

***Moving Things Around*** – 2/21/10 – FMC – 1 Cor. 3:1-11

Some laws, like the speed limit, or the April 15 tax deadline,  
you choose to obey, or not obey.

But there are some laws we obey because we have no choice.  
They are laws that are built into the very fabric of the universe  
by the Creator.

Scientists are still trying to understand the law of gravity,  
but obeying that law is not a choice;  
if you're part of this universe, you obey.

Another basic law of physics is this:  
"Matter can be neither created nor destroyed."

That's a law that does not apply to God,  
but it certainly does apply to us.

It's a law that applies to all people in all situations,  
but it applies especially to pastors.

Pastors, no matter what their training,  
no matter what their experience,  
no matter how wise or how gifted or how strong they are,  
cannot bring into being—in the church—anything that has not  
existed at all before.

God can create something out of nothing, but pastors can't.

And, just as pastors lack the power to create,  
they also lack the power to make things totally disappear.

It's a law of physics, a law of life—including life in the church:  
humans cannot create something from nothing,  
and they cannot cause something to cease to exist.

So what is it that pastors do?  
What we do—ALL we can do—is "move things around."  
What we do is to create conditions where things can happen.

What we do—at least what we TRY to do—  
is to change the dynamics, change the environment,  
change the atmosphere,  
so that positive results can occur,  
so that God’s Spirit is free to move, to change, and to create.

In 1 Cor. 3 Paul uses two images to describe the relationship between  
what pastors do in the church and what God does.

One image is agricultural, and the other image is from building construction.

The new Christians at Corinth were choosing up sides—  
not who rooted for the Huskers and who rooted for K. State,  
but who was loyal to which pastor.

Some loved the silver tongue of Apollos—“Isn’t it great to hear those  
wonderful sermons?”

Some liked the sharp energy of Paul—“He’s a go-getter; he gets us all  
charged up.”

Some like the strength and authority of Peter—“When he’s around,  
you feel safe and strong because you know he’s in charge.”

There were clear boundary lines in Corinth around favorite pastors,  
and it hurt their fellowship and their witness.

To confront their divisions, Paul talked about farming.  
He reminded them that all he did among them was plant seeds.  
He reminded them that all Apollos did was to water those seeds.  
And then he gave them his main point:  
it was God—God ONLY—that made the church at Corinth grow.

All farmers know that they don’t make anything grow.  
No farmer has anything to do with what happens within a seed.  
No farmer has ever created something from nothing.

But what farmers are very good at is “moving things around.”

They move soil around.  
They move seeds around.  
They move machinery around.  
They move water around.

No farmer has ever made a seed, or made a seed grow.  
No farmer has ever caused a cow to produce milk.  
No farmer has ever made a pig grow.  
No farmer has ever made a chicken lay an egg.

The farmer's job is to create positive conditions in which God's  
creative work can best take place.  
If you move things around intelligently,  
seeds grow, cows give milk, pigs grow, chickens lay.

Then Paul switches metaphors and talks about constructing a building.  
The point is the same: no builder ever made a structure from nothing.  
No builder ever stood beside an empty lot and created a building  
from thin air.

It's a matter again of "moving things around"—  
finding the right materials, then combining them and connecting them  
and altering them in ways that are strong, functional,  
and pleasing to the eye.

Paul doesn't use a medical image here, but he could have.  
Doctors and nurses do not heal.  
But by moving things around with medicines and surgeries  
and therapies, they create conditions whereby God can heal.

Paul's goal in this passage is to get the Corinthians' mind OFF of those  
who move things around—the church's pastors and leaders—  
and ONTO God and to Jesus Christ.

It is God—God only—who creates the growth of the church.  
It is Jesus—Jesus only—who is the foundation of that church.

Paul, and Apollos, and Peter, and Weldon and Florence and Frank and  
Tim and Don and Leo and Harold all the others did only one thing:  
move things around.

In a time of pastoral transition, it's important to remember that you have not followed Florence or me, and you will not follow Gail and whoever comes after Gail.  
You follow God.

No pastor has been or ever will be the foundation of First Mennonite Church.

Now that is not to say that we pastors who plant and water and move things around are not important.

As you know from farming and construction work and in medicine and in almost any endeavor, HOW you move things around has a large effect on your results;  
some ways of moving things around are more effective than others.

