

1000 Marbles

1 Corinthians 2:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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How is it possible that we read a particular scripture at any given time and get one thing out of it, but read it again several months later and get something else out of it? Is it because God is revealing something new to us? Is it because we're in a different place when we read the portion of the Bible? Is it both? Or neither?

The "setting" for Paul's writing of I Corinthians is well-known. Paul had planted the church in Corinth, and now, just a few years later, was receiving questioning letters and reports of problems. There was a lot of division within the Corinthian church and the believers were struggling to sort out their newfound faith while living in the multi-cultural, unchristian seaport of Corinth.

- Read I Corinthians 2:1-13 (from The Message)

When I read today's assigned lectionary reading from I Corinthians 2, I was instantly hit by a thought. What I heard was Paul speaking to me and my faith walk. This letter was written to, if you will, newbie followers, yet has the insight and power to speak to any of us further along on our spiritual journeys.

These words by Paul brought up many memories that I have collected over the past 40 years, with 34 in the professional ministry. And I want to share some of these with you today.

MY faith journey officially began back when I was a senior in college and in my last quarter of studies. It had actual been in the birthing stages for several years as I struggled to "grasp" who God is and was for me. I remember listening to, then not so common, TV evangelists. I heard their words, but they were just words without meaning for me. And I was frustrated by it, so while in undergraduate school I just let it go. My senior year I made what I thought was a mistake by accepting an invitation from one of my professors to attend a worship service with a special speaker. The day came and I didn't want to go, but I had told her I would, so I went. That evening, for the first time, words that I had most likely heard from the mouths of the TV evangelists, made sense, and touched me to my core.

The next few months I spent much time trying to sort out my newfound "beliefs" and how they intersected with my life. You see, I knew I was gay but was struggling with it while in college. For the first few months of studying Jesus' life, I put being gay aside as far as how it related to Jesus, focusing upon my study. There came a time though, when I could no longer keep these two aspects of my life separate. I began several months of fervent prayer asking God to remove this from me if it were wrong. I remember VERY well the time when I realized that my specific prayer had been answered without my realizing it. AND NO, I was not cured of being gay!

It would be several months before I found and became actively involved in the community who would become my "tribe". Metropolitan Community Church. But

during those months leading up to discovering and becoming part of my tribe, I was "indoctrinated" into the orthodox Christian beliefs. I tried to live and follow them. And as I moved into my call to "professional ministry," to share them with others.

My transformational journey really began around 1997. I began to ACTIVELY question the standard, pat, definitive answers of orthodox Christianity that I had learned. Although my questioning had begun long before that, I pushed it back down because it was contrary to the "truths" I was taught. That year I joined a group of women who gathered together on a weekly basis to begin reading and discussing Marcus Borg's book, "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time".

A member of the group was a "tribe member", a woman who had attended the MCC church where I was on staff. The pastor had in one of her sermons, with all positive intentions, urged the congregation to read through the Bible, beginning with Genesis. This woman took her suggestion literally. As she read through Genesis, the woman became more and more disillusioned about God because of the scriptural description of God. As she shared in our initial meeting about her disillusionment, she stated that she could no longer follow a God as described in what she had been reading. I realized I had experienced similar questions, and even disdain for the way some scripture in the Old Testament, often pictures God. I had no way of knowing how that small group of questioning, sharing, very open group of women would change my spiritual walk.

So, I would like to pose a question to you:

- **What if we were to stay in the same spiritual place throughout our lifetime?**

Oh, my!! I am so thankful that I have moved beyond that spiritual level I was at for so many years.

Around 1990 I read a book titled, *Faith Is A Verb: Dynamics Of Adult Faith Development* by Kenneth Stokes. Stokes encouraged his readers to view growing in faith as a life-long process, saying that faith "is an active and ever-becoming part of my life and yours...it is always in the process."

People who have studied and researched faith development theorize there are various stages that people go through as their spirituality matures. Each theory though, identifies a stage when people generally start to question their own assumptions around their faith tradition. And along with questioning their own faith assumptions, people at this stage start to question the authority structures of their faith. Of course, this is generally not appreciated by the church leadership, and often time's people will leave their tribe if the answers to the questions they are asking are not to their liking. Or, it's probably not unusual for people to be "asked" to leave or even to be excommunicated or shunned out of their tribe for asking their questions.

