

The Proof is in the Pudding
I Corinthians 3:1-9

I've quit sending out Christmas letters. I can't compete. All these years I thought we were a pretty average family, but then I get these Christmas letters from people telling about all the amazing things they have done and accomplished, and next to them we just look like a bunch of slackers. We didn't climb Mount Everest for our family vacation this year. Jim and I didn't go on safari in Africa for our 20th anniversary. I didn't write a new curriculum that is going to save the denomination. And even though I happen to think my children are wonderful and amazing, they didn't cure cancer this year, and neither of them is currently touring the country with the Broadway company of Cats.

That got me thinking: I wonder what it would look like if churches started sending out Christmas letters? What kinds of things would we boast about? What would we want to say about ourselves that would not just be newsy, but get people's attention and impress them? What are the most important things we could say about ourselves and what happened to us this past year?

I guess our version of that is the Church Information Form. If you've ever had the fortune, or misfortune maybe, of serving on a pastor nominating committee for the Presbyterian Church, you've had to write a Church Information Form and describe your church, its programs and accomplishments. In other words, brag about yourself. And what churches write is very revealing.

Most churches are quick to tell you that they are warm and caring, a friendly lot, or that they are family-oriented. Others use insider buzz words to tell you about themselves, like *traditional*, or *contemporary*, or maybe if they prefer one but know darned well they need to be a bit more flexible, they *honor tradition, but are open to new ideas*. Still others see their offerings as their selling point; they want you to know that they have outstanding programs for all ages, or as one church put it, "their music program is the jewel of their worship service."

In Corinth, what they would have bragged about is their wisdom, their knowledge, and most certainly about the abundance of spiritual gifts clearly evident among church members. They had a lot going on, that church in Corinth.

But they lacked the most important thing of all, Paul tells them. Not willing hands or great programs. Maturity. They lacked spiritual maturity. Hearts that desire only what God desires. Lives that aren't tossed to and fro with every heartache and loss and frustration, but are rooted solidly in the invisible steadfastness of God. People who need nothing besides than the love and shelter of God to be at peace in life.

Now, how does Paul know this, that they lack the most important thing of all, since he's miles away and can't hear them in Sunday School when they talk about their walk with God, or the sorts of things they ask for prayer for in their small groups? How does he know, when he isn't privy to their inner thoughts or devotional moments with God?

He can tell by the quality of their communal life, their life together. He can tell how mature they are as individual Christians by their congregational behavior; by the way they treat each other as a whole church. And that wasn't so good. They were jealous, they were arrogant, they were divided. Not adjectives that describe a community of people who have the mind of Christ, to use one of Paul's own phrases. That's what he means when he calls them people of the flesh. Not that they are carousing drunkards, but that they cling to human hopes and values, and let their focus get bogged down on each other's flaws and idiosyncrasies and petty differences. They were stuck on human, earthly thinking. They didn't see or imagine how everything is transformed by the power and grace of God.

So what should our life together look like, if we are mature Christians? What adjectives should describe the life of a church characterized by maturity?

Well, words like gracious. Are we gracious to one another? And I don't mean in a stereotypical Southern way. Being gracious isn't being nice, always smiling, whether you mean it or not. Think of the people you have known who were gracious. They forgave even the most hurtful of transgressions, didn't they, just as soon as we asked for forgiveness. Being community was more important to them than being right was; being faithful to God was more important than getting their way. In a congregation that is grace-full people are quick to be restored to community when they have sinned, and everyone knows good and well that we are quite likely the worst of sinners, and so we'd best not be pointing fingers at anyone. No one needs to walk on eggshells, or feel guilty. A gracious church is a safe church.

And how about hospitable? Now, that's not the same as warm and caring and friendly. Hospitable means we take people in, any and all people, not just people like us, and give them the run of the house. They are a part of the family. Not after five years. Not if they seem to understand how we do things and can mold themselves accordingly. Not if they are agreeable, and attractive, and sharp, and have something to offer the church. Hospitable means bending over backwards. Hospitable means taking risks. Being hospitable doesn't just mean everyone is welcome, it means everyone is on an even playing field.

