

Epiphany 7A  
Peace, Seattle  
February 19, 2017  
Lev. 19, 1 Cor 3, Matt 5:38-48

## **LOVE'S FOUNDATION**

In the year 1174, Italian architect Bonnano Pisano began laying a marble foundation for a tower that would take two centuries to complete.<sup>1</sup> Because the ground where he built was saturated with water, Pisano could only put the footings 10 feet into the ground. And as the first story was completed, the structure's south side began to sink.

To compensate, Pisano built the columns and arches on the south side one inch taller than those on the north side. But by the time he reached the fourth story, the southern side had sunk further and the columns now had to be built 2 inches taller than the northern ones. With mounting difficulties construction was stopped.

In the decades that followed the tower's south side sunk ever further and a new generation of architects tried their best to compensate as the tower grew to five stories, then six and seven. But nothing they did seemed to make a difference.

In 1350 another Pisano—Tommaso Pisano—began adding what would be the eighth and final story of the tower. Finally, in 1372, 14,000 tons of white marble later and nearly 200 years after it was begun, the tower was complete. **By now you know what tower I'm talking about—the Leaning Tower of Pisa.**

"According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled builder, I laid the foundation," writes Paul, "and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build."

Over the past five weeks, while we've been hearing sections from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we've also heard excerpts from Paul's first letter to the congregation he founded in Corinth.

We've heard about how fractured and cliquish they are; and how hubris and one-upmanship has led to arguments about which of them are "true Christians" and which of them are wannabees.

We've heard Paul's appeal to stop creating personality cults around leaders—whether Apollos or Cephas or Paul—and to strive instead to embody the unity which was their birthright and gift when they were baptized into Christ.

Today's reading is the final installment in this series, but plenty of juicy stuff still remains in this letter!

- There's R-rated material in chapter 5, court battles in chapter 6, food fights in chapter 8, and wild parties disguised as church picnics in chapter 11, on the one hand...
- And some of Paul's most evocative and eloquent writing on the other—his carefully crafted analogy of the church as one body with many members, and his timeless chapter on unconditional love.

If what was going down in cosmopolitan Corinth sounds terribly contemporary, that's because it is!

In Paul's Corinthian correspondence we can truly see that the enemies Jesus calls us to love are often enough not nameless or faceless foreigners but the members of our own communities and our own households.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.towerofpisa.org/leaning-tower-of-pisa-history/>

**You can't help but get the distinct feeling that this Corinthian church Paul planted struggled mightily with how to make God's love in Christ real and workable within their day to day relationships and lives.**

**SURE, "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF" SOUNDS GOOD IN THEORY, we can overhear the Corinthians say, BUT YOU HAVEN'T MET MY NEIGHBOR!**

Hoping to raise the Corinthians' regard for each other and pull them out of the death spiral they seem to be caught in, Paul calls them "GOD'S TEMPLE." **Folks**, says Paul, **you are God's sacred community, founded on Jesus Christ, and you ought to act like this is true!** Start treating one another like sisters and brothers for whom Christ also died.

**In his book on community making and peace, Scott Peck, identifies four stages groups go through on the road to deeper community.<sup>2</sup>**

The first response of groups who seek to form community, writes Peck, "is most often to try to fake it. The members try to become an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement." Peck calls this stage **PSEUDOCOMMUNITY** and not surprisingly, says he, it "never works."<sup>3</sup>

When these old strategies for keeping conflict at bay stop working, and the façade of superficial unity begins falling apart, the group enters the next stage: **CHAOS**. Folks start saying how they really feel, and efforts to control or heal or convert others to my belief or perspective are off and running.

In the chaos phase, says Peck, groups almost always see reorganization or fixing the structure as the solution: we've got to start a new committee, appoint a task force, create a clearer flow sheet.

But reorganizing a structure while ignoring foundational issues is like building the columns on one side of the leaning tower a little taller than the other side. It's a false solution.

**When the group recognizes this, they move into the third stage: EMPTINESS.**

Emptiness comes with the realization that none of the old strategies for relating work any more. The group falls silent. A way forward seems impossible. This is the desert time, wilderness time. Scripture tell us that true transformation always has its beginning here.

This emptiness is a time of self-sacrifice. Of asking:  
WHAT MUST I GIVE UP IN ORDER FOR US TO MOVE ON?

You enter the room when a community is in this stage, and it feels like someone or something has died. And the truth is, something has died, though it's not clear at this point what will take its place.

**All these stages, says Peck, are necessary and preparatory to the final stage:  
AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY.**

**It's only when we relinquish all our attempts to control, convert, or heal others, that we become ready to enter into the deepest sense of community.**

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<sup>2</sup> M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum, Community Making and Peace*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 86.

**There's much in Scott Peck's observations about building community that ring true to me.**

When I place his insights alongside my own life and the history of my own failures, and when I place them alongside the stories of Christ's life—the community he built around himself and all the “little deaths” and the big death that accompanied the journey they made together—I see again what a deeply challenging journey Christ is calling me, calling us, to take.

**Love your enemies. Pray for your persecutors.**

How can I love my enemy when all my energy goes toward convincing them how wrong they are? How can I pray for people who cause me trouble and hold me in contempt when I'm fixated on the righteousness of my cause?

**Trying to make others into my image of who they should be never works.**

**As Christ journeys to the cross, he shows us that all human efforts to save others or ourselves are shown to be what they truly are: a sham; a dead end road.**

Yet, in the light of the empty tomb, in the kind of sacred community that Jesus, through the Spirit, always seeks to create among us, when we yield our attempts to control, convert and heal, the impossible demand of loving our enemies becomes somehow possible. This isn't a one shot process but a daily challenge, in which God's power is made perfect in our weakness.

As it turns out, then, the call to “be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect” isn't about being right or ending up on top. It's about becoming a more mature servant community, moving toward the fullness of what God intends while allowing final outcomes to remain in God's hands.

In his work in, with, and among us, Christ leads us through deserts and through endings of every type while creating space for us to practice trusting him, and so we learn to love each other even when we are unlovable. Step by halting step, that's what he's up to among us.

Prayer:

Lord, your demands seem impossible; our success improbable. But through the power of your Spirit you have called us into community—and see—you have once again prepared a Table for us in the presence of our enemies. Grant that in this meal your cup would overflow, that we may be so filled with you that where once we saw enemies we now see friends. In your name we pray. Amen.