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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 16, 2020

Year A

Sirach 15:15-20

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

Psalms 119:1-8

God Gives the Growth

Culturally, we tend to valorize the successful, enterprising man or woman, someone who creates something out of their own ingenuity and hard work. Whether the accomplishment is a business or an organization of some kind, we rightly respect the dedication and focus that requires. Perhaps partially because of that respect, fierce fights can break out about who, exactly, should get credit for these initiatives. Sometimes, perhaps, these are arguments about money, and who gets it. Other times it just has to do with respect: who gets credit in the popular imagination.

It's not so much different with churches. A congregation that sees exponential growth alongside the development of a new and innovative program gets our respect. In a situation like that, an enterprising rector might expect the accolades to flow his way. This might be resented by the program director, or the benefactor of the program, or the volunteers that run it.

Something like this was happening in the church in ancient Corinth, to whom the apostle Paul is writing in the First Epistle to the Corinthians. The community is numerically successful, but internally they are divided and quarrelsome. In part, this quarreling is about honor and who gets the credit for its success. Some are saying that Paul himself is responsible and should get the credit, a position that St. Paul must have been sympathetic to. Others gave the credit to Apollos, who followed Paul as a leader of the Corinthian community. Others carried the banner for other people. The various factions were fighting and putting the health of the community at risk.

St. Paul puts off even those who are supporting him. "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" They are "servants of God" only, not self-made religious entrepreneurs. They might be enterprising, working with faithfulness and industry, but they aren't responsible for what has happened in the flourishing Corinthian community. Paul "planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

God gave the growth. Like a master gardener, Paul did the expert, concrete work of putting the seeds in the ground. Apollos tended the seeds, nurturing them into the young, fledgling plants that the Corinthians were. But God made them grow. God provided the life force that sustained them in their very being. The philosopher Henri Bergson, in the early twentieth century, called this life force *elan vital*, the intrinsic impetus to growth, that mysterious force that makes things seek their own flourishing. Only God can provide that. Paul and Apollos did the work, and it was important, necessary work that we should indeed be impressed by and seek to emulate. But God gave the growth to that community by infusing it with his spirit, a spirit that led them to grow in faith and dedication to their Lord. Only God could do that. He gets the credit.

Here is an instructive moment for us, not only in our religious enterprises, but in every act of our lives. At the end of the day, God gave the growth, and God gets the credit. And, because God gets the credit, God should also get our thanks. We plant, perhaps another waters, and that is important, necessary work, worthy of emulation. But if God gives the growth, then in any and every

moment in which we rejoice in something, any moment that we are enjoying something, we should remember to give thanks to God.

If we have meaningful work, let us give thanks to God. If we have family or friends, give thanks; a good parish; people we love; food to eat and a roof over our heads: thank you, God. A blue sky to enjoy; rain to water our plants; snow that drifts down giving us an enchanted landscape: thank you, God. We can plant; another can water; but God gives the growth, all of the growth—because he gives everything.

Besides, God gets the credit for the persons Paul and Apollos themselves. They themselves only exist because of God's gracious act of creation. From the mouths of babes: a few weeks ago, when we had Youth Sunday, I asked the gathered kids why we should come to church and give thanks to God. What are we giving thanks for? For our houses, said one; for our families, said another; our pets, our toys. And one said, For our lives! For the fact we are alive at all. And that future theologian is right. We are only here at all because of God's grace, because he created people to be with him, and so here we are. Thank you, God.

This thankfulness should be a defining feature of a Christian people. Whatever else is the case in the world, if someone does a sociological study, it would be appropriate if they found that one of the things that really separates a Christian from a non-Christian life is a posture of thanksgiving. This should be a hallmark of a Christian life.

When we are a thankful people, we tend to act a different way. We can be more generous with others, because we appreciate that God has provided so much for us. We can be kinder and gentler to people, because we know that we are so fortunate. Maybe we don't have to argue about who gets the credit for stuff: we know that the ultimate credit goes to God. Thank you, God, who provides the growth.

But there is another component to this. We give thanks that God has provided the growth to this or that thing: to an enterprise we care about, to our parishes, our own faith lives, and so forth. But also, if God gives the growth—not Paul or Apollos—then that means that we don't have to. The fate of the world does not rest on our shoulders. We do not have cosmic responsibility. We should do all we can: plant and water; care for the sick and poor; serve our communities and tend to our relationships. But God provides the growth. So, one of the things we can let go of is the concern that if something doesn't prosper, we have to devalue ourselves or others. God holds the world in a loving embrace; his providential care encompasses everything that happens. He is in charge.

Granted, we might not understand his providential care, and we might chafe at his embrace sometimes. Salvation history is full of such examples and they are entirely understandable. But God provides the growth. Even if the Hebrews end up enslaved in Egypt, God will provide the growth; if they are exiled in Babylon, they are under God's providence. If the early Jesus-followers are persecuted; if Jesus himself is killed, God gives the growth.

When we give God credit, not only is there a responsibility given to us, but there should be a relief as well. Knowing that we plant, another waters, but God gives the growth should result in a decrease in anxiety. Take heart: God provides. You may have seen the bumper sticker that says, "blessed, not stressed." I don't always love the religious notions on bumper stickers, but that one seems pretty good: blessed, not stressed. I can't claim that I have achieved this level of faith development, but it is an aspirational goal. To recognize the blessedness that one has been promised in Christ should be something that causes us to be less stressed. Yes, we should plant; planting is good! We should water; watering is important! But God provides. We are blessed.

Give thanks, all the time; plant and water when the time calls for it; but don't forget to know your blessedness. Find rest in God's embrace and rejoice in his providential care.