(go to stand at communion table)*

**Griffin:** Being a Christian means that you care about the good of the world and that you try work harder to make it better. *(go to stand at communion table)*

**Madeline:** Being a Christian means putting faith in God even if everything seems to be going wrong in your life. You have to trust that God will guide you on the correct path for your future. It also means spreading God's love in any way you can: helping people by doing chores for them or cheering them up; doing a canned food drive; going green; anything to take care of other people and the earth - showing God's love. *(go to stand at communion table)*

**Jacob:** Being a Christian means respecting each person and looking to God for guidance about how to live each day – and in that way you can be a guide for others too. *(go to stand at communion table)*

**Sean:** Faith means finding ways to help others and be a positive force in society – making things better for others in the world. *(go to stand at communion table)*

**Charlie:** Faith is about those who have more caring about those who have less. It's about you becoming a better person so that you can do something with your life that helps others. *(go to stand at communion table)*

GORDON: Now when you hear that, doesn't it make you believe that following Jesus doesn't have to be about division? That we can instead plant seeds of faith in this rich soil of life and God will grow good things? We gave you seeds already, but we wanted to show just how beautiful the growth is too...do you see those flowers in your pews? – it's the beauty of what God can make of our seeds of faith! So take those flowers and throw them onto the soil..! It's our own bouquet of faith – it's so much more beautiful than the division we started with. The Apostle Paul says: "we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field". Learn that truth from our youth today. They care about the bad things religion does, and they care about the good things – together with them we can change separation into sowing, and live as followers of Jesus Christ who sow good seeds of faith for all of God's children. AMEN.  
*(all go to back of sanctuary to roll up cloth)*