

1 Corinthians 3:6-16

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.⁹ For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. ¹⁴If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁶*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*

Normally, the Pastor presents a “State of the Church” report to the annual meeting. Our Pastor isn't here; he's on Sabbatical—so I'll present a kind of “State of the Church based on being here a month or so” report!

Paul often describes the church as something alive; here, he describes the Corinthian church a “field” that he had “planted”, and then left in the hands of others so it could grow, like a field, or an orchard. And it did. By the time he wrote, perhaps they had a Minister of Music, a Pre-School, and Annual Meetings! Sadly, they also started choosing sides: Paul, or Apollos, for example—and Paul is writing to intervene in the struggle of a conflicted church.

I'm happy to report: that isn't happening here. A lifetime member recently told me, “I never had an argument with anyone here.” I've heard Pastor Bill brag to our fellow clergy about how healthy Emanuel is, and so have I. So healthy, in fact, that our pastor is able to step away for an intentional time of renewal and growth, and Emanuel Church continues uninterrupted as a healthy, energetic, happy congregation.

That's wonderful, but that also means something. We're not finished growing. Churches and Christians have *long* gestation periods. Which means that while we've grown; we can never coast. You, I, and Emanuel UCC are still growing toward living reflections of Jesus Christ.

Then Paul suddenly changes his metaphor: “*God's field... God's building.*” Well—are we a field, or a building? Yes. Both were essential. “*Field*” describes how we grow—first spiritually, then perhaps in numbers. But “*building*” describes skilled craftspeople beginning with a good foundation, and working together to build something wonderful, a gift to God and our community.

But we're not just any building. “*You are God's temple... God's Spirit dwells in you.*” I think that the reason Paul shifted from his favorite image of growing to that of a building was to speak to an audience much like us. Corinth wasn't a farming community; it was a city, one with impressive architecture—especially its temples. Temples were historically the most prominent buildings in town; big, beautiful, set on the highest hills, and Corinth had plenty. They were designed to speak powerfully of the god they worshipped; they were magnificent, awe-inspiring places where you *knew* you would encounter God.

But these Christians had nothing like a temple. They met in homes; perhaps in parks or caves, wherever they could improvise a setting for worship. So to them, Paul says: You don't need impressive buildings. “*You are God's temple.*” You already are the very place where God and the world intersect, and where amazing things happen.

That's the “*temple*” Paul built. Paul said, “*I laid a foundation, and someone else (will) build on*

it." We're that "someone else". We inherited a foundation that goes back 125 years, which in turn was built on a foundation going back about 1,900 more, and it's only foundation strong enough to last: "No one can lay any foundation other than Jesus Christ." Every generation must present the message of Jesus in its own language, but we don't start from scratch. Jesus Christ was, and is, the Foundation—for the Church of the first century through every generation since, down to those who founded Emanuel UCC 125 years ago and passed it down to us. Even after 125 (or 2,000 years), the life and teachings of Jesus are *still* the core of our calling. We are measured by whether we are still grounded in the character and spirit of Christ.

And here's the hardest thing to talk about: "*the work of each builder will be revealed for what it is.*" Last week, I talked about God's unconditional grace, a gift we cannot earn no matter how we try, and I meant every word of that. God's grace is part of that "foundation". Just the same, we are accountable for what each one of us, and all of us together, do with our God-given gifts.

That should not surprise us. Never forget how passionate God is: when Scripture talks about justice for all, about reconciliation with God, about new life in Christ; when it calls for tearing down human greed and arrogance, challenges us to shatter the walls that divide, to offer food, shelter, and forgiveness to even our enemies...or the promise of abundance and for all God's children—God means every word. And God will not rest until every child is safe, every creature thrives, and every weapon reduced to rust. The world God envisions, Paul said in Romans 8, is "groaning as if it were in labor, struggling to emerge," and God will not quit until it is free.

After 125 years, God is *still* crafting something in us and through us, and not just for us. A wise church leader once said that "The Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not in it." God cannot be indifferent to whether we merely congratulate each other on being found—or follow the Way of Jesus, pouring ourselves out to share what we have received with others.

Built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, we are like triage in the Emergency Room, tasked with embracing a hurting world gasping for breath, partnering with a God who can breathe life into the despair around us. In our witness, our worship, and our servant's heart, we can be part of that. People: we *must* be. God is never, ever, indifferent to what we do, or don't do. Our work is measured by how well it contributes to reaching the souls yet to be set free to live in the freedom Christ promises, and the birth of the world God intends.

Emanuel United Church of Christ has good leaders—true *servant*-leaders—but we do not have superheroes, who rescue the world while we watch from the sidelines. We—all of us—have something to offer. Paul said that it doesn't matter if that something is straw, or gold. *Whatever* God has given us is good and holy, and can be powerful beyond imagining. As we gather in today's annual meeting of our congregation, and whenever and wherever we gather, our best question is: since God will use every gift we have, how can what I have further the work of Jesus Christ, and make God's dreams come true?