

Brandon Wrencher
Boone UMC
Sermon: "When small is BIG!"
1 Cor. 3:1-9
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Good morning Boone UMC! For those that don't know me, I'm Brandon Wrencher pastor of our Blackburn's Chapel worshipping community out in Todd. I'm honored to join you in worship again. And I'm thrilled to be continuing this creative sermon series called Stages of Life. I've been given the task of speaking to the life stage of the late 20s and 30s, what some call a type of extended adolescence. Now when Jason first told me this, my natural response wasn't a pastoral one. I think I said something like: "extended adolescence....you're joking right? You tryna' call me a kid or something?" I'm joking, that wasn't his point. Listen to this quote from a crucial NY Times article on the subject:

"We're in the thick of what one sociologist calls "the changing timetable for adulthood." Sociologists traditionally define the "transition to adulthood" as marked by five milestones: completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, marrying and having a child. In 1960, 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men had, by the time they reached 30, passed all five milestones. Among 30-year-olds in 2000, according to data from the United States Census Bureau, fewer than half of the women and one-third of the men had done so. A Canadian study reported that a typical 30-year-old in 2001 had completed the same number of milestones as a 25-year-old in the early '70s."

Boone UMC, *this* is extended adolescence, a trend of hybrid adulthood that has been in full force for over a decade now. And so as I'm preaching today, just know that I'm preaching to myself too. And what we've discovered through this sermon series is that the characteristics of one life stage very often shows up in another stage. So those of you not in your 20s and 30s aren't off the hook. Extended adolescence has its critics and its allies, but one thing's for sure, it's here to stay for a while so we all need to get used to it. To that end, for the short time I have with you this morning, allow me to preach from the subject: "When small is BIG!" "When small is BIG!" Our passage of Scripture comes from **1 Corinthians 3:1-9**.

3 Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³ You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?

⁵ What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

This is the Word of God for us the people of God. [Thanks be to God!]

Please pray with me.

Paul's telling it like it is. He's putting it to the Corinthians where it hurts. But he also calls them brothers and sisters. Paul has an established relationship with this church. It would be like calling one of your younger siblings or cousins a "big baby" for acting childish. And that's exactly what's happening with the Corinthian church. They're acting childish. But they don't know it. Paul wrote to the church because they had written him asking several theological and ethical questions. But he was also writing because he had heard from some mutual friends that there was serious division within the community. So the Corinthians' questions weren't innocent. Behind their ethical questions was a situation of division and disagreement. Presumably Paul's answers to any of these questions would have put fuel on the fire of an already contentious battle between factions in the church. The church was made up of this hodge-podge group of folks from different social and cultural and economic backgrounds. And like any diverse community, folks had differing philosophical and political and theological ideas that supported their lifestyles and aspirations, ideas that seemed naturally right to them but not to others in the Corinthian community. The different factions took any occasion to distance themselves from another group, even over which leaders they claimed to be following. There was a spiritual competitiveness that permeated the community. Who was more wise? Who held the finest perspective? Who could best control bodily passions? Who was closer to God? Each Corinthian faction was striving to be the most spiritually mature and wanted to be treated as such. And this brought jealousy and fighting and disagreement because how could they get along if every tribe was trying to be the spiritual best and the biggest. In ...steps... Paul who says: "ok, so you think you're spiritual, you think you're mature. Actually you're not, you're a bunch of spoiled babies arguing and fussing. This is not real spirituality. This is wordliness." Church, the Corinthians' patterns of exclusion and division, their disunity was a sign that they had let the world's orientation of prideful ambition and control creep into their community.

