

Plant. Water. Grow.

Rev. John Allen

Churches tend to be full of plaques. I've seen hundreds.

Plaques that remember significant gifts and sacrifices as well as the stories of those whose ordinary lives were infused with extraordinary love.

Now I may be biased, but my favorite church plaque I have ever seen is in our church here in Milton.

It's on the door as you go into Johnson Hall, and it commemorates the building of the Centre School in 2002. I love it because it has this great line on the bottom: "no one told us this was supposed to be impossible."

The names it lists are familiar to us still: Nancy Barber, David Hall, Cathy Arnold, and Tom Matejka, who were instrumental in leading the way through this process.

To their names we might also add Mark Stoekle, who was essential in the transition from the school we ran ourselves, to our management partnership with Bright Horizons.

And to that we ought also to recall the blessed memories of Al Fogel and Marjorie Cheney, who through their estates left considerable gifts to the church which hastened the coming of this day, when we can proudly declare that we, as a church, are debt free.

Perhaps we get this love of remembering people by name from the Apostle Paul. Paul loved to recognize people in his letters, and remember them by their names.

Phoebe, Titus, Philemon, Andronicus, Junia, Quartus, Onesimus, Silas, Lucius, Tertius, Gaius, and Erastus. (And they said learning Greek was a waste of time.)

In letter after letter, Paul celebrates the unique contributions that so many ordinary people have made to the different churches across the Mediterranean that he has started.

In today's reading, from his first letter to the Corinthians, we meet Paul's friend and co-laborer, Apollos. Paul tells that church he founded: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."

And then quickly Paul directs our attention to the foundation. Before there was Apollos, before there was Paul, before any of us in here even took our first breath, there was Christ, the cornerstone, the foundation of the church.

Because the greatest thing to celebrate about anyone of the saints of that early church, or the saints of this church over the past 340 years, is not the individual achievements of any one moment, but rather that in each generation we have sought to build faithfully upon the true foundation of the church which is Christ.

The story of this church is the story of each generation doing their very best to be faithful to God's hopes, and to be courageous enough to move where the Spirit bids us move.

We are all meant to be planters and waterers of God's hope in our world. To do the long, slow, sometimes mundane and quite ordinary work of caring for each other and tending to this community.

Teaching our children well. Reaching out to one another in love.

Striving to live in a way that makes God's love believable in a hurting and broken world.

In the terror in New Zealand this week we saw the worst the world has to offer. We saw hatred unfurl its ugly banner violence visit a house of prayer and peace.

These big moments often spur big responses. Organizations issue statements. New laws are proposed and then quickly forgotten. Sentiments are proclaimed that this will be the last time, but it isn't.

It sometimes feels like our collective social conscience is stuck on the monkey bars, swinging from one big moment to the next, and the next, and the next. How will we respond to this, and this, and this?

Don't get me wrong, this dramatic injustices and eruptions of violence deserve our attention, it is worth sitting in grief with broken hearts and shattered spirits.

But these do not deserve our exclusive attention. They do not deserve our fixation.

I fear that in the face of enormous pain and suffering, most of us feel powerless to make any difference at all.

And it makes sense to feel that way.

Think about how you learned history. Reading a history book it can seem like the course of humanity swung from key moment to key moment, and at each moment, there is a person or two whose name we remember as the one who made all the difference.

That is how we see the past, and so that is how we expect the world to unfold. But in reality, history is actually formed by a thousand small acts of a thousand different people, most of whom we have never heard it.

Who is Apollos? Who is Paul? Who are we? Planters and waterers of justice, hope, joy, peace, and love.

That is why I love church plaques. Because they tend to point us not toward the extraordinary titans of history, but rather the people whose ordinary living, in this small corner of God's creation, gave witness to the truth that God is at work through each of us.

In the face of the pain of the world, a simple act of love extended to a neighbor, a simple act of service to your closest community, a kind word to a broken heart, a visit to someone who is lonely, an act of kindness to a stranger, these are no small or idle things.

Indeed this church is built out of a thousand moments like that. And the way the world will begin to change is with a million more.

No one changes the world all at once. Any of us could change it a little bit today.

Planting and watering the seeds and tender shoots of God's love wherever we can, and as often as we find them, adding brick by brick to the foundation that was laid by God with Christ.

Adding our lives, and our deeds, and our faith and hope, to one another's.

This is our calling. What a privilege.