



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Fruits of the Spirit: Faithfulness”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

I Corinthians 3:1-13; Matthew 7:24-27

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So, let's talk a bit about what's going on here in Corinth. It was some 15-20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus – and thus a good 15+ years since his own conversion experience – that Paul arrived in Corinth. He was in the midst of his second missionary journey – a counter-clockwise loop from Jerusalem up through modern-day Syria and Turkey and then on to Greece. Along the way he had stops in Antioch, Tarsus, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and more, before arriving in Corinth. A tentmaker by trade, Paul took up with Priscilla and Aquila, fellow tentmakers, and lived and worked with them while preaching the Gospel and, in time, forming the Church in Corinth. He was there for some 18 months or so before heading on to Ephesus and leaving behind a young, vital and energized Church in Corinth.

Now, I'll pause for a moment and say that there is a common understanding for those of us who live our lives serving as clergy in churches that one of the most difficult things anyone can do is to follow the founding Pastor of a church. I experienced it, to some extent, when I served our sister Church in Clarkston, MI. While the Church had a history of some 175 years, the 20 years ministry of my predecessor saw that church move from the urban setting of Pontiac, MI onto an 18-acre campus in the booming bedroom community of Clarkston – starting fresh as a new Church in a new location. There is an unavoidable cult of personality that develops in those cases. The strong leadership it takes to start as a new Church, combined with the fact that everyone in that Church came under that individual's leadership, leads to a certain blurring and conflation of the identities of Church and the clergy who led it through that chapter of its life. I can tell you from experience that it's not an easy situation to step into.

I say that, however, because that's what Paul left behind. To be clear, it's not malice. It's not careless. It's not wrong. It just is. Paul entered Corinth with his dynamic persona and dialogical prowess, and this newly formed congregation started to blossom. Eighteen months later, Paul moves on to Ephesus, and a void is left behind. Enter Apollos!

Now, we don't know quite as much about Apollos as we do about Paul – he isn't the same type of central figure in the New Testament, but what we do know is that Apollos is a Jewish Christian, originally from Alexandria, who was known to be a powerful speaker and an individual with great knowledge and understanding of the Hebrew scriptures. When he first arrived on the scene he connected with Priscilla and Aquila, the same two with whom Paul had stayed in his time, and they helped Apollos to grow in his understanding of the Gospel message.

His persona and rhetoric, then, very quickly began to fill that void that had been left in Paul's departure. It's important to understand that Corinth was an incredibly dynamic and cosmopolitan city. It was a large population and a critical center of trade for the region. So, in that first century context of Greek philosophy and thought, people were drawn in by the big voices and the big thinkers. As much as Paul had drawn attention with such a charisma and message in the first place, Apollos drew a similar following of his own in his time. The result? Division! The teams started donning their jerseys.

'I belong to Paul.' 'I belong to Apollos.' I think it can read a bit cold for us, as the 'I belong to language' is not normal language for us and, frankly, any recent notion of a person 'belonging' to another is language with which many of us are uncomfortable for very good reason. The Greek being translated there, though, is more fitting to say 'I am of Paul,' or, 'I am of Apollos.' What the people are claiming is an allegiance. 'I'm on Paul's team.' 'I'm on Apollos' team.' The fundamental issue at play that Paul is addressing is that the people of the Corinthian church had begun to establish their fundamental identity of faith in the context of whether they adhere to Paul or Apollos. And that, Paul suggests, is where the whole thing falls apart. Which is where we arrive back at our theme for the season.

'Faithfulness' is our word of the day this week. In our continued endeavor through Paul's fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5, asking what it means to choose to live in those fruits that Paul delineates, we come today to the question of what it means to choose to live in faithfulness. The first challenge of that, of course, being to define the word. The notion of faith can take us in so many different directions. The image on the front of the worship order this morning was generated by first going to ChatGPT and asking it to list synonyms for the word 'faith.' Over 100 different words spun across the screen. Trust, hope, assurance, conviction, obedience, confidence, perseverance, commitment, righteousness, expectation... the list went on and on.

