

Years ago I borrowed a book from my local library. I can't remember the name of it, who wrote it, what genre it was... Honestly, I can't even tell you what it was about. What I can tell you is that the most interesting thing I read in that book was a handwritten letter wedged in between its pages. See, when I borrowed this book, I somehow also unintentionally inherited someone else's mail.

There was no envelope, no address, and the letter only mentioned the author and its recipient by their first names. I did not know them – they were strangers to me.

I wish I could tell you that I tucked the letter back inside the book, or that I threw it in the trash because it was never meant for my eyes. But the truth is, when I discovered this letter, it felt like the beginning of a mystery or adventure story, and my inquisitive nature got the best of me. I read the letter.

Here's the cliff notes version...The author and the recipient were once in a relationship. But somehow along the way, something went terribly wrong. At the time the letter was written, they were no longer together. The author was angry, they were hurt, and they blamed the other for the way things fell apart. From what I could gather, it seemed like the recipient had asked for forgiveness and actually done the work to make changes, but the writer was too angry at the time. But now, the author realized that they made a mistake. They missed their love, and wanted to find a way forward. And so the letter concluded with the question – will you give us another chance?

That's it. That's all I got. And that's the problem with being nosey and reading a stranger's mail. There was only so much I could infer from reading this one isolated note. When I finished reading, I had SO MANY questions. What happened? What did the recipient do that

made the author so upset? I wondered, should the writer even give them another chance? Was the love they shared really worth fighting for?

I'll never know.

Every time we read one of Paul's letters, we find ourselves in a similar situation. We are literally reading other people's mail. When we read 1st Corinthians, we are eavesdropping into a conversation between Paul, and a 1st Century Christian Community. Whenever we read it, it's important to remember that this letter is not written to us. Each verse is not a timeless truth for all people for all time. It was a letter written to this unique group of people, struggling with specific challenges and issues as they attempted to follow the way of Jesus.

The contents of this letter offer us a way to imagine the unique struggles that folks before us had following the way, and invites us to ask questions, self reflect, and consider with humility, ways in which we might identify our own growing edges.

In our passage this morning, Paul tells the church in Corinth that it's time to grow up. Its members are jealous of one another, they are quarreling, and much of it seems to be rooted in the belief that some of them are spiritually superior to others. They are a divided church.

In these verses, Paul calls out their behavior and points out the irony that while they are arguing over who is wiser than the other, they are demonstrating their lack of wisdom. While they think they are spiritually mature, in actuality, they are all acting like spiritual babies.

While trying to follow Jesus, the Corinthians lost their way. They lost sight of the counter-cultural Christ that proclaimed the upside down Kin-dom ethics of God, rooted in humility, love and justice. They lost sight of the Christ that Paul preached and offered as a model for a different kind of community than the culture of the world they lived in.

The Corinthians got caught back up in old habits. Old ways of looking at community, and power, and leadership. They started approaching the work of the church from that lens.

So Paul tells the Corinthians that it's time to get back to the basics. He reminds the Corinthians that they are a team with a common purpose - that they are one body, invited to see the world through the lens of Christ.

For me, this passage is reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 13 - where Paul says, "If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing."

For Paul, it doesn't matter how smart the Corinthians are, how right they are, how wise they are - it matters who they are. He prioritizes their faith formation over the knowledge they attain, and measures spirituality by the way they love others, the evidence of the fruit of the spirit in their lives, and how Christ is transforming their minds, their hearts, and the ways they view and engage the world around them.

I wonder what it was like for the Church in Corinth to hear this letter read aloud. I wonder if they felt defensive. I wonder if they felt misunderstood by their mentor. I wonder if Paul's words felt like a punch in the gut? I wonder if they felt conviction? I wonder if Paul's words were a surprise at all – was there already some awareness that something wasn't quite right? Did they hear Paul's words and then make the changes that would allow them to focus on the basics and foundation of their faith? Did Paul's letter help them remember why they started following Jesus to begin with?

