

“Rise Above”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 119:9-16

If you've ever seen the sitcom "Everybody Loves Raymond," you've seen the main character, Ray Barone, come home, walk into the kitchen and greet his wife Debra with some silly nickname. Here is a list of actual nicknames used on that show: hey, baby bop, bubble wrap, doodles; what's shaking jambalaya, jelly cheeks, lucky pants; there's my little monkey, puddlepants, sniggles, twinkles. It's his thing, it's what he does. These goofy names are terms of endearment, even if they are rather childish.

Being childish is the focus of today's New Testament scripture passage, where Paul calls out the people of Corinth for being childish. "I could not speak to you as spiritual people," says Paul, "but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food." Of course, he's not actually talking about food, but rather spiritual nurture, which is to say spiritual lessons and wisdom that lead to mature, fruitful attitudes and behaviors.

In Corinth, there were two factions – or two sides being taken – over how to behave like a mature and productive member of society. There was the Apollos faction and the Paul faction. Apollos came to the faith through John the Baptizer, who preached repentance in preparation for one who would come after him, namely Jesus, which is fine as far as it goes. But his converts failed to know and receive the Holy Spirit. Instead they continued to align with earthly leaders such as Paul or Apollos.

We know this from the Book of Acts, where it says in chapter 19 that Paul asked those who came to faith through Apollos about their conversion. "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" he asked. And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?"

They said, "Into John's baptism," which is the baptism known by Apollos. John's baptism verses baptism in the Holy Spirit," people being led by their "human inclinations," as Paul puts it, instead of being led by the Holy Spirit.

It matters whether we put our faith in human knowledge and practices or divine truth and discipline, whether we are truly spiritual people or people of the flesh" who act

immaturely. What are some ways that we see people acting immaturely? Anybody? And do any of these behaviors lead anywhere that's positive, that's fruitful and good? No. Immaturity tends to beget immaturity.

The only way to rise above these immature, unproductive ways of being is to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in our interactions. Don't be baited by someone else into a futile back-and-forth, tit-for-tat, insult-for-insult.

"For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you," says Paul, "are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?" As Christians, we are called to rise above such childish tendencies. And we all have them, we all need to watch ourselves.

If you're sure you never respond in childish, immature, unproductive ways – if you're sure you're always right and the other person is always wrong – that's an indication you may want to check your own level of maturity, your own sense of self-righteousness. Are you more committed to being right than to being loving? That's a good self-check, right there.

Beyond paying attention to our own attitudes and behaviors, we in this country have a crisis among in the leaders of our nation, and this has a lot to do with maturity – ours and theirs, the immaturity of our leaders and our willingness as a nation to tolerate it. We have two political parties that refuse to work with each other. And each has resorted to name calling and vindictive behavior, just like what Paul saw among the two factions in Corinth.

But the difference there was the quality of the leadership of those two factions. Neither Paul nor Apollos allowed themselves to be drawn into the political squabbles of the Corinthians, as leaders, they rose above them.

When the Corinthians were saying, "I belong to Paul," and another saying, "I belong to Apollos," Paul calls out both sides for acting immaturely, without a true grounding in Jesus Christ. "What then is Apollos?" asks Paul. "What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each."

In other words, Paul and Apollos joined to remind both factions that it's not about them; it's about doing what is right in keeping with the spirit of truth. We don't have many such leaders like that in Washington. Both factions think it's just fine to go at it tooth and nail. And, quite honestly, who can blame them? If they don't fight back, they get beat up, politically. That's the system we have. We back our party and the opposition backs theirs. And that leaves the nation stuck, stuck with a bunch of immature children who can't come together to work for the common good.

The key for this country in rising above such divisive and unproductive behavior is for each person in this country to check the level of maturity serving them in Washington, no matter which faction you belong to.

Don't worry about the other party. Look at who is representing you and call that person to a higher level of maturity. Demand it, of your representatives. Put an end to the name calling and vindictive behavior by holding them accountable.

Unless, of course, you're OK with name calling and nastiness. If that's OK with you, then go for it. Let's see where that gets us. Or, have we already seen it, and is it now time to do something about it? These are the questions facing our country right now.

That said, I have no doubt that the Spirit of truth and servant leadership will prevail over time. We are a resilient people, and ours is a patient God. God will let us play this out until we rise above it, no matter how long that might take.

We know this because God has proved to be a faithful, long-suffering God when it comes to his children, all the way back to the ancient Israelites. Whenever we decided to do things our way as opposed to following God's way, Jesus' teaching, the Holy Spirit's leading, we suffer as a people. Whenever we turn back to God and the spirit of divine truth, we prosper. That is God's desire for us as a whole. Not for some, but for all – everyone helping to make sure no one is left behind, if we can help it.

And with God's help, we can. Just like Apollos and Paul, we are mere instruments of God's goodness, each with a role in making the world a better place. "I planted," said Paul, "Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."

If we want to become mature, productive, faithful, blessed children of God, we need to be sure our actions and attitudes are in keeping with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And if we want our nation to prosper – meaning all people prospering in whatever way they can – we need to do what it takes to have mature, productive, faithful, children of God working on our behalf. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we come before you as a hurting people. Our hearts ache with the illness of friends and loved ones. The brokenness of this world, also Lord – it shakes our very being.

We ask that you would bring peace to our souls today – a peace that reminds us that you love us and are with us, through every struggle and disappointment.

We ask your healing touch upon all those we continue to lift up in prayer. Let them know the comfort and peace of your presence.

We thank, Lord, for always watching over us, your children. In your holy name, we pray, using the words that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**