

"A Foundation of Faith Not Personality?"

I Corinthians 3:1-11

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John Cobb, a very distinguished Process Theologian and long time professor at Claremont School of Theology, offers the thought that acknowledging that God is present in each moment creates the difficulty for the Christian of figuring out which voice is God's and which is simply our own desires. And whether he realized it or not (and he probably did realize this but just didn't bother to remind the reader of the article) Paul's letter to the church at Corinth offers us a reminder that as we seek to respond to what we believe is God's call, God's presence, such assessment isn't just desirable but necessary.

Paul is writing to a church which is located in the port town of Corinth and to which have come numerous preachers or teachers and there must have been some controversy over which one the church should follow. In our opening verses, Paul admonishes the people that though they wished to think of themselves as a spiritual people, he thought of them as people whose faith journey was simply at the beginning and not mature or adult in its sensibilities, in its abilities to determine what was and was not God's call. For Paul, a mature faith was one which acknowledged one's own interest, the interest of the community or others, and God's interests and that those can but do not always intersect. A mature faith is one, which doesn't always demand one's own way nor fail to allow that "I" may be in the wrong and need to change.

As we read this pericope, we will hear that some want to follow Paul and some Appollos, a well respected teacher and probably a Jewish Christian from Alexandria, but Paul sought to chastise them that they would see and understand how immature such a faith would be. To follow or listen to one as opposed to another preacher and believe that person to be the only one who might offer faith and truth is to be human and not spiritual. For Paul, spirituality or being spiritual was a mark of wisdom, a sign that one was ready to receive the wisdom which God offered. Now Paul believed himself to be an apostle of God but he didn't see that apostleship as offering him a special place in the life of the community. Rather apostleship meant that he was to be the servant of God and that people were to view him as such. While he acknowledged his role in planting the faith, he offered praise to others, in this case Appollos, praise for nurturing such faith and sought to deflect any attempt to see the one who brought the faith as the faith. In other words, Paul feared and understood that one of the real dangers to the faith was that the medium, the one who brought the message had become that which was the message.

For Paul, those who built their faith simply on the words, the ideas of a particular person or preacher or teacher, were those whose faith was most immature, most childish. And remember what separates children from adults is our ability as adults to recognize and live with complexity, even contradiction. Paul wants the readers in Corinth to stop the arguing regarding which preacher to follow and instead to recognize that each brought some part of the needed understanding of what it meant to be faith filled people. It was upon the message that each brought one built one's faith. The foundation, as Paul puts it, is laid by one but the building upon that foundation is done by others. It is the truth of the message which one ought see,

which one ought care to embody in one's life and that truth, that foundation is the faith that Jesus is the Christ.

Whenever we read the Biblical witness, we need remind ourselves that either we are reading a compilation of stories gathered from an oral tradition which had been passed down from person to person for decades or even centuries. Or in the case of Paul's authentic letters of which this letter to Corinth is recognized as one, we are reading someone else's mail so we can only speculate at what it meant to the recipients and why it was written. In this case, we assume with scholars and Biblical students, that this particular letter was written to a community of the early church struggling with what it meant to be followers of the Way, the early name for what we call Christianity, and how that faith might develop and be interpreted for the particular group or situation to which the letter was written. Now I read this and glommed right on to it at first. My first ideas were that this is perfectly suited to our situation and what is happening here and in the PC-USA at large. It was just too easy and that's when I backed off a bit and tried to be a little more responsible and honest.

This letter was written sometime in the first century of the Common Era and to a church community in turmoil. It was a community struggling with how it might fulfill its calling, its faith in a situation of diversity and change. As you know, Corinth was a very cosmopolitan city and one where issues of morality and personal responsibility were not simply talked about but lived out in different ways. And within this community to whom this letter was written, there seems to have been glimmers if not full debates of such. As we read and listen to the letter, one of the traps it is easy to fall into, as I have done on numerous occasions, is that the early church, the early believing communities were places of tranquility and settled understandings of what it meant to confess Jesus as Christ. And how that faith ought be lived out. That is simply a ridiculous idea which has no substance in history and no Biblical basis unless we toss out this and other letters and/or writings we find in the New Testament. Turmoil and dissension seems to have been almost the norm in the early church. Without being too cynical or flip, I really believe that the congregation, church community to be concerned most about is the one which is quiet and seeming without dissent or discussion of what it means to be believers. Humans are creatures which do metaphysics, we think about what is real and what is important, what is moral, what is morality. Our answers are constructed upon our experience, our historical situation, our conversations with our communities. The early church was being constructed in just this manner. It was struggling to build a community of faith based upon the stories about and the faith in Jesus as Christ.

And we need also remember that this code, this religious confession held a great deal of meaning which we tend to gloss over because we are not living in the first century in the Mediterranean world of Roman domination. This Jesus the people were told was killed, executed by the Romans because he challenged their domination, remember his execution tool carried the inscription King of the Jews, but unlike others whom they had killed he also challenged all of those around him and their personal and communal morality, economics, and understanding of what it meant to be faith filled people. It was the challenge to the Romans which led him to the cross BUT the foundational moment happened when the Romans execution and grave failed to destroy him. The idea of Jesus as Christ meant he lived beyond such and continues to call

people to a faith which challenges them and the world they know. It is how this faith is to be embodied which created such stress and dilemmas for the early church.

For us, in 2011, we may look at this and draw from it several truths, several theological suggestions. Let me spin out a couple with which I have been playing.

First, the faith filled life is not a life in which we seek to emulate, to walk in lockstep with any person and their message. Faith is a journey on which we sojourn as part of a community and we bring to that community our understanding, our confessionally based theology which guides us in our journey. Throughout the journey, we do participate with others and we do build on the foundations which they enable us to construct. But we need live out our faith in our own lives, our own communities. To some this may sound like situational theology, situational faith and I'm not sure but what it is for it is the attempt to know and bring to bear in every situation God's call to do justice and love kindness. It is not a cookie cutter faith which gives us a rote answer to life's continuing processes. What keeps us from following into the trap of a personality cult or worshiping only our own desires is that confession, that understanding that God always, always calls us to do justice in whatever situation. And listening to Plato, we know that justice is the attempt to assure that each participant, each person receives her or his due. Our conversation is how can we assure that.

Second, the faith filled life is never about "my" salvation, "my" spiritual development. It always about our salvation, our spiritual development because, if we listen to Paul, one only builds on the foundations offered by others and that means we are always involved in a communal situation, a communally based faith. Paul's opening concern in today's pericope is that people were mistaking the message of the individual for the message of the eternal, of God. No one has a corner on that and no one should be looked to as the messenger which opens such to us. We are all participating in understanding what it means to be God's people, what we call Christians, in this time, in this community. While each of us brings to this effort glimpses, glimmers of what it means to be a child of God, to embody God, no one here now or in the past is to be looked to as the arbiter of such. We join as a worshiping community to listen for and respond to God's presence that we might better embody that presence in this time, in this place.

Let us listen to Paul and learn from him but let us also recognize and take upon ourselves the need to build, to construct a faith for our time, in our place that all might celebrate and know God's presence and worship the hope, joy, and promise of that presence. Let us pray.