

EPHPHANY: A TIME TO CELEBRATE GOD'S GIFT FOR ALL PEOPLE

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 13, 2011

Psalm 119:1-8
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
I Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

You are not ready!

Hard words to hear.

Maybe we've heard them from someone denying us an opportunity – “You're not ready for this job, come back when you've got more experience.” Maybe it's meant as a slam – “You're just a kid!”

Sometimes I wonder about the Apostle Paul. It sounds like he's right in his assessment of the folks back in Corinth. They don't sound spiritually mature. And that may be understandable, given the newness of Christ's revelation, the world-confounding nature of the cross, and the confusing pictures of faith being presented to them from many different sources: Rome, Jerusalem, Paul, Apollos, Cephas...

But for someone who wants to be seen as their father in faith (1 Cor 4:14-16), calling them babies might not be the best approach. “You are like babies as far as your faith in Christ is concerned. So I had to treat you like babies and feed you milk” (3:1b-2a, CEV). While logically consistent, it is emotionally charged. This kind of argument has seldom worked *on* me, and never worked *for* me!

The problem as Paul identifies it is quarreling rooted in jealousy (*zelos*: zeal/jealousy). It sounds very similar to the struggles in the synoptic gospels over which disciples are greatest. Whose group is best? (The same kind of issue will arise later in this letter in Paul's concern over who eats first and best, chapter 11; conflicts over spiritual gifts, chapters 12-14; perhaps also in who exercises judgment over church members, chapters 5-6.)

Paul seems initially less concerned about the substance of the debates than the divisive character of how the debates are being conducted. This envious strife is proof that Christ is missing from their fellowship. Yet it may well be that Paul's intervention excites that conflict. Later in the letter, the apostle recognizes that “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial” (10:23a, NRSV). He may be right on the merits – but his second letter back to Corinth is a pretty good indication that things have not gone well.

Paul, the imperfectly reformed zealot, knows that this divisive quarreling is sinful. It might serve us well, when we face conflicts in our relationships, to take a step back and ask what is going on.

There are all kinds of reasons why we might act “like babies,” and if we are to “grow up” in faith, it helps to know how we need to grow.

We might tolerate milk but not meat due to pain. Have you ever had dental issues that made it impossible to chew? Pain can make even mature adults act “like babies.” Have you ever known someone who had surgery and needed a liquid diet to recuperate? And some among us avoid meat for ethical reasons.

It is so difficult to diagnose from afar!

When the name-calling doesn't work, when the metaphors break down, perhaps we should consider treating the symptom.

Now we know why Paul spent so much of the previous chapters speaking about boasting. There is, I fear, no cure for jealousy and quarreling but to simply lay them down. “What is Apollos? What is Paul?... God's servants, working together...” (3:5, 9). It is best to step aside, for this is not Paul's business, nor Apollos' kingdom, nor Peter's project. It is God's.

This congregation, this people, this great good news of Jesus Christ, these are not objects to be fought over. No church member and no apostle owns this mission field. It is God's. It is God's, and all who labor in this field have a common purpose. We might not see it today, in the midst of our strife. But we should.

When will we be ready to belong to God, and follow that foolish, cross-illuminated path that is salvation?

This week's Reflection was prepared by Paul Bellan-Boyer who lives in Jersey City, New Jersey. To see Paul's reflections throughout the year, visit his blog at citycalledheaven.blogspot.com.

This week we remember to pray for the work of: Europe-Middle East Area Service Center – with thanks to God for the work of the Center; and with prayers for the staff serving and supporting Bible work in nearly 60 countries, for General Secretaries sharing with and supporting each other and trying to respond positively to the many needs and opportunities, for the new Area Secretary, and for Area board members and Bible Society board members as they seek to lead and make wise decisions with the help of the Holy Spirit; **Africa Area Service Center** – with thanks to God for his guidance and protection, for a renewed spirit of prayer among the staff, and for improvements in grant claims and project reporting; and with prayers for blessings on national Bible Societies' efforts to reach audiences with relevant Scriptures; also pray that Christians will increase their giving to Bible Society projects, that churches and Christians will place the Bible at the center of their lives, that peace and good governance will prevail on the continent, and that the staff will remain passionate about the Bible cause and be committed to serving the national Bible Societies; **Americas Area Service Center** – with thanks to God that over 24,000 Catholic leaders have been trained to replicate *Lectio Divina* among parish leaders and that a *Lectio Divina* edition of the New Testament and the revised training manual have been published; and with prayers for *Lectio Divina* now in 18 countries, for the 49 translations the Center is involved in, especially four sign language projects and Chile's Romani Old Testament; pray for the board, General Secretary, and staff of UBS in Ecuador as they

reinitiate Bible ministry there, and for the printing of three indigenous-language Bibles; also pray that the renewed agreement between UBS and the Latin American Episcopal Conference will mean a new generation of Catholic leaders engage with and live by God's Word; **Asia-Pacific Service Center** – with thanks to God for the opportunities that they have in serving the Bible Societies in their Area and that God continues to equip them for service in numerous areas, such as translation, finance, and program; and with prayers for protection over the staff, especially those who are traveling throughout the year; **World Service Center** – with thanks to God for the work of the service center; and with prayers that they may be kept holy and humble, working as led by the Holy Spirit; pray for the new General Secretary, for his deepening understanding of the diverse needs of the UBS fellowship, and that, under his leadership, they will be inspired and achieve much; also pray for the departments of – Governance, Communications, Fundraising Development, Finance and Business Development, Grants Management, Program, and Translation Services – that they may be service-driven and mission-led, enabling the Fellowship to work together.

Activity Corner: “Have No Fear”

Supplies needed: Bible, slips of white paper, small bag, pens or pencils

Instruct group members to sit in a circle and read 1 Corinthians 3:1-9. The Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Corinth speaks to obvious divisions among the brethren. He stresses the fact that “we are partners working together.” The idea is that we must be unified in our efforts. Engage the group in a discussion on what it means to be partners and about some of the things that prevent us from working together. Point out that fear and mistrust are elements that prevent us from being unified. Distribute the strips of paper and ask them to write down what they fear the most about working with others. Afterwards, collect the strips and place them in a bag. Then, read each entry to the group, instructing them to listen for fears similar to their own. Discuss each with a view to highlight that most of the times our fears are common, and encourage the group to offer ideas on how to deal with such fears.