

“Growing From God”
1 Corinthians 3:1-9

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There was a time when I was a kid that I was really into cults. It should not surprise you that I was kind of a weird kid. It was 1997, the year that Heaven’s Gate made the news, the cult founded by Marshall Applewhite. They were based in San Diego, California, just four hours from where I lived, when 39 of its members lost their lives. I was in middle school and when I heard this story on the news, I became obsessed. Not just with Heaven’s Gate, but I used my newly acquired research skills to go to the public library and read every book there was to find on other cults.

The phase didn’t last long because when my research questions transformed from “what is a cult?” and “What were famous cults” to “How do you start a cult?” my mom began encouraging more wholesome hobbies. But still, I was fascinated by the idea what made people decide to follow someone. It’s perhaps a little ironic, or at least not a shock, that I ended up studying religion. I think my childhood question has followed me in some form or another: how we know who or what to follow? How do we find our moral compass? In a world with so many competing messages and contradictory beliefs, how do we decide what is right and good?

The people in the early Christian church were asking the same questions. In particular, the church in Corinth, Greece was in the middle of an old fashioned church split. Or since they were one of the first Christian churches, a newly fashioned church split. Among other disagreements, the members of the church couldn’t decide which leader to follow - Apollos or Paul? Whose style of leadership should they look to? Who was going to be the answer to their prayers? Whose church was it?”

Luckily for the church in Corinth, Paul heard this argument and didn't say, "Me of course! Pick me! It's my church" He set his ego aside and redirected them toward their creator, God. He says, "I planted, and Apollos watered, but God made it grow. Because of this, it doesn't matter who plants or who waters - they are nothing without God. We are God's servants working together, and you are God's field, God's building."

This is one of my favorite images of God in the whole Bible. Whoever is in charge in our world - whether it's in a church, in a town, or in the government, their leadership should point us back to God, not to themselves. In this image, leadership's goal is to plant and support other people's gifts, but to acknowledge that the source of those gifts comes from our Creator.

Paul uses a beautiful metaphor of us being a field that has been planted and watered, and it is God that gives us growth. In other words, when we are fighting over who has the best ideas or is the smartest, the answer is none of us, because we cannot compare to God. The image of God as someone who helps us to grow is an image of love – it is a metaphor of nurturing, supporting, guiding, and encouraging love.

As fields with seeds that have been planted in them, our job is to stay open to the growth that has happened and is yet to come. I love this because as an aspiring but often lackluster gardener, I know I cannot control growth. I know that even if I water my seeds or plants the recommended amount and give them enough sunlight and play them Mozart, there is something bigger than myself that happens that ultimately provides for their growth. If you have ever tried your hand at gardening, you know that when it happens it is a source of mystery and love for the ways in which we are connected to processes that we cannot see or understand but get to participate in.

When we put God back in the equation, the question then becomes, how do we know we are following God and allowing God to nurture our growth, and not something else? What sets God's growth apart and how do we recognize it? With the gardening image, how do we not mistake it for a weed, pluck it out of the earth, and toss it in the trash? How do we keep in our garden those plants that are pollinators for the bees or provide food for our families or work with other plants to strengthen each other like the three sisters of beans, corn, and squash?

The answer lies in grounding ourselves in our faith - in tracing back through our tradition and through our scriptures to discovering a God of love and mercy, a God that forgives its people over and over again, a God that cares about those who have been left out, marginalized, and oppressed, a God that stands on the side of justice. These are movements that transcend whoever is in power today or whoever will be in power next year.

It would be easy to say all we have to do is sit back and let God help us grow. It's a very "Jesus take the wheel" kind of image, but growing toward God and through God requires a practice we call discernment. Discernment is the art of finding the intersection of who we are and who God calls us to be. Discernment requires listening for how God is urging us to move, respond, or what we are called to do. It is placing our life in the context of our spiritual values and allowing that spirituality to be our guide.

Discernment can be done alone in conversation with God, but it can also be done in the context of a group. Discernment happens when we ask questions like "why are we here?" and "Where are we going?" It is when we reflect on past moments in our life that felt similar to this one and what we learned from them that might inform us today. When we practice discernment, the purpose is not to give answers, but to ask clarifying questions that help an answer emerge organically.

Discernment is a part of many Christian traditions and takes different forms, all seeking to discover how God is calling us, in other words, what kind of growth we are encouraged to nurture and how we might lean into that life-giving growth.

One of my favorite discernment practices is that of the Clearness Committee out of the Quaker tradition. Clearness Committees come together when someone has a problem or question they are wrestling with, and in the group context you ask open, honest questions. There is no fixing, no advising, no saving, and no correcting. You simply keep asking the questions, allowing the person at the center to trust their inner teacher and find the answers they seek. Clearness Committees are done in the context of worship, reminding them that God is at the center of all they seek.

