

**Sermon: February 16, 2020 – 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Last Sunday night was the annual broadcast of the Academy Awards. As usual, we tuned in to about half of it and as usual, we've seen perhaps two of the films that generated nominees, but that doesn't lessen our enjoyment of the evening. It is frustrating that the Academy just can't bring itself to nominate female directors or non-white actors, which points to bigger issues in the industry and society around whose stories get told, and by whom, but that made it doubly satisfying when the South Korean film ("Parasite") toppled the big-money big-studio productions, taking home the evening's biggest awards.

What strikes me when watching this show each year, is how much I rely on what somebody else says about somebody else, in my scant knowledge of the movie industry. The presenters obviously know many of the nominees, as co-workers or friends or rivals, but I don't personally know any of them. Movie critics help teach me about the craft and the personalities involved, and then I make up my own mind when I watch the movie or hear the actors being interviewed, but it's all still mediated through people who are closer to the action than I am.

In a way, much of the Bible functions in this way. First-hand witnesses tell of their experiences with the Divine and though I don't know them directly, I come to know and trust them through the telling of their personal accounts. Second or third-hand accounts also abound, with Biblical authors weaving together sacred stories from various sources, bringing guidance and encouragement to those of us who are far away in time and space. While it is always a good idea to do some reading and research to push the credibility of some of these witnesses, I am, deeply indebted to these intermediaries, who have helped me to go deeper into my own story and my own walk with the living God.

This morning's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians includes a reference to someone who has long intrigued me, someone not known at all to me but personally known to Paul, the author of this letter, and very familiar to the Church in Corinth, the letter's recipients. This person was named Apollos. In the book of Acts and throughout 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, we are told that there were divisions in the early Church, with various groups pledging allegiance to the apostles Peter, or Paul, or Apollos, or directly to Jesus with no intermediary. Paul, aware of the divisions but not wanting to play into it, zeroes in on the specific debate he felt most able to solve, and writes this: "5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 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."

What a healthy, respectful way to state this. Paul sees his job as setting the foundation: introducing people to the story and most basic understandings of Jesus, and how Jesus fits in to God's big story of reconciling love, and then Apollos takes over in encouraging their God-given Spiritual growth. The seed is of God, the growth is from God, and Paul and Apollos each play a role, gardeners given the job of tending the fertile fields of living, learning and loving in the name of Jesus. It is perhaps telling that Paul doesn't refer to Peter here, but that's another sermon.

So, who was this Apollos, and why would people be specifically drawn to his approach? The Bible gives us a few leads, but we also turn here to some long-standing Christian traditions. Apollos is understood to be a devout Jew from Alexandria, in northern Egypt, one of the great intellectual centres of its day. Eastern Orthodox Christianity lists him as one of the 70 disciples sent out by Jesus, and thereby a first-hand witness of the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, though the book of Acts (18:24-28) suggests he may originally have been a disciple of John the Baptist, only later attaching himself to the mission of Jesus. We are told that he moved around quite a bit in his life, starting in Alexandria, likely spending time in Judea or Galilee, then ending up as a missionary in Ephesus, Achaia, and Corinth. St. Jerome suggested that Apollos was just as disappointed as Paul

was in the divisions of the Church and because of this, removed himself to the island of Crete for a period of time so that more people wouldn't declare allegiance to him rather than allegiance to God in Christ. If this was so, we have another great example of personal spiritual maturity: just as Paul stepped back and refused to see Apollos as a rival, Apollos stepped back and refused to let his personal popularity get in the way of people really embracing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Apollos is remembered as one who taught about Jesus with great enthusiasm and accuracy, though sometimes local Church leaders – like Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth – needed to instruct him on the full breadth of the Christian experience. As an interesting aside, the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church commemorates Priscilla, Aquila and Apollos all together on a special day each year – February 13<sup>th</sup>, just three days ago. What we don't entirely know, is why some people were so drawn to his style of leadership rather than Paul's, though we can make a good guess.

We're all familiar with Paul, and his style. Paul was a doctrine guy: start with the principles, work your way out to the application. Paul was also famous for his long, legalistic sentences, one in particular (Ephesians 1:3-14) exceeding 250 words! Apollos, by contrast, was raised and educated in Alexandria and that place was famous for training philosophers in the use of Allegory. Double-checking to make sure that I wasn't confusing allegory and analogy, stories like *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, or the tales of *Narnia* by CS Lewis, are cited as Allegories. So while Paul would give the more linear presentation, it's likely that Apollos was a story-teller, weaving stories full of symbolism to illustrate the realities of God and Christ and how we are called to treat one another. I can certainly see where someone would be more drawn to one of these approaches, than the other.

And I can also see where Paul could say to people, there's no competition here; the goal, is to spread the good news of Jesus, an invitation by the God of love for us to love one another fully and passionately and without discrimination. In our reading today we also heard Paul use the metaphor of milk and meat to describe the difference between what we need when we begin our journey with Jesus, and the more complex ideas and actions we are ready to engage when we get deeper into that journey, and that may describe the Paul-and-Apollos process, too: some will be captured first by story and then have the details filled in by linear thought, others will be struck by the more academic side first of all, with story coming in later to personalize it.

