

“From Nanaimo to Corinth...and back again, part 5: Servants”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for February 12th 2017 (Sixth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

1st Corinthians 3: 1-9

There is a sense, I think...a sense in which we have now come full circle, in this six-week look at the opening three chapters of 1st Corinthians. At the outset, it was impossible to avoid the question of **divisions** within the Corinthian faith-community. On that first Sunday, I noted that at least one prominent New Testament scholar—Gordon Fee who used to teach at Regent College in Vancouver—disputes the commonly held belief that there were full-blown factions in Corinth. Nevertheless, Fee certainly agrees that this was a far from united faith community and that the Apostle Paul—for that reason—while eventually conceding that there **is** such a thing as “Christian wisdom”, insists that this congregation is not ready to receive that wisdom. Hence the baby food he’s been offering them, rather than the red-meat of wisdom for which they have convinced themselves they are ready. Paul, never hesitant about offering a well-timed insult, assures them that no, actually they’re not ready: not until they get over their divisions. Divisions which...

...and this is the aspect of the thing that this morning’s reading emphasizes...

...divisions which appear to be grounded in a tendency to express excessive devotion to particular leaders, two of whom Paul cites, namely himself as well as a man named Apollos. Reading between the lines, this doesn’t sound an expression of garden variety preferences, in which someone will simply say that they enjoy Reverend Smith’s story-telling and someone else responds by saying that they prefer Reverend Jones cute Australian accent. No: this appears to go much further: as if a Trinity person would say that they are a “Foster Freed” Christian...a Brechin person that they are a “Sally Bulas” Christian...a St. Andrew’s person that they are a “Debbie Marshall” Christian. That crosses a line...and Paul knows that’s a line that ought not to be crossed. He doesn’t blame Apollos for this...any more than he blames himself. But what he does insist, is that the Corinthians re-think their whole way of regarding their leaders. And so he asks those two key questions...

What then is Apollos? What is Paul?...

...not wasting any time to see if they get the right answer. He provides the answer! **Servants**. *Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each!* That’s what Apollos is! That’s what Paul is! Servants: nothing more, nothing less. Servants through whom the Corinthians had come to believe! Servants...servants appointed by the Lord, whose labours will have

value to the extent—and only to the extent—to which the Lord blesses their labours!

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That word...that word “servant” is not a universally beloved word. Let’s acknowledge that at the outset.

I am reminded...reminded of a story I was told many years ago: when I was still making my entry into the Church. A friend over in Vancouver told me about a women’s retreat she had attended: a retreat led by a male minister. A few weeks ahead of the event, he informed them that his theme for the weekend would be “servant-hood”. They gently tried to explain to him—ultimately to no avail—that this particular group of women, most of whom were of a generation that saw most women mainly occupied as home-makers—this particular group was not especially energized by the thought of a weekend unpacking the concept of servant-hood under the leadership of a man. He stuck to his guns, however...

...we clergy are nothing if not stubborn!...

...and managed to lead them on a three day retreat which, if my friend is to be trusted, was thoroughly disliked by all in attendance. You win some...and you lose some. What can I say?

Well...I suppose that what does need to be said—without defending the rather ham-fisted decision of a male clergyman who valiantly persisted in taking a reluctant group of exclusively female retreatants along a path they had no desire to explore....

...what does need to be said is that there is likely no getting away from the Biblical concept of servant-hood...although for some purposes and some audiences there might be wisdom in finding a different word with which to express the concept. As a matter of fact: we have one such word that is very much a part of how we United Church types tend to view our clergy. Unlike Catholics, Anglicans and Orthodox, we’re not known as Priests. Unlike Lutherans and Evangelicals, the word “pastor” has never really caught on with us. And while it’s true that we like to address our clergy as “reverend”...

...a truly terrifying word that literally means, “he who must be revered”...oh dear!...

...the more common job description we tend to reach for in our circles is minister: which simply means, servant.

Incidentally: by way of a side-bar, let me just say that I have long been fascinated by the two most common titles for clergy in the wider Protestant world,

which pretty much tends to divide between those who prefer to regard their clergy as “ministers” and those who refer to their clergy as “pastors”. I think there is an intriguing contrast between those two words, one of which (minister) defines a clergyperson as someone who serves, the other of which (pastor) defines a clergyperson as someone who has the same authority within their congregation, as a shepherd has with the sheep they tend. That’s a significant contrast, and for what it’s worth, let me just state that I believe a bit of both should be standard operating equipment for anyone seeking to do the work of a Christian clergyperson. On the one hand, there are times when we need to be the Pastor: to speak and act with authority. On the other hand, there are the countless other times when we will get ourselves and others into deep problems if we think that the world begins and ends with us. At such times we clergy need to remember—just as the Corinthians who were investing so much excessive love and trust in **their** leaders needed to remember—that we are ministers...servants (not the congregation’s servants, mind you, but God’s servants): just as Apollos and Paul were servants. And here...right here...it will be helpful to remember something of the Biblical roots of that loaded word “servant”.

