

## Children

Volunteers at church are important people. They sing in the choir. They teach Sunday school. When someone needs a ride to church, a volunteer picks up that person.

Is a volunteer paid a lot of money? Right: a volunteer isn't paid any money. A volunteer is someone who does things to help other people and doesn't expect to receive any money for helping.

Are you ever a volunteer here at church? What are some ways that you can be a volunteer here on Sunday morning? What are these in my hand? (Let them answer.) We can hand out bulletins before church begins. We can pick up bulletins left in the pews when church is over. We can help wipe up punch spilled on the floor during the coffee/punch time after church. We can help a younger child get a drink at the water fountain. We can open the church door so a younger child can come in.

I want to tell you a little rhyme about being a volunteer.

Every Sunday morning  
I will try to be  
A helpful volunteer.  
Just watch me and you'll see.

Now please listen while I say it by myself once more. Then we'll all say it together.

II

Good morning, boys and girls. A famous economist\* made an interesting statement recently. "There isn't a single person in the world who can make a pencil," he said. The wood may have come from a forest in Washington, the graphite from a mine in South America, the eraser from a Malaysian rubber plantation. "Thousands of people," he concluded, "cooperate to make one pencil." That's fascinating to me. All those people to make this one little pencil.

I read about the giant Sequoias out in California--some of the largest trees in the world--and found out that they have tiny roots that lie near the top of the soil. How in the world do they stand up so tall, I wondered, with those tiny roots so near the surface? Someone explained that they intertwine their roots with other Sequoias nearby. They help keep each other up. And I realized that this is one of the great secrets of life.

It is one of the great secrets of this church. We need one another. We lean on one another sometimes and when we work together we accomplish more than any of us could ever accomplish working on our own. We call that cooperation don't we? Cooperation is important at school, on the playground, in our families and all sorts of places. But most of all, it is what the church of Jesus Christ is all about. We belong to Him, but we also belong to one another.

## Adult I

Sometimes age and experience force us to reevaluate long held beliefs about the world and the way life works. As idealistic youths in Sunday school and Luther League, for instance, my friends and I vexed and perplexed our ultra-orthodox pastor by arguing against the doctrine of original sin. We were convinced that people were innately and instinctively good. And then we grew up and were "mugged by reality": stung by the selfishness that lies hard by the heart of each and every mortal being, including ourselves. Some among us once believed in some form of elemental fairness and justice in this life. And then we saw virtuous people suffer great hardship and heartache, while others who lived only for themselves prospered and flourished.

Part of growing up is shedding ideas and notions that fit us no better than toddlers' clothes would fit us now. "Older and wiser" is the phrase that comes to mind. But sometimes, age and experience reinforce long held views. I have, for example, long believed that the Christian faith is by definition countercultural. What I mean is this: Many of the central tenets and themes of the Christian faith run counter to the prevailing beliefs and values of the society in which we live. A few examples: Ours is a culture that values material abundance and prosperity; Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor." Our culture denies death and avoids suffering; the Christian faith unromantically confronts death, teaches that suffering holds redemptive power, and sees the suffering and death of one man as the gate to life for all people. Our culture makes heroes of rugged individualists; baptism gathers God's family into community. Indeed, the God we worship -- one God in three persons -- St. Augustine described as a "community of love."

Our culture warns against mixing religion and politics; the God of the Bible is highly political, and nowhere is the political manifesto of that God more clearly articulated than in the Sermon on the Mount, a portion of which forms today's Gospel reading. The themes of that sermon are highly countercultural. They ran counter to the beliefs and practices of first century Israel and Rome, and they run counter to the beliefs and practices of late twentieth century America.

From an itinerant rabbi whom faith acclaims as God's only Son comes an astonishing reversal of human values and mortal ways of going about the business of life. But one glance at the morning news is all it takes to see that the great reversals Jesus proclaims are not very widely in evidence among those who name the name of Jesus: Serbs and Croats -- many of them Christians -- murder each other in a protracted and bloody war whose root causes few of us comprehend, and even fewer of us care about.

In our land, where Christians still comprise a plurality if not a majority, there is a growing resentment not only of anti-poverty programs, the effectiveness of which is certainly open to reasonable debate, but more dangerously, a resentment of poor people themselves. And giving to organizations and efforts to fight hunger -- in this congregation and many communities of faith -- is dramatically down, despite increased need and -- for many who could respond -- increased income.

