

## **“The Gift of Growth”**

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*<sup>3</sup>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.”*

*(1 Corinthians 3:1-9)*

Whenever Stewardship Sunday arrives, I find myself thinking back to the 1992 presidential election. Maybe part of it is that I was living and working in Washington D.C. at the time, so I was paying extra special attention. But oddly enough the memory that always pops up is from the 1992 Vice-Presidential debate, which people don’t usually pay a lot of attention to, but this one was memorable. That was the year when Ross Perot ran as an independent and named a true political outsider as his running mate. Nobody knew much about Admiral James Stockdale, so when it was time for his opening statement, his first words to the American people leaned right into the questions on everyone’s mind: “Who am I?” he asked. “Why am I here?”

As Stewardship season begins, those are the questions that we need to be asking ourselves. Who are we? And why are we here?” As the Stewardship Committee pondered those questions, three key words rose to the top of their discussion: Growth, Community, and Faith. Who are we? We are a community... but not just any community... a community that is founded upon and centered in faith. And why are we here? We are here to grow... not just in numbers, although that may indeed be a sign of health. Hopefully, we are growing as people of God, growing as followers and disciples of Jesus Christ.

Paul had these same things in mind as he wrote these words to the church in Corinth. The congregation there was socially and economically diverse. Some were powerful, well-connected people; others were servants and day laborers. So, it is no surprise that some camps and factions had formed in the church – sub-groups of people who had things in common. Nor is it a surprise that a key word Paul used to address these divisions was the word “belong.” Many of the Corinthians were answering the questions “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” by claiming an identity with certain leaders. “I belong to Paul,” some would say, while others claimed to “belong to Apollos.”

We still do this in. We describe or even define ourselves by referring the groups to which we belong. I belong to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. I am a member



of a law firm or a medical practice. I belong to this club, or that non-profit board. And then there is the biggest and most formidable identity these days: “I belong to Taylor Swift.”

In all seriousness, it is clear that those who identify as “Swifties” have found a new community, a group bound together by common devotion to Taylor and an appreciation for her music. On every stop of the “Eras” tour, stadiums were packed by people who found a sense of belonging. Those who could not get tickets gathered in the parking lots outside. And pretty much all of them are now filling movie theaters to view the official concert film. It is a legitimate phenomenon that is now attracting the attention of sociologists and psychologists – that in all of these gatherings, Swifties feel heard, feel understood, and feel at home in a way that resonates deeply.

All of this does make sense on at least one level; namely, that all human beings have a visceral, even primal longing to belong. As Dr. Amelia Franck Meyer puts it, “belonging is a fundamental human need.” “Human beings were made to connect with other humans,” she says. “It is essential not only to our thriving, but to our very surviving.”

And why, we might ask, is belonging so important? Dr. Meyer says it is “because belonging is wonderful... belonging feels like home, like safety. ... You claim me, and you are mine. It [is] knowing we are deeply connected to someone who has our back, that no matter what, they will make sure we are OK. So we can relax... we can think and learn and connect and love and feel intense joy because we are not fighting for our own survival.”<sup>1</sup>

So, as we think about who we are, and why we are here, we can start with the fact that human beings are built to be in community, and that we have a deeply seated need to feel that we belong to certain communities that are important to us. But, just as it was for the Corinthians so many years ago, we need to be careful about how we define that belonging. The sense of belonging that we find here in the church is not found through identify with a particular person or leader or program or mission. We are here, Paul reminds us, because ***we belong to God***. The New Testament continually says that we “*are called to belong to Jesus Christ;*”<sup>2</sup> that we “*belong to Christ [in the way that] Christ belongs to God;*”<sup>3</sup> and that we all “*belong to God... because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.*”<sup>4</sup> As people of the Larchmont Avenue Church, we are “Growing through Community and Faith” when we remember that we belong first and foremost to God.

That, of course, does not mean we do not have work to do. One of the ways that we deepen our sense of belonging is by investing ourselves in the ministry and mission of the church. In the Corinthian church, for example, there were a variety of roles to play. Paul was the original missionary who planted and organized the church. Apollos was a gifted and charismatic preacher who came along and helped the church to grow. Some members helped to collect alms for the poor, some hosted the church in their private homes, others brought food and wine for the meal, while still others helped to clean up.

We have some well-defined roles here, too. Some like to usher and greet people on Sunday mornings. Others help us keep track of tithes and offerings and budgeted expenses. Still others feel called to teach Sunday School or lead Bible studies, while others feel most

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<sup>1</sup> Amelia Franck Meyer, “The Human Need for Belonging,” TEDx Minneapolis, <https://www.youtube.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 1:6.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:23.

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 4:4.

useful when they are out serving in the community and helping those in need. This is what disciples do, and it is a good and beautiful thing.

