

Growing God

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

February 16, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

Our mailbox has gotten more and more busy in the past few weeks. Political flyers keep appearing, for candidates of all persuasions. Every one of these flyers sort of looks the same. Glossy photos, nice paper, attractive family posed outdoors, preferably with bluebonnets or flags or both together. A list of qualifications of the candidate. Another list of promises the candidate is making. Each of them trying to persuade me to vote in a particular primary, for this particular candidate for this particular office. And it's not just our mailbox that sees these. TV ads, internet ads, emails, phone calls, though I generally don't answer those with suspicious numbers. Every candidate at every level, is doing their best to convince me that they are the best for the task at hand, that they will deliver on a high percentage of their promises, that they will use their power to work for good for me and for my family. It's a competition, with the dubious prize of public office.

Competition is everywhere in our culture. Last year this time, I was interviewing moving companies. They each tried out outdo the other without impacting their profit margin. One promised to protect our flooring, another offered flexible dates, the final one had the most efficient inventory app on his tablet. They each wanted me to sign on the dotted line, right then and there. As I was not the party paying for the move, it was easy for me to put them off. But regardless, I could feel how their pressure might lead me to make a decision I would regret.

I have a friend who lives in Anchorage, Alaska. Her oldest son will be starting kindergarten in the fall. She was asking advice from her neighbors and local friends about how to choose a public school for him. There is some sort of lottery system, and each student enters the lottery in the schools that they're interested in, or rather that their parents are interested in. My brother's family has experienced something similar in Midland. So if you think your kindergartner is going to be an academic superstar, you apply for School A. Or if you think your kindergartner is going to be into music and art, you apply for School B. Or science and math, School C. As far as I know, kindergartners are interested in recess and snack time, and need to learn all kinds of things. These schools are competing for

students, and the students—at four years old—are already in competition with each other.

And products are always competing for our purchasing power. Take something that seems as straightforward as milk. We always need milk at our house. Ok, fine. Half gallon or gallon. Whole, low-fat, no-fat. Cow milk, goat milk, almond milk, oat milk—whatever that is. Organic or not organic. HEB brand or Hill Country Fair, which is also made by HEB, and I don't understand the difference except one is more expensive than the other, or Borden or Oak Farms or Central Market or I don't even know all my options. They're all competing for our money.

We could go on and on. Something or someone is always in a competition for our attention, our time, our money, and sometimes all three at once. It's so inherent and natural to our culture that lots of times we don't even notice it. The constant competition is always present, underlying most everything we do and every decision we make.

This kind of competition for followers and division between people was happening with the Corinthians, too. I think it's most comparable to the political ads we're getting right now, but in a religious context instead. Paul mentions it right at the beginning of the letter and then comes back to it here, in chapter 3. It's obviously bothering him.

In Chapter 1, right off the bat, Paul is urging them to be unified, because he has heard that there are quarrels between groups of them. This group of Christians in Corinth is new, can't be huge, but yet there are divisions and quarrels. And the divisions and quarrels seem to be based on a couple of big personalities. Paul names himself, Apollos, and Cephas, which translates to Peter. It seems that the Corinthians were choosing up sides, choosing one person to follow as they became Christians. Maybe we would think of it as the earliest of denominational splitting? Paul goes on a little tirade then in Chapter 1, asking if Christ has somehow been divided. He then spends the rest of chapter 1 and into chapter 2 talking about the importance of the cross.

Then in our reading at the beginning of chapter 3, Paul returns to the issue of the Corinthians being divided and following certain personalities. Cephas falls off the list, but Paul is extremely not happy that the Corinthians are dividing themselves up with some of them following Paul and some of them following Apollos. And not just following those two people, but saying that they "belong" to Paul or "belong" to Apollos. They've set up a competition between the two factions, and it is clear that Paul does not want any part of it. We don't get to hear

from Apollos, and who knows what his reaction is, maybe he was encouraging this sort of competition, maybe not.

It's not clear that Paul and Apollos were teaching anything different, or doing anything different, from each other. It's not clear that there was any difference in the Christianity they were presenting to the Corinthians, no difference in benefits or costs or requirements. But it must be human nature to set up a competition, to make teams, to take sides, and that's what the Corinthians have done.

Paul says stop it. This is not what Christianity is about. He and Apollos are not on opposing teams. They're on the same team, the same side, there is no competition. "I planted. Apollos watered." Those are the same grammatical verb forms in Greek—a one time thing. Paul planted and was done planting. Apollos watered and was done watering. "God gave the growth." That's a different verb form, one that means an ongoing action. God was doing the growing all through Paul's planting and Apollos's watering, and was doing growing before they started and will keep doing growing after they stopped. The growing belongs only to God. The Corinthians' faith belongs only to God, and God allowed Paul and Apollos to have a teeny tiny part in it.

Paul and Apollos are working together, they have a common purpose, they are one. And so should the Corinthians be unified, working together, for a common purpose. They don't belong to Paul or to Apollos, but to Christ.

Now what does this passage have to say to us, here, today? Maybe I'm ignorant, but I've been here for just over three years, and I don't think we have any factions here. I don't think we're in competition with each other in any substantive way. That doesn't mean we agree on every thing or every detail, but we all seem to be working together for a common purpose. We seem to be reasonably unified here in our congregation. I assume you'll let me know if I'm off base about that.

I do think that we feel like we're in competition with our neighboring churches sometimes, though. Maybe I should speak for myself. It's an easy trap to fall into. I was at a ministerial alliance meeting this week, and there were a couple of newcomers there, and once we all established which churches we represented, the talk turned to "how many folks do you have at your place?" and "how many services do you have?" and "do you have any children?" Now nobody said it outright, but it felt like there was some subtle competition there. We have more people than you, you have more children than us, we have three services a week and you only have one. This conversation was not with everyone, but among the

smaller churches in our area. Maybe there were some other undercurrents to the conversation too, but that little bit of competition for what we think is the scarce resource of people was certainly in there.

Things improved later, as the more formal conversation turned to ways that we cooperate together, ways that we have a common purpose, and are one. We also discussed, as we do almost every meeting, that even with all the churches combined together, we still make up only about 20% of the population of Luling. That is, on any given Sunday, at best 20% of the town will be in church. That means that we are not in competition for a scarce resource. The people are out there. And there's a lot of them, plenty enough to go around.

And we aren't in competition because we have a common purpose. We are one. We are working together. That doesn't mean we all have to be the same or believe exactly the same or worship the same way. Paul and Apollos were different and had different tasks, but they were united in a common purpose, not divided.

Beyond Luling, and beyond the ministerial alliance, there are all kinds of Christians all over the whole world. Thanks be to God. But I will confess right here in front of God and you, that I have a hard time getting along with some of those Christians. They do things I wouldn't do. They say things I wouldn't say. They believe things I wouldn't believe. They prioritize things differently than I would prioritize. They focus on some people and ignore others, when I tend to do just the opposite. They organize themselves in ways that I find ridiculous. They worship in ways that I find boring or manipulative. There's all kinds of ways that I can disagree and draw divisions with some other Christians.

Maybe you know some Christians that you don't get along with either.

It is easy, far far far easier, to be divided from other Christians. It's far easier to believe that we are in competition with each other, to prove ourselves right I guess, to prove that our way of being Christian is superior to their way.

We don't have to be the same. And we certainly don't need to be in competition with each other. There's no need to prove that we're right. There's simply a need to do our best to be faithful. There's simply a need to be united. That's a simple need but not an easy one. We need to be united within congregations and between congregations, to belong to Christ alone. We need to be united in God, who does the growing.