

GOD'S SERVANTS, WORKING TOGETHER

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If 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. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I 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. ¹⁹I 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, ²⁰loving 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. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for 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? ⁴For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. ⁹For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

In ancient Egypt, there was a people, though perhaps they didn't see themselves in that way quite yet. They had a common history, a common story—one that had somewhat faded from memory, but shared ancestors, nonetheless, whose complicated families and relationships and migrations had brought this people to this place and time. Into this moment, to this people in slavery, God spoke: "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"...and a great story of liberation began. Plagues and exodus, wilderness and law, a golden calf and a renewed covenant—a generation later, by way of it all, they were a people. The people of God. And so it was that they came to stand on the precipice of a promised land, their ancestors' story always central to where they were going and who they had become. The question was put before them, then, about who they *would* become. What would be the next part of their story? What story would be told about them by future generations?

In the city of Corinth, another people gathered, though perhaps they were only starting to see themselves that way. They had a common history, a common story, rooted not only in ancestry but also in testimony—testimony about a rabbi who had preached and taught and healed and died and lived again, all in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was a story they were trying to understand because they were building a community around that shared story. And it wasn't easy. They argued about rituals and about leaders and about who it was that they were called to be. And so it was that they were standing on the precipice of a promised relationship to one another. The question

was put before them, then, about who they would become. What would be the next part of their story? What story would be told about them by future generations?

From the very beginning of time, God has been shaping the story of God's people. Over and over again in scripture, we encounter this intersection between the historical and theological—holy narratives that weave together people and families and communities and places. Narratives that are entirely human, filled with ordinary people worried about the most basic things: what to eat, where to live, who to love. And yet this is all ultimately inseparable from their relationship with a God who was both powerfully present and frustratingly mysterious. Whether in a desert wilderness or a fledgling Corinth mission church, exile in Babylon or a Jerusalem upper room, people throughout scripture were wrestling with questions about how to live both ordinary and holy lives—and how to build a community of fellow believers. What does it mean to be the people of God, to live and worship and work together? To be in relationship with one another and with the divine? What was, and would be, their collective story?

The wrestling is never without controversy. For even with the word of God set before them—commandments and laws gifted to the community in the earlier chapters of Deuteronomy, teachings passed down from Jesus to the community in Corinth—the people confront ideas and problems and societal issues not yet anticipated. The Israelites have to adjust from Moses to Joshua; enter a land already occupied; decide how to govern themselves; and listen to new prophets who expose injustice in the land. The new Christians of Corinth disagree about whether to eat meat that had been offered to idols, and how to worship, and what sexual norms should be involved in marriage, and whether they should align themselves with Paul or Apollos.

Building community—real *communion*—has never been easy. In calling people together, from the very beginning, God has never expected or wanted a clone army. God gathers in *realness*. Scripture would not spend so much time telling the stories of different personalities and perspectives, family structures and cultures if God wasn't truly interested in the vast and intentional diversity of our humanness. And scripture would not spend so much time recounting the *formation* of communities of people—the wrestling through all the difficult questions and disagreements—if there wasn't something spiritually important and *holy* about that very process of building community, as messy as it might be.

I spent much of my growing up years in a little town in Western Pennsylvania, just down the road from Wheeling, West Virginia. It was largely a farming community of about 400 people, which meant that when my family of 6 moved to Kentucky for my high school years, the population dropped a full 1.5%. Main Street was, in fact, the only main street; and lining one side of it was a green space flanked by two churches—one of which was the Presbyterian church my family attended, and the other the First Christian Church. This is the kind of town where great stories come from, and when I go back we all just sit around and reminisce about all the quirky characters of my childhood for hours. But my favorite story is one that happened long before I was born. In the 1950s, those two churches sitting just a few hundred yards from each other on Main Street—closer than we are to the Caroline Church—were both Presbyterian churches. They were affiliated with different Presbyterian denominations that had formed at least a century earlier around slight historical, theological, and worship differences. But in 1958, the two denominations merged, and thus these two congregations on either side of the town green decided to merge as well. So on a Sunday in June of 1958, right after the Sunday School hour in each of the churches, a procession was formed. The procession was led by the church's two choirs, and followed by the ministers, elders, trustees, and the combined congregation members. As the history book records it: "This procession, extending the full length of the distance between the two church buildings, marched as one body to the Lower Church," which would house the merged congregation. There, the history book continues, the two pastors of the respective churches

“led the joyful communion service which followed, with elders from both traditions serving the elements to the communicants who filled the sanctuary.”

This simple, small-town story has shaped my understanding of how God calls us to build community. I am under no illusion that the merger of those two congregations happened painlessly and without controversy or disagreement. (This is a town, after all, where people wouldn't speak to each other for years because of one person's perceived insult about another's pie crust.) One of the congregations gave up their building; that is no small thing. I wonder how they sorted out their allegiances to the two pastors, and how they decided the order of worship in the new community.

Nevertheless, this is who they decided they would be: the visible body of Christ, processing together into the future where God was calling them. They surely didn't know exactly how it would play out. They could have chosen nostalgia, chosen to keep things the way they had always been, chosen to protect what they each had built. It would have been the safer, the less risky choice. Nevertheless, they marched together into a new future, where they wrestled together with new challenges in their church and in the world. *This* is the story that is told about them today, the story that I cherish, that is now part of my own story, because that new church is where my own faith was nurtured.

But more importantly, it is *God's* story. It is the word that Moses brings from God to the people as they come to the promised land: choose life, choose blessing. It is the word that Paul sends to the church in Corinth: you are God's field, God's building, and God gives the growth. From the very beginning, God's great story has called people together, moving and shaping and forming God's people into relationship, to love God and love one another. God calls people into a community that remembers its roots, its ancestors, its history—but is also alive and pulsing with anticipation of the future kingdom God is building through that community. Love God, love one another.

In these days, we are being called to confront important questions about who we are and who we will be. We'll wrestle with those questions as we discern how to be stewards of the incredible gift we've received in the Gillespie funds. We'll wrestle with those questions as we discern our response, as people of faith, to what is happening in our communities, in our nation, and in our world. At the center of our wrestling is this: what does it mean to love God, and what does it mean to love one another. What does that love look like, and whom does it include—both inside and outside of our walls? Is our love safe, self-protective, and risk-free; or is it the courageous, inclusiving, boundary-breaking and life-giving love of God?

In modern day Setauket, there is a people who gather together in the house of God. We have a common history, a common story—a story founded in courage and conviction, of great risk and boldness—a story kept alive throughout the generations by faithful caretakers, who remind us both of revolution and of redemption. For the story told in this place week after week, for more than 350 years, is the story of a God who loves us relentlessly; whose love spilled out in creation and walked among us in Jesus; who has formed us and shaped us and guided us as a people; who has been with us in every moment of decision, great and small; and who calls us from the firm foundation of our common history to love boldly as our story continues to unfold. We are God's field, God's building, and God is planting and watering and creating the kingdom of God within us, even now. Who are we becoming? Who is God calling us to be? What will be the next part of our story? What story will be told about us, about who we were, in this time and place?

I pray that it's this: we are God's servants, working together. And they'll know we are Christians by our love. May it be so. Amen.