The research indicates that for faith development to continue, this strong need for individual self-reflection must give way to the next stage ... a sense of the importance of community in faith development. People at this stage are generally much more open to other people's faith perspectives. Not because they are moving away from their faith but because they have come to the realization that other people's faiths might inform and deepen their own. I am gratefully for having found College Hill Presbyterian Church that allows me to continue my journey of talking, questioning, and listening to other's faith journeys. Many of us were privileged, enlightened, and dare I say, awed by Harold Hill and the faith insights that he shared with us.

Paul had his hands full with these newbie Corinthian followers. I do not envy him! M. Scott Peck's scheme of faith development describes what he calls a "Formal, Institutional Stage. People in this stage are very attached to the outward forms of their faith. They are very much in need of stability and do not deal well with society. Their God is a legalistic, punitive person-like figure. People in this stage depend upon organized religion to define their life and govern their behavior. Does this sound like what Paul may be trying to address in his letter to the Corinthians?

Paul gets straight to the heart of the problems that were taking place in Corinth: *misplaced priorities*. In the first chapter, Paul writes "You must get along with each other. You must learn to be considerate of one another, cultivating a life in common." (v. 10) They had been together in community for some 3 years and the worldly culture that Corinth was famous for had crept into the church. As I read the portion of Paul's letter in the 2nd chapter, I heard it not as criticism or scolding for their failings, but as a challenge not only to step back from error, but also to actively cultivate their spiritual lives and to make it priority #1!!!

I recently read a story that I want to share with you. It's called "**1000 Marbles**". (Written by Jeffrey Davis © 1999)

The older I get, the more I enjoy Saturday mornings. Perhaps it's the quiet solitude that comes with being the first to rise, or maybe it's the unbounded joy of not having to be at work. Either way, the first few hours of a Saturday morning are most enjoyable.

A few weeks ago, I was shuffling toward the backyard patio with a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and the morning paper in the other. What began as a typical Saturday morning, turned into one of those lessons that life seems to hand you from time to time. Let me tell you about it.

I turned the dial up to listen to a Saturday morning talk show. I heard an older sounding gentleman, with a golden voice. You know the kind, he sounded like he should be in the broadcasting business. He was telling whoever he was talking with something about "a thousand marbles".

I was intrigued and stopped to listen to what he had to say...

"Well, Tom, it sure sounds like you're busy with your job. I'm sure they pay you well but it's a shame you have to be away from home and your family so much. Hard to believe a young fellow should have to work sixty or seventy hours a week to make ends meet. Too bad you missed your daughter's dance recital."

He continued, "Let me tell you something Tom, something that has helped me keep a good perspective on my own priorities."

And that's when he began to explain his theory of a "thousand marbles." "You see, I sat down one day and did a little arithmetic. The average

person lives about seventy-five years. I know, some live more and some live less, but on average, folks live about seventy-five years."

"Now then, I multiplied 75 times 52 and I came up with 3900 which is the number of Saturdays that the average person has in their entire lifetime.

Now stick with me Tom, I'm getting to the important part."

"It took me until I was fifty-five years old to think about all this in any detail", he went on, "and by that time I had lived through over 2,800 Saturdays. I got to thinking that if I lived to be seventy-five, I only had about a thousand of them left to enjoy."

"So I went to a toy store and bought every single marble they had. I ended up having to visit three toy stores to round-up 1000 marbles. I took them home and put them inside of a large, clear plastic container right here in the shack next to my gear. Every Saturday since then, I have taken one marble out and thrown it away."

"I found that by watching the marbles diminish, I focused more on the really important things in life. There is nothing like watching your time here on this earth run out to help get your priorities straight."

"Now let me tell you one last thing before I sign-off with you and take my lovely wife out for breakfast. This morning, I took the very last marble out of the container. I figure if I make it until next Saturday then I have been given a little extra time. And the one thing we can all use is a little more time."

"It was nice to meet you Tom, I hope you spend more time with your family, and I hope to meet you again."

You could have heard a pin drop on the radio when this fellow signed off. I guess he gave us all a lot to think about. I had planned to work that morning. Instead, I went upstairs and woke my wife up with a kiss. "C'mon honey, I'm taking you and the kids to breakfast."

"What brought this on?" she asked with a smile. "Oh, nothing special, it's just been a while since we spent a Saturday together with the kids. Hey, can we stop at a toy store while we're out? I need to buy some marbles."

Misplace priorities right priorities. It's good to be reminded sometimes!!

Amen?