

10-11 #12

Guidelines for Spiritual Growth

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalms 119:1-8

Matthew 5:21-37

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Normally I don't really care if you read along with me while I read the sermon text for the day, but today, I kindly request that you read along.

1And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.

Even now you are still not ready, 3for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? 4For when one says, "I belong to the Orthodox Church," and another, "I belong to the Catholic Church," and yet another "I belong to the Protestants," are you not merely human?

5What then is the Catholic Church? What is Protestant? Structures and beloved people through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6Our forbearers planted, Church structures watered, but God gave the growth. 7So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.

9For we are God's servants, working together;
you are God's field, God's building.

As you can hear, I have compared what was going on back then to what still goes on today. It seems that humans have a tendency to want to compare and contrast and rank people and knowledge in competition, with the goal of wanting to be ranked greater than the others in some way. Paul is telling the Corinthians that they haven't quite fully comprehended what this faith in Jesus Christ was all about then, if they still persist in being jealous and quarreling.

So it seems we as a human race still have much to learn in our knowledge of Christ and in our personal spiritual growth. However – I believe with all my heart that especially with the relatively peaceful transition from the dictatorship of Mubarak to the evolving democratic process in Egypt we have yet one more proof that non-violent conflict resolution – the way of that Christ was showing the world – is becoming more and more understood and used in positive human relationship changes.

Paul was trying to emphasize to the people in Corinth that this new life in this messiah, Jesus – takes some time to grow into, because he has a message that is so subtle – so amazing – so Godly – that it cannot be easily understood by humans, and almost contrary to our natural way of living. It takes time – and they are like babies in the faith, not able to consume the total solid faith yet.

And this is so true for all of us. I am thankful that I have grown in my spiritual discipline and awareness since I was first struggling to understand my faith. And yet, I know that I still have a way to go before I can say that I am not jealous or my desire to quarrel is forever removed from my way of living. To be united as believers sharing our experiences in loving compassionate ways, and not competitive ways is such a wonderful ideal.

The guidelines for this spiritual growth that Paul speaks of are much more clearly laid out in another scripture:

From Philippians 2: 1- 8 "The Message" version of the Bible:

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends.

Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

The reason that this humility is so vital to spiritual unity is because at the root of all our boasting – all our desires for a higher position or role of importance is a basic loneliness. All of us know the fear of being alone. And often humans either try to overcome it by force of will, or sometimes we hide away in fear and become recluses.

Yet, Christ offered another way – he encouraged people to be with each other in their weaknesses; to share with each other all our fears – and to become empowered through our weaknesses to be with each other and to love each other and rejoice with each other.

This is the weakness of Jesus – the suffering one on the cross – the one who ate with lepers and tax collectors and sinners . . . he was cherishing all humanity and uniting us through our common weaknesses. That trust that all will be well, and we one never alone without God, even in our weakest moments, is the source of love and joy.

And this awareness of strength in weakness and unity in purpose is essential to greater human development of the entire world. And I don't believe I exaggerate this. Paul is telling us that WE are God's servants – WE are God's field - WE are God's buildings . . . We are the present and the future of humanity. Because all people – either those workers – or field hands – or cogs in a structured employment – we all are in reality *always* vulnerable. Our lives can turn upside down in a second.

As we can see by Mubarak, and so many others throughout history, even the greatest dictators are vulnerable. The idea of a strong impenetrable human is a pure myth. And uniting as many people together for a common cause of love and truth and righteousness can only be done by uniting together in awareness of our mutual dependence on each other.

Jesus points out that God will make our weaknesses our strength – the truth has power – love has power – power to overcome guns and force and dictators – and bring humanity slowly but surely to peace.

There are great human issues out there in the world – which is one of the most important reasons to fight denominational boundaries and claim life - united as one body of Christ. Because if we are bickering about such small things as doctrinal differences then we are not seeing what unites us as humans – the need for and love of God and each other – and furthermore we need to be united to work together as God's instruments for peace on earth. AMEN