

Back to Reality - 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 – August 16, 2009

Again I hate to be the bearer of bad news but summer break is pretty much over – at least for our children, youth and college students and their families. But even for those of you without children at home, life does seem to take on a different pattern and pace from Labor Day to Memorial Day from than that of June, July and August.

I hope and pray it has been an enjoyable and maybe even a restful summer for all of you and that you are ready to move into the coming school year with enthusiasm and energy – both at home, at work, at school and of course at church. I guess the bottom line is that not only is it back to school time - it is also back to reality as well. Just like for all the students of our church, vacation is over and it is time to get back to discerning and following God's vision and will for our lives and our church. Why? - Because God and his church need our help more and more with every passing season.

In his book *The Heart of Christianity* Marcus Borg of Oregon State University describes how his university students have a uniformly negative image of Christianity. "When I ask them to write a short essay on their impression of Christianity," says Borg, "they consistently use five adjectives: Christians are literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental, and bigoted." We might object by saying these are sweeping generalizations, but in a world where image and impressions mean more than truth, we should be concerned.

And unfortunately, a fairly new book called *unchristian* by David Kinnaman, of the highly-respected Barna Research Group, presents objective research that supports Borg's classroom experience. Kinnaman's three year study documents how an overwhelming percentage of sixteen to twenty-nine year olds view Christians with

hostility, resentment and disdain. He's not working with stereotypes. Nor are these critics - people who've had no contact with churches or Christians. These perceptions are based on real experiences with today's Christians.

According to Kinnaman's Barna study, here are the percentages of people outside the church who think that the following words describe present day Christianity: anti-gay 91%; judgmental 87%; hypocritical 85%; old-fashioned 78%; too political 75%; out of touch 72%; insensitive to others 70%; and boring – 68%. Just imagine standing up in Starbuck's or the St. Louis Bread Company, announcing you're a Christian knowing that a sizable number of people drinking their lattes probably think of you in one of these ways.

The church exists in a less-than friendly environment these days. It's not surprising that so many churches are in trouble and so many ministers burning-out or leaving ministry altogether. The church is in a time of significant, cultural challenge. I don't necessarily view the culture as hostile toward the church; it is more an attitude of bland indifference. These are tough times for the church, but also times of opportunity. The church thrives best when it is under persecution, when we face cultural dislocation and alienation. For most of its history, the church has existed in times of difficulty and challenge.

The church in Corinth was no Disneyland either. Throughout Paul's epistles to this major metropolis of the Roman Empire he's trying to deal with sectarian divisions, rampant immorality, lawsuits, pseudo-preachers preaching a false gospel. And all of this was in the church, not the culture of Corinth. One of the greatest challenges for a Christian in the Roman world, where everyone was religious, worshipping all kinds of

deities, including Caesar, is that you couldn't be Christian on the side. You couldn't worship both Jupiter and Jesus. You had to decide. Christian discipleship required commitment, devotion to one God and not an assortment of gods.

This sounds very similar to what we face in our time where people worship all kinds of gods, but are reluctant to make a commitment to the God of Jesus Christ. And yet, despite their considerable dysfunction, Paul still thanks God for them, for the grace that is nevertheless at work in them. In every way they are being enriched for the work God called them to do. They are really messed up and haven't a clue what it means to be and do church, and yet they're not lacking any spiritual gift. They have the gifts of speech and knowledge, which allows them to give testimony to the good news of Jesus Christ. All of this bodes well for the church today, despite its many challenges.

God is equipping the church with every gift necessary for its life – committed pastors and lay people who love the Lord and who not only want to see the church survive - but more importantly thrive. We are not called to just survive, but to thrive. I believe God has and is equipping the United Methodist Church and particularly St. John's with every gift necessary for our life together. We lack nothing. We have everything we need to be faithful to what God is calling us to be and do. It's all within us. We have the personal, spiritual, and financial resources to do amazing things. And the greatest resource is YOU – your faith, your commitment, your life experience, and your faith experience.

I'm grateful that we have – for the most part – moved beyond the factions and internal squabbling that plagues so many congregations these days. We have a healthy sense of conflict, we don't all agree on things – nor should we – but we listen to one

another and make space for difference. We do more than just tolerate each other; we try to work together. A church exists to serve Christ. We don't exist for ourselves. Christ calls his people to suffer with those who suffer, weep with those who weep and rejoice with those rejoice. To share the burden and pain and joy of God's people. This is the work of all of God's people, not just religious professionals.

I'm grateful for the way you walk with those who are in pain and can celebrate with those who celebrate. I see it all the time, the way the people in our congregation reach out in a ministry of prayer and presence. Yet, inevitably, there are people who suffer silently, whose pain is too deep for words. There are people who fall through the cracks or just silently move out of the orbit of the church and then they feel hurt because they are not missed. This is always my fear. This is everyone's responsibility, not just your pastors.

