

of our DNA, our nature, our essence, but I wonder if it is a part of our identity? The mission initiatives here mostly fly under the radar, unobserved, and I rarely hear chatter about it. But it is a significant work that we should embrace and celebrate as a great part of our identity.

Today at the annual meeting we will have our very first congregation-wide discussion about who we want to be in the future as Varsity Acres Presbyterian Church. Notice the language I'm using: "who we want to be". Recall that quote from the beginning of the sermon: "The church is. The church does what it is." When we describe "who we are" (our character qualities) we are describing our identity (who Varsity Acres is)....and how we understand our identity shapes what we do. Over lunch I will be asking you to discuss two things. 1] Who are we now? What is our essence, our nature, our DNA now? Then I'll ask you to discuss who you want us to be? What new character qualities would you like to see us add to our essence, our nature, our DNA?

And as we engage in this process, what does our text remind us about the identity of the church, generally? That we belong to God (God's servants), that we are God's field (a people of growth), God's building (a beautiful expression in the world of Jesus Christ), God's co-workers (a purpose-driven people pursuing God's mission). Is that us, now? Is that the "us" we wish to be?

"Building On The Foundation of Christ"

Date: 25 February 2018

Text: 1 Corinthians 3: 1 - 14

Rev. Peter Coutts

Over the past 8 weeks we have crossed a lot of ground. We've thought about the calling and nature of the church, the challenges our rapidly changing society presents to us as well as the kinds of questions we should be asking as we begin to consider moving into our next 50 years. How should we wrap up these weeks of reflection? I think our text from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth provides a good summary for us. To help us explore this passage I want to highlight a simple description of the church that was laid out by the theologian Craig Van Gelder. He wrote, "The church is. The church does what it is. The church organizes what it does." To put this another way, the church knows its identity in Jesus Christ ("the church is"). That identity gets expressed in all we do as the church, and we organize ourselves to be an authentic expression of our identity.

This formula is really what is at issue in the conflict in the Corinthian church. The root of the conflict is a misplaced sense of identity. Congregants it seems were identifying with certain missionary teachers. "I follow Apollos" some said. Apollos was a prominent missionary in Paul's day. "Well I follow Paul!" others said. This created a rift in the congregation. It may have been that Paul and Apollos also had somewhat different teachings, and if that was the case then the division could have been significant indeed. ("We follow Apollos so we should do things this way!" "No, we should do things the way Paul taught!") Paul's response was to the point: we identify with Christ, not Apollos, not Paul. The church is the body of Christ. The church does as Christ did. Yeah, but we know what this kind of conflict is like. In the Reformation some said, "we follow Luther" while others (like us) said "we follow Calvin." There are umpteen denominations today, and those divisions at times have not served the church at all. We can sympathize with the congregation in Corinth.

That's an obvious example of how our sense of Christian identity can get skewed. But there is a more subtle and pernicious influence that skews Christian faith everywhere in the world, and that's the culture of society where the church is found. *The wider culture the church finds itself in inevitably tugs the Christian faith in its direction.* That's a bold assertion, but here is a vivid example. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer grew up in Germany in the early 20th century. Like other Germans, to him the culture of society was

tightly interwoven with their common Lutheran faith. In fact, Bonhoeffer assumed Lutheran Christianity was the influence that shaped German society. He became a professor at the University of Berlin at the age of 24, and he took those assumptions with him. Those assumptions began to unravel 2 years later when the Nazis ascended to power in January 1933. Two days later on his regular radio program he told his listeners that the country was slipping away from the values of Jesus Christ. Over the next few years he watched in horror as the Lutheran Church was sucked into the Nazi mindset. The Christian faith of those Lutherans was twisted by their identification with Hitler. Then in one moment Bonhoeffer had an epiphany. What was happening so rapidly to the German Lutherans was not unique. He realized that the culture of society always drags Christianity in its direction. And we can see the truth of that around the world where Christianity can look so different from ours.

Three weeks ago we hosted the eminent theologian Darrell Guder. One of his books had a significant impact on me. The thesis of the book's argument is that society's culture (no matter its shape) always draws the church away from the nature Christ intends for her. Consequently Guder asserts that the church needs to be continually converting itself to the Gospel. It is to be our habit to hear Jesus' teachings, reflect on how we identify with Jesus, live out his calling, and resist society's tug.

Paul was addressing the same issue in microcosm in the Corinthian church. Don't identify with me or Apollos—we are Christ's. That roots us for living out our identity as described by Craig Van Gelder. The church is Christ's. The church lives as Christ lives. The church organizes to live this identity. Next Paul moves on from this correction to explore our identification with Christ and Paul does this through metaphors. You are God's field, Paul wrote. Fields are places of growth. What grows is what the farmer plants. And what the farmer wants is a bountiful harvest rising up from what was planted. We are God's field. We are to be people of growth in God. Paul wrote, who are Apollos and Paul in comparison. I may have planted the seed of the Christian faith in you. Apollos watered it, encouraging that faith to grow in you. But God is the farmer...God brings the growth. We are God's harvest, so we are to be a people of growth.

In a similar vein Paul holds out another identifying metaphor: "you are God's building." Our foundation, he said, is Jesus Christ. All that we build needs to be on that foundation, be oriented by that foundation. Then Paul acknowledges that it is up to us—the church—how we build on that foundation. He wrote, some may choose hay or straw (meaning the church can be a poor expression of Jesus Christ). But you may also choose gold, silver and costly

stones (the church can be a beautiful, glorious expression of Jesus Christ). And this is a building program that never ends.

In his final identifying metaphor Paul says "you are God's co-workers." God is on God's mission in the world (the "mission Dei"). What makes us God's co-workers is that we, the church, are one of God's strategies for fulfilling that mission. So every congregation periodically needs to reflect on God's mission and discern how we (in our uniqueness) can do our part in pursuing that mission, given the context of our congregation. Within these three different ways to describe our identity there is one constant theme. Paul reminds us "You are God's...you are God's...you are God's." We are God's possession.

So here we have four descriptions of our identity: that we are God's belongings (God's servants), that we are God's field (a people of growth), God's building (a beautiful expression of Jesus Christ in the world), God's co-workers (a purpose-driven people pursuing God's mission). This is who we are to be. And as Craig Van Gelder put it, "the church does what it is." What we do flows from our identity.

Given this, it is important for a congregation to reflect periodically on how we do identify ourselves. How do we understand and describe our nature, our essence, our DNA? So let's conduct a little exercise. Suppose your neighbour asks you one day, "who is Varsity Acres Presbyterian Church?" How would you describe us, our church: our nature, our essence, our character qualities? (I will give you a moment to think about that). In my time among you I've begun to get some insight into the nature of Varsity Acres Church. Most centrally this congregation is a community of Christian care. Your congregational history ("Life and Joy") makes it clear that this has been the orientation from the very beginning. It is also evident today, day by day. You hear Christian care in the concern and conversations of people. I find Varsity Acres Church is also a people of prayer. If a minister is in the room Presbyterians will typically ask the parson to pray. Not here. Scripture readers at worship typically offer a prayer for inspiration before they read. Committee convenors lead prayer at meetings even when I'm at the table. And I hear people talking about prayer. Prayer is more visible within this congregation compared to many congregations I've worked with. And that's wonderful!

Varsity Acres also has a heart for mission. There are a lot of congregants here involved in a lot of mission work: Inn from the Cold, The Drop In Centre, coffee time at the Longbow apartment, Bedding and Towels for Oxford House, Prayer Shawl Ministry, Foodbank, English Conversation Club, Side by Side, working with refugees new to Canada. This is certainly part