

**7 Epiphany – Year A – February 23, 2011 - Homily**  
**Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48**  
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Since it's cold and a little snowy outside, tonight I want everyone to relax, maybe even close your eyes, and imagine you're at your favorite beach. The air is like a warm blanket caressing your skin. The water is lapping gently on the shore. You're walking along the edge of the water, and your footprints leave a clear trail in the sand behind you. As you turn to look a surge of water breaks the trail you've made in the sand, and as it retreats leaves the sand smooth and dark. Gently, gently now let's come back from the beach to another day in our lives. You may have experienced this specifically, or you may just imagine what I'm going to describe. You're wearing your work clothes now, old and shabby, but also soft and comfortable. As you look around you see signs of construction or building: lengths of tightly strung string mark out a straight line. A shovel, a rake, and an old broom lie nearby. There's the grinding whir of a small cement mixer, piles of gravel, sand, and planks of wood. You're about to pour a new footpath in fresh soft cement, and you already have in mind that you just might leave a handprint behind before it dries. It's almost irresistible and fun to leave our mark, knowing that it will be there for a long time to come after the cement hardens.

Tonight's reading from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth begins with a building metaphor. Paul describes himself as one of Christ's master builders who has laid the foundation of God's truth through the Good News of Jesus Christ, who is the perfect foundation for others to build on. Our own footprints in the sand are quickly washed away with the next wave. Our handprints, so carefully pressed into the wet cement, are also less permanent than they look. Unlike either of these, the imprint in the foundation of the church is Jesus Christ, and His life and teaching permeate the shape and design of the new Temple in His body that is the church. The imprint of Jesus in the life of a believer cannot be simply washed away. Paradoxically, it is the waters of baptism that create this foundation in our hearts. Nor can the imprint of our Savior and Lord be destroyed by anything in this world. No natural or supernatural force or power can tear up or destroy it, except God alone. The foundation of the church is no less than the Creator of the universe, the alpha and omega, the eternal I AM. Jesus has conquered sin and death, once for all, and so even with the death of individual believers, the Body of Christ lives on as the Good News is shared and passed on from generation to generation.

Paul is responding to a common situation in the life of the church, where leaders have sprung up and factions of supporters have developed, resulting in quarrels, splinter groups, and dissension. Heavily influenced by the surrounding culture, with a strong and exclusive class system, combined with intellectual elitism, the leaders of the church in Corinth have been using their highly valued rhetorical skills to boost their personal popularity, and to keep out the riff raff. In the same way that this week's Gospel lesson shares Jesus' teachings on getting over ourselves and growing up, Paul reminds the Corinthians of exactly what it means to be a member of Christ's body. He builds on other aspects of Jesus' life and teachings, which amount to what we now call servant leadership. For example, in Matthew 20:25-28 Jesus says, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.... It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." And from the Gospel of Mark (9:35) when Jesus tells His disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." The most important lesson of Paul's letter and the Gospel reading is that God in Christ is the center and impetus of all we do, and who we are. The second lesson is that all are welcome. All is a tricky word, and one that we are quick to redefine as "all according to me". In Corinth, it had become all according to this leader or that leader, whereby some parts of the Body of Christ were being shaped into exclusive human institutions, rather than an inclusive gift of God. The divine foundation of the body of

Christ means that we are being transformed by Christ into a collective community, a new people of God in a way that transcends mere human organization.

The cross shapes and defines the life of Jesus the servant. To live as Christ lived is to live a life of love, doing for others what we would desire for ourselves. It is to live humbly, listening to God in all things, and doing all we can to build up the community of faith. Since the foundation of our building is Jesus, then the foundation of our lives must ensure that everyone can see Jesus in who we are and what we do. Christian discipleship is about intentionality of being, such that in our doing we incorporate God's love and justice, God's compassion and mercy into our faith in action. In practical terms, it means that our worship is an offering of love where all are welcome, without judgment. It means our hospitality excludes no one. That our outreach is the gift of grateful and generous hearts, and cares for the poorest amongst us. That our children's ministry demonstrates that all members of Christ's body are equal, as well as ensuring that each child of God is loved and protected from harm. That our Christian formation is available for children of all ages. That our pastoral care offers Christ's healing and comfort. That all leadership is servant leadership. We can only make good decisions that serve the best interests of the whole community of faith, when we are grounded in right relationship with God in Christ Jesus. Speaking personally, I have plenty of great ideas, many of which I quietly shelve because they would not benefit the community. Being a servant leader is holding all things lightly, setting aside self, and seeking the very best for the whole community.

As we already do in this place, every community of faith is called to self-examination and discernment through prayer and Bible study at a minimum. We must look carefully to see if what we are doing here incorporates the cruciform shape of our Lord's footprints and handprints, the voice and teachings of Jesus, His humility and integrity, as well as His love and service. Paul's letter sought to address splinter groups ruled by human wisdom. Paul's wisdom is grounded in, and shaped by the cross of Christ, so his letter applies to every faith community where cliques and factions form, or where a few try to assert individual opinions, often to the detriment of the whole. Paul calls us to be ruled by God's wisdom, which is most clearly seen through humble service, and selfless love, rather than the foolishness of the age. As we each commit our lives to God's service, we commit to a radical transformation to Christ-likeness. That in turn means that God helps us to get over ourselves, and grow to maturity in Him. Discipleship is tough. Building relationships, putting others ahead of ourselves, and living in community is hard work. The challenge for us all is one of endurance. The test of faith is our integrity and witness to God in Christ Jesus over the long haul. Christian discipleship is a life-long process. A process largely marked by our recovery from innate selfishness and foolishness, towards becoming a new community that is a witness to God's love. In other words, we are being transformed from footprints in the sand, to disciples who are able to create lasting and concrete imprints of divine love in Jesus' name, by the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.