If you haven't seen someone in church for a while, pick up the phone and call them or drop them a note. Do you know the names of the people who sit beside you, before and behind you? They're your sisters; they're your brothers. They're part of the family. Care for them.

Reach out as well. Perhaps that's one of the greatest challenges facing us - reaching out. As I talked about last week, we need to better witnesses to the love of God in our lives. Unfortunately, we think of individuals being evangelists – like pastors or Billy Graham-types. But it's really the church as a whole that preaches, teaches and shares the good news. We have worked very hard in our communications efforts this past year – thanks to the hard work and dedication of a brand new communications team.

But they and hopefully you know that the best advertisement for the church is you. Most people come to a church not because of the pastor or the preaching or the music, worship style, education programs or mission programs, but because someone cared enough to invite them to attend worship or join an event.

It's through word of mouth that the church grows, through testimony, when we share what we see taking place in our congregation. Look around and see all the new faces to see what I mean. This congregation has done a great job the past year. But we can't stop now. Imagine if every person – or just one family working together – invited one more person to come visit St. John's - not once but cultivated that relationship so that he or she became part of your church family. Imagine the impact. As I mentioned last week – God through the Holy Spirit is preparing people's hearts and minds and it is up to us to do our part – to invite them, welcome them and of course nurture and love them.

I wish I could say it is always easy but you know that is not the case. There are so many other things, activities – other gods – competing for people's time, attention, commitment and money, which cause the church to suffer. Like most pastors I love to see this church grow in numbers, for the pews to be filled every week. In addition to infant baptisms – which we have blessedly had our share of this year, I would love to see more adult baptisms – adults becoming Christian, seeking to be disciples, which is an even stronger sign of the future health of the church.

Yet, a long time ago I learned to check at the door of the worship center my American sensibility that numbers equal success, that a growth in numbers is a sign that I am doing something right or that the congregation is doing something right. That's

a deadly formula for the church – it's not biblical, it's theologically abhorrent, and ultimately it's unfaithful. The church is not called to grow, but to be faithful. The church is called to be a faithful church – which means Christ-centered. This church does not belong to me or even to you. It's not ours - it doesn't belong to anyone except Christ.

We have been invited in grace to be a part of it. We are here by grace to be Christ's disciples, to serve him with joy, to grow in our faith and commitment to him and one another. We are here by grace because God wants to do something through us, together, that we couldn't do on our own. Growing in numbers is less important than growing in faith. What matters most is that we continue to be a faithful church which also helps us to be a healthy church.

What is a healthy church? I agree with Rev. Dana Knapp's description. Rev. Knapp is the Presbyterian equivalent of our District Superintendent in the Columbus Ohio area and she describes a healthy church as one that puts Christ first – which is another way of saying, puts love first. A healthy church trusts God to do the impossible. It looks to the future with confidence instead of pining for the past and is willing to take healthy risks.

It is a church that studies scripture in order to know God with people who engage their minds and their hearts as Disciples of Christ. But it is also people who don't have all the answers; that are still growing. In other words, it is a church where you don't have to have all the answers first and your faith completely intact before joining.

A healthy church is a church that worships and prays together, where we rejoice with those who rejoice and suffer with those who suffer; a place where people can bring their pain. A place where we practice what we preach; a place that's unreasonably

generous - that welcomes the joy and the responsibility of faithful stewardship of God's gifts. It's a church that in these tough economic times is not letting fear and self-preservation be the driving forces of ministry - not letting fear rather than vision control choices for ministry - not settling for maintenance - for status quo.

The greatest danger we face in this scary, vulnerable context is not dreaming too big but dreaming too small. It is a place where egos are set aside and we seek the welfare of the whole church, caring less for "my needs" or what "I want," thinking more about what God wants, what Christ demands, what the Spirit desires.

A healthy church is a place that is known for its mercy and kindness, that makes a space for all people to be fellow-disciples. It's a place that cares for its children even as it cares for its elderly, indeed, as it cares for anyone who is vulnerable or weak or fragile or alone. It is a fellowship where the presence of Christ is known – when guests walk into the worship center, attend a concert or a meeting and just know and feel that there's something different about us, that in us they somehow see the face of God.

A healthy church is a church where everyone knows that he or she has a calling because of one's baptism and is therefore called to something unique and needed to give a blessing to the world. It is a church that's not bent on surviving (which is really more about ego than faith), but on thriving and reaching out to a community, a world in need. It is a church where we prove to be an exception to the statistics.

Wishful-thinking? Beyond our reality? Not if you believe that God's Spirit is within us and among us, equipping us with every gift need to be an effective, faithful, fellowship of Christ. The church in Corinth prospered despite its many limitations. It wasn't about them, but what God was doing through them. It's not about us, but about

what God is doing through us. This isn't wishful-thinking, but faithful-thinking. And it is exactly what I believe is happening at St. John's. Yes – it is back to school time and back to reality as well. I don't know about you but it is a reality I look forward to facing with each and every one of you in and through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.