

WGUMC February 23, 2020 “Building and Belonging”
I Corinthians 3:10-23

The great German theologian, Paul Tillich, spoke out early and loudly against the Nazi Party. When he lost his teaching position in 1933, Reinhold Niebuhr invited him to come to the U.S. to teach at Union Seminary in New York City. The sermons he preached at the seminary chapel were collected in a book entitled, “The Shaking of the Foundations.” The 1930’s were certainly a time when the foundations were shaking. Hitler was rising, the stock market falling, and war was coming. The world as we knew it was about to be knocked off its foundations.

Can anyone feel the ground shaking again? You’d think that those of us who live in earthquake country would have an advantage in these situations. But we Californians aren’t much better at keeping our footing than the Corinthians. So, Paul’s word speaks to all of us who worry about the world burning up or the UMC splitting up or racial hatred flaring up or marriages and families breaking up or

careers and dreams going belly up or all of the above. Could we get more worked up?

I don't know about you, but I don't want the upheaval in the world to take me down. I want to plant my feet on some firm and stable ground. So, I was looking forward to spending some time in Colorado with my folks. They were the master builders who laid the foundation for me, and I am so very grateful that I still get to love on both my mom and dad. I just wish it were more often than a couple times a year.

Later this year, my mom will turn 86 and my dad will reach 90. They are both still very active in their church in Loveland. Mom sings in the choir. Dad leads the men's book study. They are also still active in the community. Mom is a 60-year member of the League of Women Voters and volunteers at the homeless services center. My dad goes to Rotary, writes letters to the editor, and volunteers at the Habitat for Humanity thrift store. They have done these kinds of

things throughout their lives, no matter what has been going on in their internal or external worlds.

And I think I know why. One of the topics we talked about while I was there was the need to go through their belongings in preparation for an eventual move into a senior housing facility. They're not quite senior enough, yet! I said that I didn't really want any of the furniture and didn't have a way to get it, but I did want the family Bible from my dad's mom's family. Looking through it this past week made me think of Elva Irelan, my pious Methodist grandmother, who was a rural Nebraska version of Ruby Goodnight. I like to think that they are best buddies in heaven and having tea and cookies right now.

Among the funeral bulletins and obituaries tucked into the pages of that Bible was a yellowed envelope, containing a few slips of paper and a pressed flower. On one of those papers were written the names of the twelve apostles. I have no idea why Grandma Irelan kept this list of names, but I do know that her faith was built on

theirs. And my dad's faith was built on hers and my faith was built on his.

We flatter ourselves when we think that faith is a solo project, that we have crafted it out of our very own resources and founded it on our own personal strivings and struggles. Our faith would be like that section of the border wall that fell over in the wind if we didn't build on a more solid foundation than our own ego and our limited experience. Life is so much bigger than any single life. And faith is so much stronger than any one person's decision to believe.

On whom or what are you building your foundation? In the Bay Area, builders have a big job. They not only have to know building materials and methods, they also have to know soil types, water tables and the location of fault lines. You can have laid the firmest foundation ever, but if there is a fault line running underneath you, you are still going to feel the shaking.

That's what we have been feeling in the UMC. Wesley and his workers built a strong foundation, but ever since the mid 19th

century, there has been the fault line of biblical interpretation that has run underneath our denomination. It ruptured over slavery, women's ordination, the Vietnam War and for the last 40+ years over human sexuality.

We have argued and argued over what the Bible says, relying too much on the so-called wisdom of the world and not enough on the mercy and grace of God. The hope is that by agreeing on a separation at our General Conference in May, we Methodists might be able to quit fighting and get back to building on the sure foundation of Christ. Will it work? I don't know, but Paul says that our work will become visible, the Day will disclose it. He warns us that we may suffer some loss, but we builders will be saved through fire. So, put on your hard hat and grab a hose!

Meanwhile, how do we get back to Christ, our cornerstone, in whom there is no fault at all? It's interesting that Paul doesn't tell us to *go* to church. Instead, he says, you *are* church. He says, "Do you not know that you are God's temple, that the Holy Spirit dwells in

you?” This is the truth that very few of us are ready to hear or willing to accept, either because we don’t feel worthy or we don’t want the responsibility. But Paul is saying that the Spirit of God is already living in us. Regardless of what materials we think we are made out of, we are the temple that sits on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and it is our job to hold—to contain but not constrain—and humbly bear the presence of God for others.

Do you have any idea how mind-blowing this is? Can we even begin to imagine what it means to be God’s temple, to be a holder of God’s presence for others? We would rather talk about the need for God to hold us. How can we possibly hold God? Only by belonging to Christ.

Church is not a denomination or a building; it’s a belonging. For what do we long for in this life more than a sense of belonging or of being longed for? Every one of us has felt left out, shut out, kicked out, and there have been times when we would have done anything just to fit in. When Paul says we belong to Christ, he isn’t talking

about membership in an institution or a club. Belonging to Christ isn't like belonging to any in-group, tribe or faction. Belonging to Christ means finally finding where we fit into reality, discovering that we belong to life.

Remember in John's Gospel where it says that all things came into being, into reality, through Christ. [John 1:3] And in Colossians, it says that all things hold together in Christ. [Colossians 1:17] In other words, Christ is reality. [see Richard Rohr] But here in I Corinthians, Paul says something even more radical than that. All things—in life and death, in the present and the future—it all belongs to us because we belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

Sounds crazy to say that everything belongs to us. What I think Paul means by that is that nothing out there can own us and nothing can disown us: not a country, not a job, not a school, not a church, not a spouse, nothing. We belong to God. God owns everything. It also means that whatever or whomever we are trying

to disown, to exclude from our lives, God has already found a way to include. That's because God's grace is so amazing that all things, even the bad things, are working for good for those who love God, even if we can't see it yet. [Romans 8:28]

Belonging to Christ means all of us and every part of each of us—even the parts we don't like—belong to the divine life that is coursing through our veins and pulsing through our world. The love, the laughter, the miracles and mercies, the good works and good memories, yes! But also the fears and tears, the sins and scars, the pain and the broken promises. All of it belongs to us, and it's going to be ok, because we belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God. As Julian of Norwich said long ago, “And all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.”

As I held my dad's mom's family Bible in Colorado, I thought about the faith of my foremothers and fathers and wondered: how can we be sure that we are building on the same foundation, the foundation that was laid for us in Jesus Christ?

Here's a test: is what we are doing making us feel separate from or farther away from other things and other beings, because if that is what is happening, then we are not building on, we are not yet living in the reality that we belong to Jesus Christ. Whatever makes us feel more connected to life in all of its beauty and all of its ugly, we need to keep doing that. That will keep us building on and belonging to Christ, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. But, unlike what it says in the vows of marriage, not even death can part us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 8:39] Alleluia. Amen.