Here at Edgewood, we do not have a formal process of discernment, but it is something that is informally woven into the life of our church. It is what we call on our committees and ministry teams to do as they navigate the direction for our church and decide what issues we should take up and commit to as a faith community.

Our justice teams at Edgewood are discernment teams. The Green Team, our Open and Affirming Team, and our Justice & Peace Team are constantly asking themselves questions and trying to find clarity about how we are guided to respond to the pressing justice issues of our time. I am most impressed because I know the members of these teams to be inundated with different issues of injustice in our community and world - individually they have their pulse on the finger of where there is a need for justice all across the globe.

I could not attempt to list the issues they are involved in because it would be near impossible to capture them all. But they don't come to Edgewood bringing their individual agendas. They come together and say given all that is happening in our world, given all there is

to do, what is Edgewood called to respond to? Which of these issues speaks to the heart of our church or where should we be using our voice to amplify the concerns of others? They ask questions about what is happening in our community, where there is work to be done, and how God has called us in the past and is still calling us today. It's an active engagement that means there are many things that come up in these discernment discussions that don't move beyond committee, but that when something comes before the congregation it is done so with intention and great conviction that we are called to respond.

Recently there have been two justice issues that have come out of these teams that we feel Edgewood is called to respond to.

The first comes from the Open and Affirming Team and the continued belief that all people in Michigan deserve to have their civil rights protected under the laws - civil rights like knowing you won't be fired from a job or evicted from housing because of your gender expression or because of who you love. Right now Michigan's Civil Rights law - the Elliot Larsen Civil Rights Act includes "religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, height, weight, familial status, and marital status." It does not include sexual orientation or gender identity, meaning LGBTQ folks do not have the same protections when it comes to work, housing, education, or public accommodations. For years there have been discussions and efforts to change this to no avail.

This year a mass movement is underway to get this issue on the ballot for November. To do this 340,000 more signatures are needed before May. I know those of you who worked on the gerrymandering ballot initiative are having flashbacks. Edgewood is being asked to join this justice movement by training folks to learn how to collect signatures, making sure everyone in our congregation has the opportunity to sign, and going into our community to spread the word.

This Tuesday night from 7-8pm we are hosting a training with Fair and Equal Michigan, the organization leading this effort, to find out all we need to start mobilizing. The training is right here at Edgewood so you already know where to go. Working on this campaign is a dynamic way to show up and show out our support for the LGBT community - it is a campaign that is flexible in terms of time commitment and when you work on it. It is perfect for families of all ages, sizes, and configurations to do together in the name of making sure our children and grandchildren have protections that at one time we wondered would ever be possible.

The second justice issue is one the Racial Justice Team has been tuned into and discussing for almost a year now. We, like a growing number of communities across the country have been concerned with the issue of police oversight - ensuring that when an incident happens that involves our local law enforcement, there is the ability to have an impartial outside investigation instead of keeping it solely within the department.

The Human Relations Commission in East Lansing, on which I serve, has been grappling with what this might look like in our community and how to go about forming it. The one constant in this conversation has been the understanding that it wasn't a matter of "if" we would ever need a public oversight commission; it was a matter of "when." When police officers in this community have up to 40,000 contacts with the public each year, it's like playing a game of roulette to think that there will never be something that happens.

In the midst of these discussions, something did happen. This week we saw photos of a young Tanzanian man whose face was bloodied and scarred after being assaulted during an arrest here in East Lansing. The reactions have ranged from shocked that something like this could happen in a force that works to be so community minded and relationship focused, to remembering the discussions with many in our black communities who have publicly shared that

they feel unsafe in East Lansing, primarily due to profiling and past troubling interactions with police here.

While the investigation into this event unfolds, Edgewood's Racial Justice Team is calling on us to stand in support of the victim and to join the call for transparency and an outside investigation, along with a renewed commitment from the city to move toward a strong Public Safety Oversight Commission. Next Sunday afternoon at 1:30pm there is a peaceful protest scheduled outside City Hall and the Police Station to stand against violence and to move toward a safer community for all people.

I am proud of the way our justice leaders discern directions for Edgewood to move, even as it challenges us. They recognize that growing from God often means taking a stand, finding our voice, and showing up in the community for justice and peace, even when it is not popular. It's how I know we wouldn't make a very good cult - instead of false promises of luxury and safety we tell people, "When you come to Edgewood you'll be asked to take risks, speak out against injustice, and it's not always going to feel comfortable. Welcome!"

But when we trace God's presence through past generations and through scripture, usually when people start to get uncomfortable or are asked to do big things, that is when we most clearly see the presence of God. May we continue to follow God through seasons of growth, no matter where it takes us. Amen.