One way or another, this scripture is a great reminder to those of us who step into a pulpit, Sunday after Sunday, that God uses a great variety of styles and gifts to help advance us in our spiritual journeys, none of which is perfect but all of which can contribute. Back in 2016, when we had our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation, I recall looking at the rogues' gallery out in the narthex, and all the ministers who have served this place since 1891. Some of them we know more about than others: I hear what a formidable presence Doc MacKinnon was, for example, back in World War II; and for me, there's those I've met and got to know to varying degrees: Malcolm Profitt, Ron Jeffrey, Catherine MacLean & Earl Reaburn, Sue Hertell, Bruce McIntyre; and then there's the host of other leaders I know only through Mary Smith's wonderful history book. Each of us have had our strengths and weaknesses, each of us have helped the congregation accomplish things, and each of us have likely dropped the ball by being absent or distracted when someone really needed more. Some of us are better at planting, others better at watering, and we pray that the growth is ultimately up to Creator God.

What is perhaps clearest, though, both when we consider our local religious history, and in the more global scheme, is that the Church is at its best and most faithful, when we realize the actual role of Ministers and entire congregations, in the overall scheme of Jesus' mission. We are at our best when we humbly discern and act upon the calling of Christ Jesus, allow our course to be altered by the winds of the Holy Spirit, recognize God's own gift of life in the face of our neighbour and the cries of the planet. Hear once more those words from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians: <sup>5</sup>What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup>I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup>So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. <sup>8</sup>The one who plants and the one who waters have

a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. <sup>9</sup> For we are God's servants, working together."

I am reminded of a story I shared with you a couple of years ago: in 1998, I was at a terrific annual training institute hosted by the Crystal Cathedral down in Orange County, California. The speaker that afternoon was a man named Millard Fuller, but he was introduced not by name, but simply as "President and Founder of Habitat for Humanity." Mr. Fuller came out on stage, surveyed the murmuring crowd and said, "this is one disappointed looking room – y'all thought you were going to see Jimmy Carter, didn't you?" And then he continued, with words that frequently cross my mind: "I'm fine with not being a household name, because years of house-building with Habitat has proven to us what others have said before us - that great things can be accomplished when nobody cares who gets the credit". **Great things can be accomplished when nobody cares who gets the credit.** What a great line, and so reminiscent of what Paul said about the insignificance of Paul and Apollos compared with what God was accomplishing. And as kind of a funny aside, as Millard Fuller alluded to, I recall these as his words, but the same words have been attributed to everyone from British journalist Charles Montague, to US President Harry Truman, to legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden! Truly, getting credit for something, is way less important than the good that is accomplished, and at our best we realize that if there is credit to be attributed, it is all to the glory of God.

And so we examine our lives, and the life of this congregation, and the ongoing events in the world around us, with a view to God's bigger hopes and goals. I read with pride how the United Church of Canada has been in dialogue with Indigenous leaders throughout the Wet'suwet'en standoff, yet I yearn for a resolution in which communication and respect between cultures and within cultures can increase. I recall the November night in 2015 here in this room, when a community meeting formed the Bow Valley Syria Refugee Project, entrusting Ralph Connor to be the host and home of that project – but where that starts to really matter, is in our preparations to welcome our second sponsored family, Dana and Wa'll to this community sometime in the next few weeks, and celebrating the babies that both Sevan and Rima are expecting this May, and praying that peace will somehow be found in Syria, and Palestine, and throughout the Middle East. Next Sunday after Worship, we will consider the Mission that Christ has given us to do, and how our physical facilities can be adapted to help that to happen; and in that whole process the bottom line, is service – how this congregation and its building, can support spiritual growth and community development in future, that process of God-given growth described by 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3.. And then there is your analysis, of your life: What actions are you equipped to undertake, in order to foster reconciliation, to invite diversity and inclusiveness into your words and actions, to be a more faithful steward of planet earth? What supports do you need, for your life to provide fertile ground in which Christ's vision of far-reaching love can grow and flourish?

There are many ways for us to hear God's age-old message of love. We give thanks for the various messengers who have shared the message over the ages, yet our focus is on the love itself, Christ's love that is just begging to find a home in our words and actions and funded priorities. We give thanks for the different styles of service shown in Canmore's Churches, here and at St. Michael's, Trinity, Crossways, Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran, Mountain Baptist, Our Lady of the Rockies, and in smaller house gatherings, and we pray that between us everyone in this town will find a safe place where Christ's irrepressible love is known. We open ourselves to be surprised by what comes next in life, and pray for God's own adaptiveness as we engage those new challenges. One plants, one waters, God gives the growth. All of us, in the kin-dom of God, are servants together. May this be so. Amen.

Sources consulted:

Chaw, Walter. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/10/opinion/parasite-oscar-best-picture.html>

Fuller, Millard. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kk-poYwckco>

<https://literarydevices.net/allegory/>

Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. <https://www.lcms.org/worship/church-year/commemorations>

MacDonald, Dennis. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/related-articles/alexandria-and-allegory>

Myallis, Rob. <http://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/2017/02/1-corinthians-31-9.html>

Pope Benedict XVI, <http://catholicsaints.mobi/ebooks/book-articles/b16-saint-barnabas-the-apostle.htm>

Wikipedia. "Apollos" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollos>

© 2020 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church