But Paul, as he often does, has a warning for us. Paul was always very leery of our tendency to get a little too confident... a little too proud. And that seemed to have been happening in Corinth, especially when it came to jobs. Individuals were beginning to think a little too highly of themselves and the work they were doing. This is easy to understand, because so much of our identity is tied up in our career. The last time you introduced yourself to a new person, what was the first thing you said? You probably told them what you do. And you probably started with the words "I am." I am a banker. I am a lawyer. I am a pastor, a teacher, an ad executive.

Paul, as usual, turns this on its head. And he does it by asking the "Who am I?" question to himself. "Who is Paul?" he asks the Corinthians. "Who is Apollos? Sure, we have high profile roles in the church, but who are we really? We are servants. And yes, we are doing certain tasks that seem important, but in the end, our jobs are not important. *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.*" Paul wants us to understand that the church is so much more than the sum of the individual tasks we accomplish. In fact, Paul would say that all of our work put together does not amount to much at all without one key ingredient, and that ingredient is the power and presence of God. Paul knew that he and others could plan, plot, dig, hoe, weed, and water in the garden of the church 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, but if God wasn't the animating power and influence, then nothing was going to come out of the ground. Only God can give the growth.

And to Paul, this was not just a quick aside or a little nugget of Christian wisdom. This is a truth that goes to the very heart of Christian identity. Who are we? We are people who believe that we can be part of the process, but it is God who is the prime mover. We may be called to work in the garden, but we are not the master gardener. We are more like the soil that God is working in. We can be laborers in God's house, but we not the architects. We are not even the general contractors. You and I are more like a brick or a beam or a fixture that God can use. Some of you may even be studs! [That's a contracting joke, for those who missed it.] To be a Christian is to live and breathe the idea that, if anything good happens, if we are making any real progress in a spiritual sense, it is God who is doing that work. Only God can give the growth.

Lisa Sharon Harper, a columnist with *Sojourners* and a prominent contemporary religious leader, is the author of a book called *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can be Made Right*. She had concluded that our understanding of "the gospel" was often inadequate to address the real brokenness of the world – the brokenness of racism, the brokenness of oppression, and the brokenness of violence. In the book, she analyzes and reframes the gospel of Christ through the lens of the Old Testament concept of "shalom." Her work could not be more relevant after the horrific and heartbreaking week the world has endured, with terror and violence boiling over in Israel and Palestine. "Shalom," she says, "is what God declared. Shalom is what the Kingdom of God looks like. Shalom is when all people have enough. It's when families are healed... It is the vision God set forth in the Garden and the restoration God desires for every broken relationship. Shalom is what our

souls long for.”<sup>5</sup> When we ask “Who are we? And why are we here?” this is a great answer. We are here to seek and practice Shalom.

On a personal level, Harper is very open about who she is. As the child of a single mother, the two of them moved to Philadelphia shortly after her parents divorced. There, her mother thought, Lisa would be safe in a good neighborhood and an excellent school. But when she got there, Lisa found that she was the only African-American child in the whole school. She was teased, bullied, and betrayed by people she thought were her friends. She began to internalize shame and a sense of real unworthiness.

By some measures, she weathered the storm and succeeded in many ways that the world measures success. But twenty years later, she was struggling. She could not quite name what was wrong. She just knew that something was broken. Around that time her church was holding a service for health and wholeness. She decided to go and ask for some healing prayer. She didn’t know precisely what in her needed to be healed; she just knew something wasn’t right.

At the service, the group formed a circle and joined hands. When it was Lisa’s turn for prayer, the leader asked God to reveal what she needed, and what God wanted for her life. After a few moments, that leader raised her head and asked the group if they had heard anything. A few people said they felt deep pain and sensed that God wanted to heal it. After a few moments, the leader shared that, while in prayer, she had seen in her mind’s eye a small piece of paper, pressed to Lisa’s forehead, with a single word written upon it. The word, she said, was “Unwanted.”

And that was it. Lisa broke down in tears as she realized, after all those years, that this was the core of her identity. This was who she was. She was unwanted, unwelcomed, unloved. As she wept quietly, the woman leading the group spoke up again. “God wants to remove that label,” she said, “and give you a new name.”

With this, the group started praying again, this time asking Jesus to reveal to Lisa that new label, her new name. Lisa says that in those moments she saw clearly (with her eyes closed) an image of Jesus removing the old label and placing a new one on her brow. This one read simply, “Wanted.”

“I wept again and giggled,” Lisa said. “It was the first time in twenty years that love had broken through. It might have been the first time ever. With my new name, my armor came down and I was free to love and be loved.”<sup>6</sup>

Who are we? We are those who have been gathered by God, those who find our identity in God, those who belong to wholly and completely to God.

And why are we here? We are here to grow – to grow in faith, to grow in spiritual maturity, and to grow in the strength of the ties that bind us together. We are called to invest in what God has planted here and what God is building here in our community of faith. In all of these things, may God bless us with the kind of growth that only God can give, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, **Amen.**

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<sup>5</sup> <https://lisasharonharper.com/the-very-good-gospel/>

<sup>6</sup> Scott Bowerman, Source Material from Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*, pp. 79-80. New York: Waterbrook, 2016, <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-belonging/>