What about generous? Do our hands open freely in gratitude to God, and when there is a need? Does the thought of being a part of God's work excite us so much that we just can't help but be a part of it, or do we give what is left over, our hours and our dollars, once we are sure that they won't be needed somewhere else? Is God's work our first priority, or one more demand on our already overextended lives? A congregation of mature believers never worries that there isn't enough.

And then, of course, there is love, the best adjective of all. Do we love each other? Not just *like* each other, or *enjoy* each other, or *tolerate* each other. Do we *love* each other? There's a very simple way to tell. It's not in the casseroles that we bring each other when we are sick, or in the phone calls. It's not in the pats on the back or hugs, because, of course, not everybody gets those, just a few, the special ones. If we can extrapolate from something Jesus said, there's nothing too commendable about loving your friends – even the Pharisees do that. No, the way you tell if we love each other – really love each other – is in the way we respond when it looks like sides are about to be drawn, or no one wants to take their turn but someone needs to do it, or

someone is being very, very difficult. That's where it's really telling. That's where our maturity becomes clear, or it doesn't.

Back in the first chapter of 1st Corinthians Paul says that the wisdom of God looks like pure foolishness to the world. You can see that played out right here, can't you? We try to sell our church to people just like we would our favorite restaurant, or our alma mater. We talk up its assets, its strengths; all the things it has going for it. Rubbish, according to Paul. The best thing we can have going for us is the one thing the world finds weak and pointless: we give up a lot for each other; our pride, our rights, our power; anything I might want to call 'mine' I am willing to call 'ours.' I am willing to be wronged.

Paul has another way to describe the behavior of mature people in their common life, adjectives he pulls out in chapter 13: We are patient, and kind and gentle. We are not envious of each other or boastful about ourselves, we aren't arrogant or rude, we don't insist on our own way. We aren't irritable and if someone hurts us we don't sulk and if someone does something scandalous; we don't secretly gloat because we are better people, and we would never do something like that. We work hard at love.

There is probably one more adjective that ought to be thrown in there: accountable. Doesn't seem like it goes with the others, does it? Holding people accountable is risky. It causes friction. It makes people uncomfortable. It makes people angry, and they tell us to mind our own business. Or they leave. It seems counterintuitive that you would want accountability if you also want community and unity. And so we tend to tolerate behavior in the church that we really wouldn't tolerate anywhere else. Besides, Christians should forgive, right?

But tolerance isn't the same as forgiveness. Sin, repentance, forgiveness and restoration, that's part of the everyday cycle of discipleship and life in the Church. That is what mature Christians do, or at least maturing Christians. We encourage each other in our journey to be more like Christ, and sometimes we need a little nudge in the right direction, sometimes we need a good solid kick in the backside. Sometimes we need to say clearly, *what you've done is wrong*. Or maybe, *What you are doing is divisive and hurts the body of Christ*.

It's not a great way to run a club, or a board, or most any other kind of organization. In any other context, people would get their feelings hurt; people will get mad if they are called out for their behavior. But that's what makes the Church different. Our goal isn't to please people, to keep people happy, or even to keep from rocking the boat. Our purpose is to glorify God.

This week marks my ninth year here at Covenant. I hope that, as we look back, we can see that we have changed, that we aren't the same church we were nine years ago, or even five years ago. I hope that we can see that we are a better church now. Not because we have better programs, or a more engaged congregation, or that worship is somehow livelier, but because we have grown in our faith more and more each year, each month, each day. I hope that we are a better church now because we have all become more like Christ, and that that is evident in our communal life. As Paul might have said, we can have all manner of exciting programs, we can be warm and friendly, we can have excellent music, but if we don't have love, if we don't have maturity, we have nothing.