It is well known that Mohandas Gandhi was a great admirer of the Sermon on the Mount. A confused reporter once asked him, "If you like the Sermon on the Mount, then what do you think about Christianity?" Gandhi replied, "I think it would be wonderful." Gandhi's reply is at once both comical and a stinging indictment of Jesus' followers.

Our Lord's sermon describes an old way (an eye for an eye, for example, and a tooth for a tooth) and then commends a new and better way (turn the other cheek; do not resist an evildoer.) Such countercultural preaching typifies the mission and ministry of our Lord. Recall some other of his statements: "The first shall be last and the last first." That's countercultural!

"Whoever would be great among you must be your servant. And whoever would be first among you must be slave of all." That's countercultural!

"Those who would save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake and the gospel's sake will save them." That's countercultural!

"Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." That's countercultural!

God's way of being with us runs counter to our expectations of who God is and how God ought to act. God comes as a baby, cradled in a feed trough; God dies on a cross, convicted like a common criminal. The countercultural mystery of the gospel is that that coming and that cross are more powerful than any regime, any power or principality in the world; more powerful than any sloth, apathy or lovelessness in our hearts and souls, for that coming and that cross simply are the power of God's perfect love.

When we hear the stark and startling demand Jesus makes in the closing verse of today's text, "Be perfect," we do well to remember that it is precisely God's perfect love and not our moral and spiritual striving that has the power to perfect us. God's perfect love emboldens and sustains us to swim against the currents of our culture when those currents flow counter to the perfect will of the holy and righteous God. When we hear the demand of perfection and shudder at the impossibility of fulfilling it, we do well to remember that the God who says "Be perfect" is the same God who said "Let there be light" ... and there was light! This God brings about his holy and perfect will by calling into being that which did not previously exist: light in darkness, order out of chaos, countercultural followers of Jesus from those whose lives were once indistinguishable from those of the surrounding culture.

People who hear Jesus' sermon and hearken to it find themselves living countercultural lives, by the grace of God. For when people learn to turn cheeks, surrender cloaks, go second miles and love their enemies, they demonstrate that they are living by the values of God's coming kingdom rather than by the values of the present age.

Those who place their trust in the God whose perfect will Jesus' sermon proclaims find themselves no longer consumed by the love of power, but perfected by the power of love. And in late twentieth century America, my friends, that sort of lifestyle is definitely countercultural.

## II

Peter Hanson once gave a speech in which he told what a moving experience it was even for him, a Canadian, to visit the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. This was not long after that memorial was constructed. Hanson described watching crowds of people of all ages reach up to touch the cold wall of granite rising out of the ground, containing the names of every American soldier known to have died in that tragic conflict--approximately 50,000 of them.

Some people who came to visit that memorial just stood and stared, said Hanson. Others broke down and wept. "Why?" they all seemed to be asking. Fifty thousand young boys taken from loving families to fight a war that many found difficult to justify. Fifty thousand American soldiers who would never return home. Fifty thousand brave young men slain in that terrible conflict.

But Peter Hanson wasn't giving this speech to debate the merits of the Vietnam War. He was making another point. Hanson continued, "Fifty thousand--that is also the number of Americans who are killed by cigarettes every eight weeks." (1)

That will make you think, won't it? Fifty thousand people . . . every eight weeks . . . People dying because of the harmful effects of nicotine.

Please don't think I am picking on cigarette smokers this month. I was just captured by the dramatic picture Peter Hanson gives us of this particular health problem.

It reminds me of the words of St. Paul. He writes, "Do you not know that you are God's temple . . . ?" What a sad thing when any human being abuses his or her body in anyway. We are God's temple. Think about what that means.

That is one way St. Paul used the imagery of followers of Christ as the Temple of God. He is telling us to take care of our body, for that body is where God abides. In I Corinthians 6:19-20 he writes: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies." Paul is saying that our physical bodies are the Temple of God.

That is one way in which Paul says we are the Temple of God. But there is another. That is found in today's lesson in chapter 3 of this same epistle. Paul is writing to the Corinthian church--a church in conflict. The source of this conflict? Some in the church are claiming to be followers of Paul while others are claiming to be followers of Apollos, a skilled preacher much admired in the early church.

