

God's Servants Working Together

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

1 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. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, 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? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

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

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We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen.

These are the words of our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith¹. They celebrate the deeds of God as the One who creates, who sets before us the choices of life or death, who saves, judges, shares, conquers, reconciles, and covenants with us as we are called to be disciples in the Church. By God's promises to those who accept the challenging cost and unequalled joy of discipleship, we are called as servants of the gospel, servants of Jesus Christ, who are filled with the grace of forgiveness, inspired for courage in the ethical and physical struggle for justice and peace, comforted with God's presence in our trials and when we are rejoicing, and then one day will rest in eternal life. This is the tradition of our past, the immediacy of this moment, and a view into the future. This is the church to which Jesus Christ has called us—little 'c' and capital 'C' church.

On this Annual Meeting Sunday we take time to step back, to pause, to both look back and look ahead as God's servants working together, as Jesus' co-workers performing necessary tasks, as we are God's field, God's building.

Those who came before us in the Church, including those who came before us in Smith Church, planted gospel seeds in God's fields for mission and music and education and outreach and social activities and youth programs, and God raised up the planted seeds in those fields. This is the time each year here when we formally check in on what was planted, how it has grown, where it needs pruning, and how it has been harvested.

Thinking of the church as a field, as a garden, is a familiar analogy, and so instead I invite us this morning to instead think about Paul's other phrase, 'you are God's building.' This is a unique phrase, a different way to see our place and our purpose. The irony that Paul calls us to see ourselves as exactly something we have long been taught that we are *not*, no doubt makes us curious.

"The church is the people not the building." We have heard that since we first folded our fingers over one another, raised our index fingers into a steeple, and opened our thumb doors to see all the people. And sadly in this era of declining church attendance and membership in every denomination, the spoof is to open the doors and see no people.

The church is the people, the Body of Christ, united by our identity, oneness, and unity in Jesus Christ for a common purpose. It is later in the same letter to the Corinthians that Paul will talk about the body having many parts with different purposes and functions, and so it is with Christ. "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or

Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”ⁱⁱ

But also Paul says, ‘you are God’s building’. You are the people, the ones who are created in the image of God the Architect, who are baptized into Jesus Christ, and who are inspired by the Holy Spirit who are the church. In ‘The Message,’ Eugene Petersonⁱⁱⁱ says that together we are God’s house and we are each carpenters. “Let each carpenter who comes on the job take care to build on the foundation! Remember there is only one foundation, the one already laid: Jesus Christ.

Three men working on a building site were doing the same kind of work. One day, they were asked to describe their work.

One said, “I shovel dirt into a wheelbarrow, push it across the site, and empty it.” The second said, “I come to work to make a living, to put food on the table and a roof over my kids’ heads. Then I go home.” The third said, “I’m privileged to be building a cathedral.”

The first saw work as drudgery; the second as a means to an end. The third, however, had a sense of grandeur and purpose in what he was doing.^{iv}

How would you describe the work that you do as a part of Smith Church? Do you ‘have’ to go to meetings and take on tasks that you would rather not do? Do you participate and attend and support and contribute and donate as an expectation of duty? Or are you privileged to be building God’s kingdom?

When Paul talked about his work and that of his co-worker Apollos, his message was that we all work together, we work as a team with the same grand and sacred purpose. That purpose is to build “God’s building.”

He could have described his work as getting on a ship, sailing to a new city, preaching, getting beaten up and thrown in jail, and then moving on. But he saw the grand picture—he was building “God’s building”—the church. The church of which Jesus is our foundation.

My friends, what grand picture are we building together? How are we working together to love the Lord our God, by walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, as the church that has accepted the cost and joy of discipleship? Let’s go find out. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith/#doxological-version>

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 12:13-14

ⁱⁱⁱ Peterson, Eugene, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Nav Press, Colorado, 2002, page 2068

^{iv} Stuart Briscoe <https://www.tellingthetruth.org/read/individual-post/read/2022/07/17/god-s-building>