

Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Trinity

1 Corinthians 3:9–17 (NIV)

9 For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. **10** By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. **11** For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. **12** If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, **13** their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. **14** If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. **15** If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. **16** Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? **17** If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

More than ten years ago, a great cloud of dust and smoke hung in the Lukaskirche. You could hear hammering, scraping, and now and then a loud crash, because something had toppled over. People came from various congregations. Even a group from America came here to help with the construction and renovation of the church. Throughout that whole time, it wasn't only clouds of dust that filled these rooms — clouds hung over our minds as well. Because we had to plan, and we worried about how the whole thing could possibly work. And that wasn't the first project. Many years earlier, things were just as lively on Kleiststraße. The church was renovated and the parsonage was built. There too, people came together, pitched in, and helped. Of course, with all that building there wasn't just one opinion, but many different ones. And where those opinions collide, conflicts arise now and then. As the saying goes: "Where there's sawing, there are wood shavings!" And that wasn't only true of our small congregation in Leipzig — it has always been that way.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul takes up this very question. Paul describes the congregation using two images. First he uses the image of farmland, and speaks of how Apollos, Paul, and Peter planted and tended such a field. Then Paul switches images and speaks from that point on of building the congregation. I think this is deliberate. Because it is precisely in building that human beings are actively involved. Plants, once rooted, grow on their own, so to speak. In building, people are involved and must decide: "What material do I use? How high should it be? How large? In what direction should it go?" As I said, I think Paul switches the image on purpose, because in the building of the church, what is visible at first is what people do. But it is exactly at this point that the danger lies of going down the wrong path — and we do, whenever we locate the foundation and the goal of the building solely in human doing, human giftedness, and human effort.

And that is exactly what happened in the Corinthian congregation. Factions had formed. Some followed Apollos, others Peter, and still others Paul. I am certain that each of these co-workers in God's building had particular gifts, particular qualities, but also particular flaws. And God, in his wisdom, ordained that all three should work on God's building.

Paul, the trained rabbi, was firmly rooted both in Judaism and equally at home in Greek language and culture. He experienced not only a radical conversion — from persecutor of Christians to missionary to the world — he also had a special gift for pouring it all into a beautiful theology, as one can read in the letter to the Romans. Peter, on the other hand, was practically minded, as a fisherman would be. He was used to teamwork and is also known for reacting impulsively. I imagine he was a man of action as well. Peter was not a theorist but a practitioner, who again and again had to learn in his own body what forgiveness meant.

Apollos, meanwhile, came from the city of Alexandria, a stronghold of Jewish-Greek scholarship. In the book of Acts he is described as a very eloquent man. What is remarkable, though, is that he let himself be instructed by Aquila and Priscilla, even though they had no great reputation as scholars.

Put together, this yields an appealing pattern: three completely different life stories (scholar, fisherman, orator), three different temperaments. And that was precisely God's plan — to use people with their different gifts in the kingdom of God. Paul does not conceal the differing gifts of these co-workers. And yet he must emphatically insist that none of these co-workers, with all their gifts, is the foundation. The foundation is Christ, and Christ alone, to be found in no other.

The Corinthians had formed factions. That is all too human a way of thinking. It would happen the same way in any club or association. But the church is not a club, and it cannot be built on human gifts or qualities. The church stands on Christ alone. God evidently wants to use quite different types of co-workers — the scholar, the practitioner, the orator — and values precisely this diversity. But that diversity is bounded by the fact that they all build on the same foundation. The real danger was that the church would go down the wrong path at exactly this point, by following a person, with their whole being, as the goal, and neglecting the foundation on which the church stands — namely, Christ. Surely Paul, too, felt the temptation to side with the Pauline faction. Humanly speaking, after all, those were his own people. But that is exactly what Paul does not do. Neither Paul, nor Apollos, nor Peter is the foundation. Christ alone.

What is striking is that Paul does not lapse into indifference here, as if to say, "Christ is the main thing, so anything goes after that." No — quite the opposite: Paul warns. "Each one should build with care," and he warns that there will be a reckoning: whose work will stand, and whose will have to burn like straw. I was once in a congregation where the slogan, repeated again and again as a kind of banner, was: "Christ alone!" But in the course of the service it became very clear, very quickly, that this was not really about Christ at all, but about a particular pastor with a particular gift of healing. And this particular gift, it was announced publicly, was especially effective if one paid a great deal of money. So you see: not everywhere that "Christ" is written

on the label is Christ actually inside. That is why the church has had to keep spelling out, again and again, precisely what it means for Christ alone to be the foundation of the church. In our confessional writings, this foundation is explained and laid down systematically. Wherever God's word is proclaimed and wherever the sacraments — the Lord's Supper and baptism — are administered according to Christ's own words, there is the church. And where the label says "church," but people no longer believe in the resurrection, or in Christ's death on the cross for our sin, then that foundation has been abandoned. And that must then be said clearly.

But on the foundation that Christ has laid down for us, there can still be the most varied gifts: theorists and practitioners, people with a certain outward-radiating faith, and others who are more inclined to be private rather than public. God wants to use both.

These words of the apostle — which on the one hand speak quite freely of the different co-workers, and on the other hand of the one foundation we must never abandon — are of the highest relevance for us as the church today. In the church leadership and in our congregations, people are worried. What will the church of the future look like? What will remain, and what must burn like straw? Plans are being devised for how, with less money and less staff, the same number of congregations might still be served. And here, this word of the apostle applies in a special way: "Each one should build with care." For we are dealing with the congregation of God, not with a human club. We will probably have to make difficult decisions in the future. It is especially important that in this situation we pay attention to the apostle's words. "Each one should build with care" means that we keep glancing back, again and again, at the foundation: Is this the master builder's idea, or have we run off into an illusion? Have we perhaps also built on individual personalities and gifts, rather than on Christ?

In the future, it will be the congregation — not the individual — that remains standing as God's temple. That is the place where God has promised that he will always be present. What power radiates from that promise! Here are not merely flawed people in need of redemption, but here is God's building. Here God is at work, and God wants to use precisely this church, with all its flaws, according to his own will.

When the church on Kleiststraße was built and renovated, people had ideas about what the future would look like. Probably no one back then could have imagined that we would one day be in the Lukaskirche. And when we took over the Lukaskirche, we sometimes stood there, full of doubt, asking how it could all possibly work. But somehow God made it all possible. Now we stand before a future that is still unknown. How will things go on? I believe we should not cling too tightly to our worries about the future. Bonhoeffer once said: "The church is the greatest gift that God can give us." Amid all the challenges, it is worth taking that to heart. The church is a gift of God. We do not make the church — we find it already there. We build on the church in that knowledge. We do so by holding worship services, by praying for one another, by grieving together and comforting one another. In doing so, we discover again and again that the church is not dead, but alive. That means that sometimes we suffer because of it. But in the end, we realize again and again that it is greater than the pain and the hopelessness.

Amen.