

WGUMC February 9, 2020 “God is Going to Grow You”  
I Corinthians 3:1-9

The speaker at the National Prayer Breakfast this week, Arthur C. Brooks, a conservative think tank leader and Harvard professor, said some very valuable things about Jesus’ command to love our enemies. But judging from the media reports, it looks like his words, just like Jesus’ words, fell on deaf ears.

The truth is that when it comes to loving anyone at all, we are all still babes in Christ. That means that we are not so far removed from that fledgling church in Corinth. Paul rebukes them because they are quarreling, because they are dividing into factions, or as he puts it, conducting themselves as if they were still “in the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations.” Human inclinations rarely lead to a good thing!

Paul tells them that they are not spiritually mature enough. They can’t go out in the world and make a witness to God’s love because they can’t even love each other. If following Jesus is like

getting an education, they aren't even in preschool yet. They still need spiritual baby food.

And so do we, because all that hate that is out there is coming from somewhere. It is coming from in here. Most of it is coming from our fear. And there's only way I know of to get rid of fear, and that is to get all filled up with love. First John says, "There is no fear in love [there's no room for it because]...Perfect love casts out fear."  
[I John 4:18]

So, love is our baby food. The unconditional love of God is like mother's milk. Think about it. When we come into the world, do we do anything to deserve unconditional love? Quite the contrary. We cause our parents loads of worry, long nights of sleeplessness and endless dirty laundry. And yet, mother's milk is right there for babies. As any brand-new nursing mom will tell you, all babies have to do is cry and the milk starts to flow. And as soon as the baby latches on, the baby starts to grow.

It works the same way with God's love. We didn't do anything to deserve it. Quite the contrary. We cause God eternal worry, heart-breaking, cross-bearing, soul-crushing sadness, and endless dirty laundry. And still, God loves us. All we have to do is cry and the love starts to flow.

But we don't know it and we can't accept it and we try to put all kinds of limits and conditions on it. What we have yet to come to terms with is that we will never stop hating our enemies if we don't stop hating ourselves. And we will never ever learn to love ourselves until we learn that God loves us, regardless.

I went into false labor with my daughter, Kristen. She was a lazy baby, a teenager in the womb, and didn't want to be born. After what seemed like an eternity, they gave me drugs to induce me. When she finally came into the world, she didn't want to wake up. She was jaundiced and the drugs they had given me made her too sleepy to nurse. I remember desperately trying to keep her awake by squirting her little face with water. The doctors were very

concerned that despite all my efforts she wasn't gaining weight. I had to take her into the pediatrician's office what seemed like every day of the week for the first four weeks because they were so afraid that she would waste away.

Our spirits do the same thing when they are so sleepy that we don't know they are hungry, that is, until someone squirts us in the face to wake us up so that we can get enough of the life-giving milk of God's love. We all know people who didn't get enough, who were weaned too early or didn't get any love at all when they were kids. And even though we grow up, we never stop needing it.

As a physician of the soul, I can say that God's milk is so much better than any of the commercially available substitutes. Social media is good at filling us with fear and hate, but it will not fill us with God's unconditional love. Neither will money or political power or social position. Neither will food, friends, or even family. Yes, the failures of even our very best families are proof positive that we need God's love more than anything.

Some of you may have read in the newspaper the story about the longtime pastor of Menlo (used to be Presbyterian) Church. Menlo Church is a megachurch based in Menlo Park with several satellite campuses throughout the South Bay. The church made the news some years ago when it left the Presbyterian Church, USA because they disagreed with the denomination's embrace of LGBTQ persons and pastors.

We have now learned that the senior pastor, John Ortberg, was put on leave late last year after his board found out a volunteer had confessed to him that they had always had a sexual attraction to children. Pastor Ortberg offered prayers and counseling referrals but didn't tell anyone and allowed the volunteer to keep working with kids. The one who blew the whistle and informed the board was the pastor's transgender son whom the volunteer had also confided in. To add insult to injury, the son was then told by his father that he had no right to raise the alarm about a possible pedophile because, after all, he was transgender. Lord, have mercy. All I can say is that

that family, that congregation, is going to need a lot of God's love in the form of spiritual baby food in the months to come.

We should ask ourselves the question: what keeps any of us from filling the holes in our soul and getting the love we so evidently lack? In a word, the answer is *ego*, which is an acronym for "Edging God Out." It can happen to senior pastors, for sure, especially those who stand in the biggest pulpits and are put on the loftiest pedestals. They will be tempted to think, "I can handle this, through the power of my prayers, my personality, my position. I got this. I don't need your help, God." But when pastors are at the peak of power is when they are most in peril.

But we can't just blame pastors, for anybody can let ego get in the way and edge God out. That's what the Corinthians were doing when they were quarreling with each other. That's what we do when we vie for power, divide up into parties, and when we limit our love to those who look, think, love, pray, and vote as we do. I think that we are reluctant to take a sip of that divine milk of mercy because

we are pretty convinced that it will not taste good to our ego. And we are afraid that it will take the edge off of the hunger for power that drives us and divides us, and frankly, in a perverse way, we're having fun.

Friends, if you don't want to let go of your ego, if you don't want to cast out your fear or hand over your hate, then don't get involved with God. William Barber was my classmate at Duke Divinity School. He is now the pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, NC. He's president emeritus of the North Carolina NAACP, founder of the Moral Mondays movement and co-founder of the Poor People's Campaign. He puts it this way: "Don't mess around with God, 'cause he'll grow you. Don't mess around with the Holy Ghost, 'cause it'll stretch you. If you want to stay comfortable, if you want to stay where you are...leave Jesus alone."

Paul was foolish enough not to leave Jesus alone. So, Paul planted churches all over the Mediterranean, including the one in Corinth. Then Apollos came along and watered it. But it was God

who gave them the growth. Likewise, God's love was planted in you a long time ago. God's love has watered you for years. By now you've lived long enough to accumulate some enemies, so that God can grow you.

At the National Prayer Breakfast, Brooks asked the pastors and politicians in the room if they loved someone they didn't agree with. With one notable exception, everyone in the room raised their hand. Then he told a personal story that challenged them to imagine that their enemy could be a beloved member of their own family, a member of God's family.

Loving our enemies gets both harder and easier when it gets personal, when we realize that God loves our adversaries no more and no less than God loves us. And that enables us to love them, not because they are loving, but because the God who loves them is so loveable. It is God who grows us by giving us the grace to love what is of God in our enemies.



God's unconditional love for us is our spiritual baby food. It's what gives us a healthy start in life. But God is waiting for us to grow up, waiting to give us the solid food of the Gospel, which is the grace to love God and our enemies, too. It is, after all, what Jesus died to show us how to do. [Romans 5:10]

If we live long enough, God's love will take us to places we never thought we'd go. God's love will stretch our heart muscles, strengthen our hope muscles, and lift up our heads so we can stand taller and see farther. If we want our enemies to do the same, we've got to love them! For God is ready and willing to use us to grow them as surely as God is using them to grow us.

My friends, the hate and fear must stop here. As Paul says, the Church is God's field and we can't be pouring spiritual toxins into it. After all, we have to work here, for we are the servants, God's field hands. We have to grow our love here so that others will know that love can grow anywhere. So be it. Let's get to it.