Our aim, as pastors, is to move things around so that God's Spirit has room in which to operate in the lives of individuals, and in the gathered life of the congregation.  
We do it imperfectly, but that is our constant aim.

By virtue of an individual pastor's gifts, interests, and personality, things get moved around in different ways.

Each pastor, just by being him- or herself, has a different effect. Each pastor develops a different circle of people that he or she connects with most closely.

Pastors work hard at relating to everyone,  
but with every pastoral transition the group dynamics change, and some who were close to the last pastor feel farther away from the new pastor—and vice versa.  
It's just a fact of life; pastoral changes move things around, and that can be a very good thing.

It's why sports teams change managers or coaches from time to time. Sometimes, even if a coach or manager is competent,  
you just need to change the group dynamics in order to take the next step.

Sometimes a new personality with a different set of strengths and weaknesses can free up a system that's sort of stuck so that it can perform up to its maximum potential.

Every pastor comes with a different set of gifts:

Apollos, the silver-tongued preacher, would have made a lousy church planter; great speakers are often poor initiators and administrators.

Paul would have been a lousy counselor or pastoral care person; he's just not the type you'd want holding your hand in a time of crisis; he didn't have the sensitivity or the patience.

No pastor has all the gifts in perfect proportion for every situation, and so the new mix of gifts that comes with a new pastor always moves things around. And that's good.

Gail is going to be your interim pastor.

He'll move things around simply by being himself.

One of his central gifts to you will be that he's not me.

That's not to put myself down, but it's a recognition that new leaders always move things around.

That's good. That's what's supposed to happen.

Give Gail the freedom to be himself.

And for the pastor that follows Gail, give to that person the same freedom, and expect that things will move around again, and that that moving around is part of God's plan for this church.

Now when things get moved around, some people may be glad, because they're tired of the old patterns and are ready for change.

And, of course, when things get moved around, some people are disappointed or uncomfortable; they like the way the previous pastor did things.

Just remember this: whenever something gets moved around, it's a sign that the congregation is getting into a new position to respond to the creative power of the Spirit of God.

Pastors are God's farmers and builders,  
working the ground,  
planting the seeds,  
feeding the livestock (pardon the metaphor),  
gathering materials and coordinating their use,  
moving things around according to their gifts, their vision,  
and their particular calling.

Don't spend energy comparing Weldon and Florence with Gail or  
with Gail's successor.

Don't demand that pastors play the piano or the guitar or sing in the choir.

Don't expect that a new pastor's energies will be allocated in the  
same places as ours have been.

Comparing one pastor with the other gets the focus off of God,  
who is the only one who can create.

Comparing one pastor with another loosens the mortar around the  
foundation stone which is called "Jesus Christ."

Comparing pastors got the Corinthians in trouble, because they lost  
their focus on Jesus as the center of the church.

As we leave this community in a week, Florence and I certainly hope  
that you will remember us, for we will certainly love and remember you.

But do not use those memories as a yardstick—either positively or  
negatively—for the next pastor.

It is not the next pastor's job to duplicate the good things we did,  
and it is not the next pastor's job to be perfect in all the areas  
where we were imperfect.

Just pray that God will help your next pastors to move things around  
in ways that create fertile soil in which God's seeds can grow.

Just pray that Jesus, not the performance of the pastor,  
will be at the center of your heart, your thoughts,  
and at the center of the life of this congregation.

God has called this congregation to  
Follow Jesus, Mature in Faith, and Carry the Good News.

As you talk with neighbors and friends about this church,  
talk less about how great—or not so great—your pastor is,  
and talk more about how exciting it is to be part of a church that is  
growing in courage to follow Jesus,  
that is committed to continuing growth in faith,  
and that is finding new ways of connecting our neighbors  
with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Pastors are important because there are helpful and not-so-helpful ways of  
moving things around, just as there are more or less effective ways  
of farming or building.

But the church is NOT about its pastors.  
The church is about Jesus.

Even as pastors move various things around,  
keep Jesus at the center.  
That's something faithful pastors will NOT move around.

If you stay centered on Jesus, you'll discover that God is not done creating,  
and that this church—no matter who the pastor is—  
will be full of life, purpose, hope, and joy.

May it be so.