

Epiphany 6A 2017, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37, February 12, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Imagine for a moment, if you will, that you are an incoming freshman at college, say at Millersville or Franklin and Marshall. You think you want to be a scientific researcher someday, maybe developing new medicines that cure difficult diseases like cancer or Parkinson', or Lou Gehrig's disease. But you have to start at the beginning so you enroll in the first level Chemistry course. You get your class assignment, you find your way to the building and the classroom, you go in and find a seat. Soon the instructor comes in and begins to teach. In just a few moments you begin to realize that something isn't quite right. The professor is speaking about something called "Hydrohalogenation." She goes on: "Hydrohalogenation is the addition of hydrogen halides to alkenes to yield the corresponding haloalkanes: If the two carbon atoms at the double bond are linked to a different number of hydrogen atoms, the halogen is found preferentially at the carbon with fewer hydrogen substituents. This pattern is known as Markovnikov's rule. The use of radical initiators or other compounds can lead to the opposite product result. Hydrobromic acid in particular is prone to forming radicals in the presence of various impurities or even atmospheric oxygen, leading to the reversal of the Markovnikov result."¹ You realize you are in the wrong classroom. You were hoping for starting with something simple, at least with a review of the Periodic Table of the Elements. You are in way over your head.

New pupils in any subject need to start at the beginning. This is true if you are studying chemistry. It's true if you are learning how to cook, repair an automobile, build a house. This is what St. Paul reminds his Corinthian congregation in our reading today. "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." You don't put a baby in a high chair and set a steak and baked potato in front of her, put a knife and fork in her hands as say, "Enjoy."

Paul is telling the Corinthians they aren't mature enough yet. They aren't ready for the solid food of in depth spiritual teaching. In part this is because they are all fairly new Christians. This is early in the Christian missionary movement. All Christians at this time are adult converts. There are no families in which children have been raised as Christians to grow up as mature Christian adults. But he also speaks to them as infants in the faith because he says they've been acting like children. "In the flesh" he calls it, not as "spiritual people." Their childish behavior comes about because they are divided among themselves into contentious groups. Each group has their favorite teacher. Some like to say they belong to Paul. But after Paul left another wonderful preacher and pastor arrived on the scene. His name was Apollos. He too attracted quite a following. And now, within the same congregation, exists these competing groups. The unity of the congregation is threatened. New converts to the faith are confused. Who is right? They ask. The "Paul People" tell me not to listen to the "Apollos People" and the "Apollos People" tell me not to listen to the "Paul People."

Paul reminds the Corinthians there is no difference between himself and Apollos. We are "servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each," he says. I'm the seed planter, Apollos comes along after me and waters the garden. But it's God who brings about the growth. "We are God's servants, working together, you are God's field."

These are good words for you to hear, but they are especially good words for pastors such as myself to hear. For we pastors have a tendency to see ourselves as not just seed planters and garden waterers, but also responsible for the spiritual growth that takes place. Or we might get jealous if we see our flock finding spiritual wisdom in places additional to the congregation we

are called to serve. So I am grateful to be reminded once again that along with Paul and Apollos I too am merely a servant in the garden of the Lord, watering, tending, but with God bringing about the growth.

Unlike Paul, I would not say you are a congregation of infants, feeding only on the mild milk of instruction. Unlike Corinth, most congregations today consist of multi-generational Christians. The ones who planted and the early waterers of your spiritual lives were not just all the pastors who have served you in the past, but more importantly, your mothers and fathers, grandparents, Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, camp counsellors, college chaplains, trusted mentors in the faith. We are hundreds of generations away from the first converts in Corinth. You are not the little saplings envisioned by Paul. Some of you are towering trees in the faith, rooted solidly in the ground of faith, giving shade and shelter to others, who have sprouted new growth in children and grandchildren of the faith. Like Paul, I attribute this growth and maturity to God, to the work of the Holy Spirit, in granting faith and growing faith in you.

So, in the few moments remaining I believe it good and right that we should turn our attention to the words of Jesus we heard this morning in our gospel reading. Jesus continues his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. He teaches those who are called to follow him and how they are to live in the abundant life he comes to give. These are the ways mature Christians are to live in the world. Jesus goes to the very heart of the matter, right to the source. It's as though he heads to the very mountain top and instructs the pebbles and stones on the ground before they can begin to cascade down the mountain and become a violent, rushing avalanche of destruction and mayhem. "You have heard it said of old, you shall not murder...but I say to you...if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment...if you say, 'you fool,' you will liable to the hell of fire." Jesus wants us to get control of the kernel of our anger, to calm our anger and get it under control and let it go before it tumbles down the mountain and rushes on and brings harm or destruction to our neighbor and to ourselves. Calling a brother or sister in the Lord a "fool" can be the start of a journey down a path that can lead to consequences far more destructive than mere words.

In similar fashion Jesus speaks of our sexual nature. The destruction of a loving relationship between spouses may begin with that small look of desire cast towards another, the belief that someone else will be more fulfilling, more exciting. Intimacy and commitment is destroyed because one imagines fulfillment with someone other than the one to whom promises of fidelity were made.

At the heart of Jesus' will for us is his desire that we begin with life-affirming choices. That choice often begins in a small arena; a glance of desire, a word of anger, a little white lie. And we can then become captive to our own choices and soon the small pebble dislodged from the mountain top rolls down, picking up speed, dislodging other pebbles, rocks and boulders cascading down in a path of hurt and suffering and destruction.

The same one who teaches us the goodness of the law of God already establishes his life giving love and salvation. We do not use the law to please God. God is already pleased with us. God already loves us by sending his Son into the world. Jesus Christ died and rose from the grave that we would belong to him forever. Nothing will change that, not even the times we stumble and fall and even start that pebble racing down the hill. Forgiveness is always there for those who return to the Lord.

Jesus urges us to choose an abundant life on this earth. God's law is meant for our good, not our ill. It is for us gift and blessing. Jesus shows us the calling of those who follow him, who are joined to him in faith. We are called to live by the law of love, a love which seeks the best

for our neighbor; whether that neighbor be our own spouse, child, friend or stranger. Not merely to refrain from harm, but to seek our neighbor's good.

The Corinthian church was just beginning to understand the way of Jesus. But they got stuck on thinking that their teachers were more important than the teaching. Good teachers always get out of the way, and allow the words to take root and grow. But when Jesus speaks he is both teacher and teaching, both the instructor in life and the giver of life itself. This is the way Jesus teaches us. This is the path Jesus comes to show us with his own life A path of love, self-giving, generous and graceful. Amen.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alkene#Oxidation> Not being a chemist I had to find some advanced chemical language to illustrate my point.