In other words, some of the members are still linked to their former pastor and will not accept the current pastor while some others in the congregation have now grown close to the new pastor and are saying bad things about his predecessor. That happens, doesn't it? Oh, not in our church, of course. But I've heard of it happening in other churches.

We're human beings. We all have different preferences. We have different needs. And we respond to different personalities. It's human, but it also can be destructive. It can tear up a church.

Paul counsels the church at Corinth to grow up. "Who is Paul?" he asks. "Who is Apollos?" Paul plants, Apollos waters, but, he notes, it is God who gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6).

In this lesson Paul compares the church to a specific kind of building. He notes in order to construct this building, he laid the foundation, now another is building on that foundation. The basic foundation, however, is Christ, and that is all that matters--not individual personalities. It is certainly not worth tearing up a congregation over which of the builders is superior. In this context Paul writes, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him."

God's temple in this passage is the church. We as a body are the temple of the living God. And it is a terrible thing when the body of Christ is torn apart with dissension. Think about it for a moment. We as a church are the Temple of God. What does that say to you? It says three important things to me.

**First of all, the church is a living body.** "This is the church," goes the little nursery rhyme, "This is the steeple; open the door and here are the people." Wrong! The church IS the people! The church is not the steeple nor the windows nor the door. Stone, mortar and glass will never constitute the church. A building is simply where the church meets. It is not the church. The church is a living, breathing, growing, influencing body infused with the spirit of the living God. At least, that is what the church is supposed to be.

"I am building a church," said a small boy playing with a set of blocks, "and we must be very quiet."

His father, eager to encourage this unexpected act of reverence, asked, "Why are we to be quiet in church?"

"Because," the boy replied, "the people are asleep."

Heaven help us if that is how we perceive the church or if that is the way others perceive us. The church of Jesus Christ must be the most alive, most dynamic, most awake institution on this planet.

A visitor to the Grand Canyon once stood speechless before the grandeur of that marvelous sight. Finally he recovered enough to exclaim, "I wish I had been here to see this happen."

The ranger standing nearby said, "You are!"

The ranger was saying that the Grand Canyon is still happening. That mighty gorge in the earth is still changing, still growing. So it is with the church.

There is no institution on earth that authoritarian regimes around the world want to muzzle more than the church. That's true in China, it's true in Russia, it's true in some Moslem nations, it's true wherever people are being oppressed. The church is no dead museum for displaying the relics of a bygone era. The church is alive, and well, and making God's voice known in human affairs.

When young St. Francis of Assisi knelt before the life-sized crucifix in the little tumbledown chapel of St. Damien, he heard God's voice. "Renew my church," Francis heard God say. St. Francis was not sure what that summons meant. Taking it literally at first, he went to work restoring the badly decayed chapel itself--begging, buying, borrowing stones and timbers. He saw before long, however, that something far more costly was being asked of him. It was not the church building that needed renewing, but the interior life of church people, which is a much more difficult task.

That is our summons today as well. The church is alive, but it is constantly in need of renewing. The church is God's temple. It is the living body of Christ.

**Individual members of the church, then, are partners with Christ carrying on God's work.** We build on a foundation that others have laid. This is an important principle. Paul plants, Apollos waters.

Let's use an example. James Watt was the "inventor" of the steam engine. Right? Wrong. Peter Drucker in one of his books notes that Thomas Newcomen in 1712 built the first steam engine which actually performed useful work. It pumped water out of an English coal mine. Watt's steam engine was simply more refined--it was "state of the art" we would say today. The true inventor of the combustion engine, however, and with it what we call modern technology, was neither Watt nor Newcomen. It was the great Anglo-Irish chemist Robert Boyle, who did so in a "flash of genius."

Only, Boyle's engine did not work and could not have worked. For Boyle used the explosion of gunpowder to drive the piston, and this so fouled the cylinder that it had to be taken apart and cleaned after each stroke. Boyle's idea, however, enabled first Denis Papin (who had been Boyle's assistant in building the gunpowder engine), then Newcomen, and finally Watt, to develop a working combustion engine. Boyle had the idea, and the others built on that foundation.

That is the nature of all knowledge. It is also the nature of the church. We are Christ's assistants in building God's temple. He uses us, if we will let Him, to build something beautiful and lasting. None of us are prima donnas. None of us are stars. We are but co-builders.

