

February 12, 2023 – Deuteronomy 30:15-20 & 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

I was in a fraternity in college. Now, that fact alone may bring all sorts of negative images to your mind. Parties and sex and drunkenness and such. That wasn't at all the case for us. Our fraternity was different.

Because it was a Christian fraternity. There was no alcohol at our parties. There was no sex in the fraternity house. We had plenty of fun as a brotherhood. But our unity was centered in our fellowship as Christians. And often our meetings were times of prayer and Bible study and service to our neighbor.

And that fact was even displayed in our name: Sigma Theta Epsilon. In addition to being our name, those three Greek letters are also the first three letters of 1 Corinthians 3:9 in the original Greek. And they stand for the Greek words “sunergoi theou esmen.” God's fellow workers. That was our goal as a fraternity. To be God's fellow workers. Just as Paul describes in our Epistle lesson today.

But to understand this concept of being God's fellow workers, you really need to take a step back and understand what Paul is talking about here. Because this issue between following Paul or Apollos extends over a good portion of this letter to the Corinthians. In fact, we've been reading about it in our Epistle lessons for the past three weeks.

So who is this Apollos guy? Well, he's actually a pretty important figure in the New Testament church. He was born in the city of Alexandria in Egypt to Jewish parents. He eventually found his way back to Palestine and was baptized initially by John the Baptist.

However, for whatever reason, he didn't stick around long enough to become a disciple of Jesus. Instead, he travelled to Ephesus and lived there for some time. Where he eventually met a Christian couple named Priscilla and Aquila. They told him about Christ and gave him a Christian baptism. At which point he almost immediately becomes an important leader in the church of Ephesus.

Eventually, he's sent to the church in Corinth, which Paul had previously planted, with a glowing recommendation that he become a pastor there. He works long and hard in Corinth. Has some amazing success. And Martin Luther suggests that he may have actually written the book of Hebrews. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't.

Regardless, he's an important figure in the early church. And the Lutheran liturgical calendar actually commemorates him tomorrow. So it's a good time to be talking about him anyway.

Apollos and Paul were both pastors of the church in Corinth. As Paul puts it, he planted the congregation, Apollos watered it. Under Paul, the congregation went from nothing to something. Under Apollos it went from a little congregation to a big congregation.

And as you might imagine, the members of that congregation have their opinions about who did more for the church of Corinth. They have their opinions about which pastor they liked better. They remember who it was who brought their family into the congregation and baptized them. Paul or Apollos.

And there's nothing particularly wrong with having those opinions and holding onto those memories, except that they begin to divide the congregation. And pretty soon, they're no longer considering themselves Christians anymore. They're Paulites and Apollians.

They're losing their focus. They're losing their message. They're losing the Gospel. And it's destroying their congregation.

And so Paul writes to them. And he chastises them. He has some pretty harsh words for them actually. And in this particular passage today, he calls them infants. Not just children. Infants. Squalling, whining, infants.

They think of themselves as this big strong church. Hugely successful. Packed to the brim with people. Ready to hear some deep, meaningful theology. Some meat and potatoes sermons. That will fill them up with the Spirit.

And Paul says, “No. You are children. You are infants. And this division among you, where you've split your congregation over which pastor you liked better? That's all the proof I need to tell you that you're only ready for milk. You need to go back to the basics.”

And so he takes them back to the basics. He takes them back to the sovereignty of God. He takes them back to the God who is Lord over all. Lord over heaven and earth. Lord over the church. Lord over Paul and Apollos. Lord over them and their petty jealousy and strife.

They think they're flattering Paul and Apollos by putting them up on a pedestal. But these two pastors are merely sinful men. They're nobody. They didn't do anything. And they both know it.

God handed Paul a seed and he dropped it on the ground. God handed Apollos water and he poured it on the dirt. A trained monkey can take the things given to him and throw them on the ground. Growth and life and fruitfulness come from God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And that growth had nothing to do with Paul or Apollos or the people of Corinth or any of us. God is sovereign. He provides it all. He gives the seeds. He gives the water. He makes it grow. He gives us life.

And until you realize that, you will always be a worker for yourself. You'll always be serving your own pride and jealousy and bitterness and sinfulness. Because you will have taken from God a piece of that sovereignty and given it to yourself. You will be no different than Adam and Eve standing in the Garden of Eden wanting to be like God. Wanting to have power and wisdom that isn't yours to have.

And that leads to division. Because the moment you decide you want to be like God, building your own church apart from him, you will set yourself up as your own little god. And you will expect everyone else to worship you. And to worship your opinions and your demands. If we're not *God's* fellow workers, then we're not fellow workers with each other either. And all of this falls apart.

It's really the same message that Moses had in our Old Testament Lesson. Love the Lord your God, walk in His ways, keep His commandments. And you shall live and multiply and the Lord will bless you. Turn your heart away from Him, refuse to listen, serve other gods – even yourself – and you will not survive.

Why? Will God strike you dead for your disobedience? No, he won't have to. The Old Testament spells that out for us. When the Israelites took their eyes off the Lord. When they served other gods. When they served themselves. They simply collapsed. Into civil war. Into corruption. Into famine and despair.

The Israelites were never conquered because the Lord was too weak. They were conquered because they themselves were too weak. Too divided. Too sinful. They took their eyes off the Lord, they trusted in themselves, and they were easy pickings.

Choose life and live. Choose death and die. Choose the God who went to the cross, died, rose again, and lives forever more. And you too will live. Choose your own frail flesh. With its sinful thoughts and sinful actions and sinful words, that lead only to death. And you too will die.

It's a simple formula. It's one that the church of Corinth apparently took to heart. Because in Paul's second letter to them, he tells them that he boasts to the churches of Macedonia about what the Corinthians have become. Through correction and exhortation and the Spirit working among them, they became God's fellow workers once again.

Through correction and exhortation and the Spirit working among us, we will always be God's fellow workers. United not by me or any other pastor or any other person or any other work of man. But by the one Lord and Savior of us all. Who gave his life and rose again that in every decision of this church, we might choose life and live. Amen.