Ambition and control, base instincts that in many ways make us human. For what is it that gets you out of bed in the morning but some form of ambition to pursue and accomplish that day's work? What is it but control that maintains a sense of order and predictability to our lives so that we know how to function and operate? And yet, these instincts left unchecked twist the personality toward an altered life, toward a life of self-absorption. Left unchecked these two instinctual drives push us to pursue more, to pursue what's best, to pursue what's first with a spirit of competition that wants to claim and possess while isolating and excluding others. And what's scary is that competition often blinds us to the fact that we are even doing this; we don't even notice the ways in which we are reinforcing patterns of exclusion and pride. Dr. Martin Luther King called this the drum major instinct. The instinct that drives our desires to be recognized, to be correct, to be significant, to be BIG. We 20 and 30 somethings feel this drum major instinct in a pronounced way because of this new life stage of extended adolescence, this extended instability to our lives. The milestones that for so long have determined adulthood take longer to achieve. But we don't stop trying to achieve. But what is the cost of our achievement, of our wanting to be big? Are we ignoring the struggles of our neighbors? And even in our helping are we doing it because deep down we believe we're better than them? This drum major instinct, this infatuation with wanting to be BIG only reveals that internally there are deep

insecurities, a smallness that we mask and are afraid to name and face and reveal to others. But in our hiding behind our accomplishments, our strivings, our posturing we become distant from our true selves and from our neighbors.

But Paul helps the Corinthian church to see rightly. And he helps us to see as well. Paul says that the key to being spiritually mature, to being great is not through prideful control and ambition; it's through service, it's through understanding ourselves for what we are: a very small part of the big picture, a very small part of God's plan for the world. And so Paul uses himself as an example. Verses 5 and 6 read:

⁵ What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.

But Paul knows that we can't maintain this understanding of ourselves unless we are able to see God rightly as well.

⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

We are able to be small, to do the small thing, because we don't have to put our trust in ourselves to produce the outcomeGod makes things grow! So this is really a matter of trusting God, of trusting that God will do God's part. We toss seeds and sprinkle water, do small things and then trust God for the growth.

During my study of the passage this week I couldn't help but think of the connections to the classic 1980s film BIG starring Tom Hanks. Hanks plays a 12 year old boy named Josh Baskin who is sick of being considered a little kid. He wants to date older girls and ride the big rides at the carnival. One day he discovers this fortune teller machine called Zoltar Speaks. He puts a coin in and makes a wish to be BIG and the machine pops out this card that tells Josh his wish had been granted. The next morning Josh wakes up a 30something year old man. He has to leave his house because his mom thinks he's a burglar. He gets his own place and lands a job at a toy production company. Josh's future as a BIG person seems all put together. The only challenge is that even though he's big physically ... developmentally, internally he's still a 12 year old boy. So he eats candy all of the time, doesn't follow any of the adult social cues, and his apartment is full of toys and he sleeps on bunkbeds. And yet even with Josh's childish ways there's something appealing, something attractive about his *childlike* manner. He brings people together, he makes people laugh, he helps them remember what's most important in life. And the few folks that he manages to upset and that want his destruction are those who are bent on power and ambition and control. And there is this one scene that connected so deeply with our passage this morning. And I may butcher the exact lines, so forgive me. One of Josh's opponents, Paul, full of anger and jealousy, asks a mutual friend of theirs: "And what's so great about Baskin anyway?" And the mutual friend responds with probably the most ironic line of the film: "he's great because he's a real grown up!"

Church when we see ourselves for what we really are – children of God – there's real freedom. And what is a freed human spirit but someone who is truly mature, truly great because they are free to serve, they are free to love others. The bible says:

For freedom Christ has set us free ... For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

¹⁴ *For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." – Galatians 5:1a; 13-14*

And it was Jesus that said:

let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. ²⁷ For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. – Luke 22:26-27

Church let us be those who seek to become the least, the youngest, to become small. The challenges of war and division and fragmentation don't begin with big ideas and strategies. They begin with a humble and contrite heart, a willingness to be small so that we have the capacity to serve all humanity and not just those that agree with and look like us. Jesus said that those who seek to gain will lose and those who lose their life and power will gain for his sake. Those who seek to be small have the capacity to trust God's love and grace.

Let me close with this prayer from the great Christian leader Oscar Romero. Join me in prayer:

The kingdom [of God] is not only beyond our own efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's word. Nothing that we do is complete.

The kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the church's mission.

No set of goals includes everything that we are about.

We all plant the seed that one day will grow.

We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces efforts far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything.

Knowing this enables us to do something, and to do it well.

Our work may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way.

Our actions present an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are the workers, not master builders.

We are ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.
Amen.