

First Presbyterian Church-Birmingham
February 16, 2014
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God's Field

Exodus 4: 10-17; 1 Cor. 3: 1-9

We just heard Paul warning the church at Corinth that they are acting like spiritual babies. They look to their little groups for support, forgetting that they are each God's servants and are expected to work together. And no matter who might influence and lead them, only God gives any growth they experience. The church is "God's field," says Paul. Seeds may be planted and watered by different people, but God gives the growth, and we church people can sabotage with our quarreling and jealousy what God is trying to create.

Growth is something we all think about...and worry about. When I was still in clinical practice as a pediatrician, parents were always concerned about their infant's physical growth. Watching the head, length, and weight measurements follow a normal growth curve was always a great relief to them and to me. In short order, concern about developmental progress became equally, if not more, prominent. Underlying both these concerns was this question: Will my child be successful? And the answer--whether the child is short or tall, has greater or lesser intellectual capacities, is physically robust or challenged—is: How do you define success? As much as we hate to be reminded about it, success in the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not match success in the world, where productivity, power, and influence are the hallmarks of success. We preach Christ crucified, and that is surely a stumbling block for all of us! If success means being crucified, what then is failure?

Let me tell you briefly about one who redefined success based on his experience with the Gospel. He was a professor at Yale Divinity School, a prolific writer and lecturer. But he wasn't convinced that he was where Christ needed him to be. He had prayed, "Lord, show me where you want me to go, and I will follow you." Many of us have prayed similarly, often a bit fearful of what the result might be. One day, a woman knocked on the door of his New Haven apartment and said, "I am Jan Risse and come to bring you greetings from Jean Vanier." The person Jan Risse came to see in New Haven was Henri Nouwen. Many of you have heard of Henri Nouwen, but who is Jean Vanier? Vanier was the son of a Major General. He had left a career in the Canadian Navy to pursue further education, culminating

in a PhD in philosophy. After a stint of university teaching, he left academia and invited two men with developmental disabilities to leave the institution where they resided in order to live with him. He kept expanding his efforts and founded an international federation of L'Arche communities. Vanier wanted to plant a seed in the mind of Henri Nouwen, and he sent Jan Risse to Father Nouwen's apartment in New Haven to do just that. This visit occurred in the late 70's. *A few years later*, when Nouwen had forgotten about Jan Risse's visit, he received a phone call from Jean Vanier. Vanier invited him to attend a silent retreat in Chicago. They attended together with obviously very little conversation between them. Father Nouwen visited Vanier's L'Arche community in France on two subsequent occasions. This coincided with a period of great anxiety as Nouwen tried to figure out what God was calling him to do. He resigned his position at Yale, then spent several months serving the poor in Peru. He was then invited to join the faculty at Harvard Divinity School, but his time there brought little satisfaction. He writes, "In the midst of all my doubts and uncertainties, the voices of Jan Risse, Jean Vanier, and L'Arche gained in strength....My sense of being called to L'Arche was based more on what I had to receive than on what I had to give." Henri Nouwen did leave Harvard and joined the L'Arche community in Toronto where he remained until his death. His spiritual journey is recounted in his book, *The Road to Daybreak*.

I tell you this story because it tells us some very important things about what spiritual growth is about. As I mentioned earlier, we all know to be concerned about physical, intellectual, and emotional growth. These can be measured and observed. Spiritual growth is different. In spiritual growth, as the apostle Paul states so well, seeds are planted by persons in our environment, and God gives the growth to a community of faithful persons. Those who understand this see the crucified Christ as the measure of their success. Other measures of success, like things we can purchase for ourselves, give no lasting satisfaction. You noticed that it took years before Nouwen gave up academic success to find a home for his loneliness in the L'Arche community. Furthermore, it was service in a community that brought Nouwen real happiness and a cure for his loneliness, not personal success. It can take a long time before we recognize what God is calling us to be or do. At the root of our confusion and restlessness is our struggle with loneliness and weakness. This why we, like the people in the church at Corinth, want to identify with certain leaders or groups, rather

than Christ. This is why, like Henri Nouwen, we keep looking for the right home for our heart.