'His faith is strong.' 'She is so faithful.' 'He was unfaithful to her.' 'Tell me about your faith.' 'It will be ok, have faith.' Same word, all sorts of different meanings. We talk about faith as a delineation of what we believe. We talk about faith as a set of behaviors and morals. We talk about faith in aspiration and in hope. Faith means so many things in so many contexts. What Paul is talking about in his list of the fruits of the Spirit, however, is the same thing he's talking about in that passage from I Corinthians. He's talking about fidelity. He's talking about reliance. He's talking about whose team we're on! And, he's talking about the same thing that Jesus seeks to express in his parable in Matthew 7.

It's worth noting that this passage from Matthew represents Jesus' concluding remarks of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins that Sermon on the Mount with the promise and hope of the Beatitudes. He continues with the call to be the salt and light of the world, and then he moves into a reframing of the Law of Moses. Anger, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation... he makes his way through a series of elements of the Law and reframes them as questions that pierce beyond behavior and into the heart that lies behind them. He talks about wealth and treasure. He introduces what we refer to as the Lord's Prayer. He talks about judging others, and seeking God, and treating others as you'd want to be treated. He talks about bearing fruit as God's children. And then, after this long sermon about the hope and challenges of living in God, he closes with these words:

“Everyone, then, who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

We tend to read these words in isolation – and they make sense. A house built on sand will wash away. Anyone from the Outer Banks, or Nantucket, or southern California, or the Florida coast would tell you the same. Houses built on sand will fail. Houses on solid rock will not. Jesus is the rock, our lives, the Church, are the house. We get it. What we often overlook, however, is that Jesus is saying so much more than that. “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them...” What words? The ones he just finished. Remember, these are the final sentences of the Sermon on the Mount. The house – the life – that is built on the foundation that is the rock is the one centered on all of those things he just said. Trusting in God. Being the light and the salt. Clinging to God’s promise. Looking beyond the behavior to heart the lies beneath it. Putting those things first – being true to that living in God – is how we build on the firm foundation that prevails. Or, if I can say it another way, the life built on the rock is the life that holds first and foremost our reliance upon and fidelity to God. It’s the life that says, first and above all, I belong to God!

The challenge, of course, is that we are perpetually surrounded by things clamoring for that place in our lives. Our jobs, our finances, our homes, our comfort, our health, our security, our success, our popularity, our sense of approval, our control, our independence, our appearance, our political affiliations, our social circles, our well-devised plans for the future... It’s a long list, and many of those things can rightfully be, and often need to be, very high on our life’s priorities. This isn’t a question of embracing some sort of ascetic living as we throw up our hands and give up any consideration of anything but God. This is about those moments in which the alluring voices of our competing priorities start supplanting our fundamental reliance upon, and fidelity to, God.

Paul bounces between metaphors a bit as he comes through those words in I Corinthians 3. At one point he’s planting, at another he’s laying a foundation. Apollos is watering and building. Different people playing different roles along the way. What’s intriguing to me about Paul’s argument here, however, is that there one foundation – that is Jesus – and there is one who gives the growth – that is God. Different things serve different roles along the way, but the beginning and the end – the foundation and the aspiration – belong to God. The fundamental identity belongs with God. The people do not belong to Paul – and they do not belong to Apollos – they belong to God.

It seems such a simple notion in theory. In a world run amuck with an endless litany of things that clamor to be our ‘thing,’ Paul’s call to choose to live in faithfulness in Galatians 5 is an echo of his command to the Corinthians in I Corinthians 3, and a reflection of the very words with which Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount. The life that withstands the storm is the life that is built on the rock. The rock – the foundation – on which that life is built is God – is Jesus.

And the life that is built on the foundation of God is the one that sets aside all of those alluring and tempting voices and says first, last, and among all, ‘I belong to God.’