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To be fair: it’s a very commonly used word in the Old Testament, with a range of connotations. However: I believe that the best starting point for unpacking that word is to think about the ministry of Moses, who describes himself as the “servant of the Lord” and is referred to by God as “my servant Moses”. There is no doubt in my mind that Moses represents “ground-zero” when we want to think about servant-hood in Biblical terms: and clearly the Old Testament regards him as a figure of unmatched stature. While it would be unfair to suggest that every use of the word “servant” in the Bible has that sort of exalted implication, it’s important to remember that even those who are referred to in the Bible as the servants of a King—an earthly human King—are often those who hold high-ranking positions. Think of how we, in Canada, refer to members of the Cabinet as ministers, as in the Minister of Health, the Minister of Education, or the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Many of the ministers—in other words, many of the servants—we meet in scripture, hold just such exalted positions: the point being that they are servants not in the sense that they are doing debasing work, but in the sense that they are not fully their own. They are representatives of another. They serve at the behest and at the pleasure of another.

And that’s why the case of Moses is so revealing. The issue in Exodus rests in the conflict between those who serve the Pharaoh and those who serve the one God. That’s what the Bible cares about: not **whether** you serve but **who** you serve. I’m reminded of what may well be the finest song Bob Dylan wrote during his explicitly Christian phase.

***You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.***

Try as I might to wrestle out of the implications of that song...frankly I've never succeeded! Its logic appears to be pretty iron-clad. And it's that very piece of logic that undergirds what Paul is trying to say here. Those who have places of leadership in the Church must regard themselves as God's servants, not as independent agents...because you can't really be an independent agent. If you are not serving God—as a Christian leader—and if your actions don't point back to God, then you're probably serving your own ego. That never ends well.

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Permit me a final thought: a final thought concerning the ultimate destiny of those who have come to regard themselves as servants of God: and here, of course, I'm most certainly not restricting this to clergy.

Part of our discomfort with the thought of servant-hood has to do, I suspect, with the sense we all have that those who are “in service” are perpetually and eternally trapped there. Those of you who love *Downton Abbey* as much as I love *Downton Abbey* will know that most of the show's tension comes from the changing dynamic of the relationship between the Earl of Grantham's family, and those who are “in service” to the Earl and his family. Despite all of the things that are lovely about that household, it is always clear that those “in service” are not meant to aspire to anything higher or better or nobler. That's why it is such a scandal when the Earl's youngest daughter marries one of the servants. What was she thinking? And how dare he presume to rise about his station? To the extent that's what being a servant is about, no wonder we rebel at the very thought of it. But that overlooks the fact...

...the fact that to serve the living God...to serve the God of Jesus Christ...to serve the God who has promised to wipe away our tears...is to serve a Master who seeks to raise us up, to bring us to a station that so far transcends any reasonable expectation we might have for ourselves, that there may be few words with which to do it justice, though in a pinch, I kind of like the words found in an old Black Gospel hymn. Entitled “Sit down Servant”...it's a song that exists in many different versions, including a lovely one by the Staple Singers. My personal favourite is by American opera singer Florence Quivar. In her version, an overworked, tired to the bones servant—one who has no doubt served in the most menial and degrading of ways—has finally reached the gates of heaven.

The Lord says to the old man: "Sit down servant"...to which the servant responds: "I can't sit down". The Lord repeats: "Sit down servant"...but once again the response is "I can't sit down." And then a third time: "Sit down servant..." to which a further response is made and this is so classic: "My soul's so happy that I can't sit down."

From where I stand, that the real irony—the delicious irony—when it comes to our enlisting in the ranks of service God yearns for us to enter. The good news is simply this: when we place our own ego to one side (I vaguely recall a chap name Jesus admonishing us that we need to lose our lives if we wish to find them)...

...the good news is that those who put their own ego aside in order to serve this particular Master...will discover that they have entered into relationship with One who seeks to humble only in order to exalt...who seeks to judge only in order to show mercy...who seeks to show us the truth about ourselves, that we might be set free all the more fully to participate in a love that never ends.

May we never be ashamed to serve so good and kind and gracious a Master. May we never hesitate to be numbered among those who are privileged to minister in the court of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God!