Remember what Kyle read to us in Exodus? The story of Moses gives us additional insight into the meaning of spiritual growth. Moses resists his call from God and makes note of his weaknesses. He tells God, "I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." He looks to his past and says, in essence, "God, you've got the wrong guy. I don't have what it takes." God is angry with Moses and tells him that he will be given all he requires to be successful in God's eyes. We learn in that story that a called life is one in which God intrudes into the human experience of vulnerability and weakness, and enables a person to accomplish what he or she thought was impossible. But the person has to attend to God's presence and trust God. Remember when Moses was out hiking and spotted the burning bush? Had others seen it and explained the phenomenon away? But Moses turned aside, and his experience there changed the course of history. Also, consider this: Does God assure Moses that he is adequate to the task? No! Instead, God simply assures Moses that what God needs to have done will be done. God wants Moses to have confidence that the resources he doesn't know he has will become available. Unfortunately, these resources will not be evident until Moses places himself at risk in the vocation God has given him. Walter Brueggemann has called this a drama of vocation and resistance. God shapes the future. Moreover, it's not about Moses; it's about God's plans for Israel.

As John mentioned last week, we are a lot like the people in the church at Corinth. We are excited by the possibilities of being empowered by God to be part of God's activity in the world. But we also have the desire to control our own futures. We generally feel we can solve our own problems. When we can't, we feel inadequate. It is also our nature to consider what's in it for us as individuals. We align ourselves with certain people and follow their leading out of comfort and self-interest. Is the crucified Christ the model for our success? Not so much. Stated another way, we resist pouring ourselves out for others, preferring to protect ourselves from an uncertain future. If we do extend ourselves for others and are hurt, we typically say, "Enough! I'm out of here!" Indeed, emotional growth is about building adequate defenses; spiritual growth is about finding freedom in Christ to respond to what God is doing in the world to liberate, reconcile, and restore God's people.

In case you are wondering, we are not all called like Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen to find freedom in Christ by serving those with developmental disabilities. We are asked to seek God, respond to God's presence, as Moses and Paul did, and honor those places where God's grace is at work in us. We are asked to set aside all measures of success but the crucified Christ. Serving others as God has called us will take different forms for each one of us. But all forms have to do with service to others to create community among all God's children. Vanier writes, "To be free is to put justice, truth, and service to others over and above our own personal gain or need for recognition, power, honour, and success." The apostle Paul affirms the same, recognizing that we find it extraordinarily difficult to do this. The sign of our failure is jealousy, quarreling, and conflict. The sign of our success is preaching Christ crucified, which makes a mockery of success as most people conceive it.

I was recently talking to a friend of mine about Paul's message in his letter to the Corinthians. My friend suggested that there could be no real spiritual growth without wisdom—wisdom in the sense of intellectual depth of understanding. What I have learned, together with Paul Vanier and Henri Nouwen, is that spiritual growth has little to do with intellect. It involves three components. First is a recognition that all persons are called, though not all respond. Second is the recognition that each one of us is inadequate to the task. Third is the belief that God responds when we seek God in order to serve God. We are all responsible for discerning God's leading in our lives. Where is the need to work for justice and love kindness calling us to be part of God's activity in the world? Feeling weak and inadequate to the task must not discourage us. God has promised to make the resources we need available to us.

So, how can we live as spiritual people? We begin by listening, as John emphasized in his sermon last week. We listen for God's voice in the midst of the noise and violence of the world. Through the experiences of others, particularly those we understand the least, we come to a deeper understanding of reality. I often see that happening among those with intellectual disability more than I do among those who believe they have all the answers. Both Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen also recognized that they lacked answers. They were restless until they found a home where love and service were more dominant than striving after success. Seeds were planted in Henri Nouwen's mind, he was attentive to the call planted within him, he recognized that the crucified Christ was the measure of any success

he might experience, and he responded to the call. The same is available to all who are called by God. You do have the freedom, of course, to ignore God's call. You can resist it, like Moses, looking back at past failures. Or you can nurture it and rely on God to enable growth for God's purposes. Worry less about how tall or good looking or intelligent you are. God appears to care nothing about these measures. Spiritual growth and success will be measured by an experience of freedom from all that the world values and a powerful experience of God's love liberating, restoring, and reconciling people in this world—even in the midst of the world's chaos and violence. Your loneliness will be cured when you are welcomed into a community of service where God is present. Thanks be to God. Amen.