Like the letter I pulled out of a library book years ago, I'll never know exactly what happened when they received this critique from their mentor. I can only imagine.

I do empathize with the Church in Corinth. It's hard to change old habits. It can be hard to change the way you see things and the way that you live your life. Especially when things have been so ingrained in you that you may not even realize they are there. And I imagine it's even harder to think you've done a pretty good job, just to realize that you've made some huge mistakes along the way. That's hard. And honestly, I can say that from experience.

I don't think the Church in Corinth was bad. I think they were human. And I don't think Paul thought they were bad. I think he loved them. And I think Paul's letter is evidence that he believed in them, that he saw the light in them, and that he wanted that light to shine brightly. So he did what he could to help them get past their conflict and challenged them to take an honest inventory of the things preventing them from letting their light shine.

The other day I was scrolling through social media, and I came across a meme that said, "If Saint Paul could see the church today.... We'd be getting a letter."

Every church has its unique challenges and issues. And I think it's safe to say that even FCCO has its own unique challenges and issues. As wonderful as I believe this congregation is, I do think we'd get a letter.

Paul is not here to write to us. All we have is some of his old mail. And it wasn't meant for us. But as I mentioned earlier, even though the issues in Corinth are not exactly a mirror reflecting our current context, I do believe that the contents of this letter to this 1st Century Church

invites us to ask questions, self-reflect, and consider with humility, ways in which we might identify our own growing edge.

As we begin this year of Loving Out Loud, in what ways do we want or need to grow up?

What questions do we need to be asking? As I was preparing this sermon, I started asking some questions.

What is hindering us from growing?

Do we ever make decisions or avoid taking risks out of convenience or comfort or fear?

How often do we do things because we've always done them, or we've always done them that way.

What distracts us?

When we get caught up in the business aspects of running a church, do we ever lose sight of **why** we're doing it to begin with?

Does being right ever become more important than how we treat the other people on our team?

How much power does nostalgia play in the life of the church and in our worship?

Do we ever hold on so tight to procedure that we don't leave space for the spirit to move?

If Paul were to write us a letter, what do you think it might say? What questions do you think he would ask? What questions do you think we should ask?

In what ways do you think we, as a community, are invited to grow up? In what ways do you think you might be invited to grow?

There is a wonderful energy here at FCCO. This is an amazing congregation. This church is full of love – and I believe that we genuinely desire to love God and love one another whole heartedly. So I do want to clarify - the intent of asking all of these questions isn't to point out all of our imperfections and focus on the negative. There is a lot of good happening here and we can celebrate that.

AND – we can recognize that we're not done growing. We can appreciate how we've grown over the past 140 years, and we can stay engaged as we discern how God may be growing us.

Growth is not a linear process - and we will never arrive at some spiritual destination. We are in process - always. As individuals and as a community. So we keep pressing on. We keep asking questions. We keep grounding ourselves in our mission and in our values so we don't lose sight of who we are and why we do what we do.

I remember a few years ago, there was a plumeria tree in our Atrium. It was doing okay. But something needed to change. It wasn't draining well and my partner was worried it was eventually going to die. She did some research on how to fix the situation. She ended up cutting the tree at specific points and replanted them in new pots with new soil, hoping that they'd take root and blossom into new trees. I was worried that in the process she killed a nice tree. 3 years later, we have 5 plumeria trees that continue to grow and bloom. Had I played it safe, it probably would have died. But Alicia's vision and effort resulted in something beautiful.

Growth can be hard work. It can feel risky and vulnerable. It can be scary and uncomfortable. And we may not always see immediate results - and that can feel frustrating. But it can also be so beautiful and life-giving.

The church can never stop evaluating, innovating, or imagining. God is always doing a new thing- the question is, can we see it? God is moving. In you. In me. In all of us and all around us.

Friends, as Paul reminded the Corinthians, we are a team. May we continue to grow together as we follow after Jesus, and let our light shine bright and we continue on the journey together.