Someone once said, "All the world's a stage--but nobody wants to be a stagehand." We are all stagehands; each of us has a role to play; none of us are stars.

Pitcher Lefty Gomez was a talented baseball player. When he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, a reporter walked up to him and asked, "Lefty, what was your secret?"

Lefty smiled, his eyes began to sparkle, and he replied, "Two things. Clean living and a fast infield."

Lefty was acknowledging that he alone wasn't responsible for all his victories. He had teammates, particularly in the infield, who were helping him.

George MacDonald once noted that one draft horse can move two tons of weight. But two draft horses in harness, working together, can move twenty-three tons of weight.

MacDonald put his finger on the strength of the church. When we work together, we can perform miracles. Literally. Perhaps that is why Jesus said, "Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:19). Not one person asking alone, but two or three agreeing and then asking. And then working together. That's how things are accomplished in the kingdom of God.

**One thing is clear from St. Paul's words. It is a serious matter when seeds of dissension are sown in a congregation.** We have a world to save. We don't have time for petty bickering.

Cotton Mather, the Puritan divine, once made a very astute observation about bees. He noticed that every swarm has its own unique scent, and when different swarms meet, the conflicting smells trigger a fight. However, Mather also noticed that when the bees are pollinating plants, they get covered with pollen nectar which masks the smell of the individual groups. When they all smell the same, there is no competition and their work gets done.

So it is in the church. When we are busy fulfilling our purpose of connecting people to one another and connecting people to God, we don't have time nor the inclination to engage in petty bickering.

We are the temple of the living God. Each of us is a building block in that temple. Imagine what would happen to the temple if the blocks were in conflict with one another. Nothing would get done. This is serious business. It is so serious that St. Paul said, "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him." Members of Christ's body are to work out their petty grievances than get back to the business of building Christ's Kingdom.

One last thing needs to be said, however. **The foundation of God's temple is Christ himself.** There is no other foundation.

Joyce Carey, a British writer, was once asked how he put his novels together. Obviously, there are many ways a novel can be constructed. It may be scribbled from an introductory idea, with episodes added on as the plot begins to unfold in the author's

mind. Or it can be designed by piecing together a sequence of casual events as a loose outline which is filled in from the writer's imagination.

According to Carey, however, wise writers will begin with the sketch of a central episode, working back to a beginning and outworking an ending. (3)

For Christians the central episode in human history is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are inspired by his example and empowered by his presence in our lives. Our perspective on history is unique. We focus on the world outside, but we always view it from the foot of the cross. In everything we do we pray that we do it in the love and spirit of Christ. He is the founder of the church, but more than that, his spirit is to infuse everything we do. He is the cornerstone of it all.

Most of us are familiar with the name Bill Lear. Lear is best known as the father of the Lear jet. Bill Lear made a childhood resolution to make enough money so that he could not be stopped from finishing anything. A tinkerer, inventor, and self-made millionaire, Lear made a fortune with the Learscope and other navigational aids for aviation. He later branched out into stereo systems and communications satellites. He was in his sixties when he launched the first Learjet, producing the ultimate personal aircraft at a price that most top executives could not resist.

At 65, Lear sold the business, but did not like the lifestyle of being a Beverly Hills millionaire. So he established a laboratory in Reno, Nevada, where he worked on developing a better steam engine and improving his jet aircraft. Lear kept working, even when he knew he was dying of leukemia. His last words to one of his colleagues were: "Finish it? You bet we'll finish it." Unfortunately, Bill Lear didn't finish his work. He left that for his colleagues. (4)

Jesus' last words to his disciples were "Go make disciples . . . ." In other words, "finish what I have begun." And that is his command to us today. Finish what Christ started. Finish what Paul and Apollos added. Finish what millions of saints through the ages, including many who are dear to us, have added to that.

Like the Grand Canyon, God's temple is still happening--still growing--still changing. And we are part of it. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?" God's temple. That's who you and I are. Let's get busy following in the footsteps of Christ and his saints, building God's temple until it encompasses everyone on earth.

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1. Pete G. Hanson, *Stress for Success* (New York: Doubleday), pp. 20-56.

2. *Joyful Newsletter*, 189, p. 2, Robert C. Savage.

3. David Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

4. Peter Hay, *The Book of Business Anecdotes* (New York, New York: Facts On File Publications).