

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 “In All Things Charity”

Every now and then, I feel a need to touch base with who we are as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We preachers just assume that folks who come to church know about us outside the context of our individual congregations. And of course, I'm happy that you all found this congregation. We were talking last week about how important it is for us to have something to see when we tell people, “Come and see.” Thank you for looking, and thank you for seeing. We see you too.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is actually the first American-born Protestant denomination. You might be thinking, “What? No way! What about the Methodists? They started out here, right? They're all over the South and Mid-West.” Nope. Mid-1700s England. Okay, what about Baptists? You don't get more American than Baptists! Nope. 1609, Amsterdam. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints? I know they were American-born! Yeah, well we have 30 years on them. Pentecostals? We have 80 years on them. We *are* the first American born Protestant movement. We were founded by a handful of Renegade Scottish Presbyterian immigrants who were tired of all the European Protestant denominations trying to convince folks out on the frontier that they were the only valid manifestation of Christ's church on earth. Our founders said, “We are not the only Christians, we are Christians only.” We threw creeds and confessions of faith out the window because they were used to exclude people from fellowship. Our founders wanted to *include* people, so they went as far as to say, “You don't have to confess to a narrow set of denominationally specific doctrinal beliefs in order to have communion with us. The only confession that matters to us is Peter's great confession that he made when Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?” Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” We're all about making the table bigger, not smaller. All are welcome. And all means ... ? (All?)

Well ... in theory. We still have a ways to go in that department. That's our movement's challenge here in the 21st Century, and that's a sermon ... or maybe a series of sermons for another day. Kudos for Joel Thomas, though, for being the first person to notice the question mark on the "All" on our marquee. He got a Starbuck's card for that one. We shall revisit this.

What our founders back in the 1820s were trying to do was "restore primitive Christianity." In other words, they wanted to re-capture the faith and practice of the first Christians before Emperor Constantine messed things up by making Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. Constantine did this in the fourth century, and our founders believed that's when things started going downhill for the church. They believed that the hierarchies of the church started looking too much like the hierarchies of the Empires. They wanted to get back to the way the church was when they met in small groups and opposed the empires of the world rather than adopting their ways. That's why we are often referred to as the "restoration movement." Let's get rid of all the fluff and get back to what the church was when it first started. Oh, you mean back when the followers of Jesus got along with each other and lived in peace and harmony with no fussing or fighting or arguing about who God liked best?

Well ... again ... *in theory*. The problem is, the early church was far from perfect. Think about it ... Jesus' *disciples* barely got along with each other when they were following Jesus in person! They would sit at the table arguing about who was the greatest among them right in front of Jesus! They betrayed each other, argued with each other, disagreed vehemently with each other and could barely keep it together long enough for the day when the Holy Spirit was poured out on them in Jerusalem and the church was born. Okay, well they did better after that, right? Once the Holy Spirit filled them on the Day of Pentecost, they gelled and everything was hunky dory after that, right? Once again ... *in theory*. To figure out if that's the case, it makes sense that we go back to the earliest writings in the New Testament. Here's a question

for those who've been coming to Bible study over the years ... what are the earliest writings in the New Testament? Right! The epistles. Well that doesn't make sense, wouldn't it be the gospels? That's the actual story of Jesus, right? That comes first! Yes. But the story of Jesus was oral tradition long before it was written down. The earliest writings of the New Testaments are the epistles, or the letters to the early church mostly attributed to the Apostle Paul. That's where we can find out about this primitive Christianity that we in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) want to restore. That's where we'll learn about how well the early church got along!

The scripture that Jerry read this morning? That's an epistle. That's one of the earliest writings in the church. And how does this passage start out? "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." In my experience, you don't have to say "Be in agreement" to people who are *already* in agreement. Amen? And then the next thing he writes is, "It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you." See? People tattled on each other to the preacher twenty years after Jesus walked the earth!

Why is it so hard to get along with each other sometimes? Don't we have better things to do with our time, energy, and resources than to argue about whose baptism counts and whose doesn't? Because that's the issue on the table here. People were trying to set themselves apart by who baptized them. Are we *sure* we want to restore this early church? We don't argue about who baptized who! There are some other things, sure ... but not that! This church in Corinth doesn't sound particularly focused on their vision and mission right now if they're fussing at each other about who their favorite preacher is. See, I think we have a tendency as human beings to idealize things and people from our past. We want to believe that the church in the first Century was somehow perfect. But clearly it wasn't. In fact, I don't think there ever has been a perfect church. Dennis Martin, one of my wise and wonderful clergy

colleagues I had during my first full-time pastorate gave me a poem that I still have in my “Wisdom and Humor” file that I’ve carried around for the past 27 years. It’s called “The Perfect Church.”

I think that I shall never see
A Church that’s all it ought to be;
A Church whose members never stray
Beyond the Straight and Narrow way;
A Church that has no empty pews,
Whose Pastor never has the blues,
A Church whose Deacons always deak,
And none is proud, and all are meek.
Where gossips never peddle lies,
Or make complaints or criticize;
Where all are always sweet and kind
And all to other’s faults are blind.
Such perfect Churches there may be,
But none of them are known to me.
But still, we’ll work, and pray and plan
To make our own the best we can.

Now you know where I get that phrase, “Our elders eld and our deacons deak!” We in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are known for our quippy little sayings. When you don’t have formal creeds or doctrinal statements, you use quippy little sayings like, “Unity is our Polar Star” and “We’re not the only Christians, we are Christians only.” One of my favorite quippy sayings is, “In essentials unity, in non essentials liberty, and in all things charity.” Very similar to our congregation’s, “Agree to differ, resolve to love, and unite to serve.” The challenge, of course, is in determining that which is essential and that which is not essential.

Paul gives the church in Corinth some insight on this matter. For Paul, the most important thing is that the church be engaged in proclaiming the gospel, or “the good news.” What is this good news? We went over

this last May. For the entire month in fact. According to Jesus, the good news is that God is reconciling the world. To what? To whom? To God. God is reconciling the world to God. Bridging that gap. Making the space between Kingdom of Heaven and Kingdom of Earth very thin. Transparent even. “How?” Through Christ. “God is reconciling the world to God through Christ.” That’s the church’s good news. For Paul, this is tied up in the “message of the cross.” “What *is* the message of the cross?” you might ask. “And you’ve only got about five minutes to tackle that one.” Fine. I’ll let someone who can sum things up better than I can tackle this one. This is from Timothy Sedgwick, author of *Feasting on the Word*. “The good news is given in the cross as *self-sacrifice*, giving oneself up in response to and care for the other, the cross as bearing the burdens of others—not as *self-denial* and resignation, but in joy and thanksgiving. To claim anything else empties the cross of Christ of its power.”

It is essential for the church to sacrificially care for and bear one another’s burdens with joy and thanksgiving. That’s the power of the Cross. And Paul says that the way this is communicated doesn’t have to be with “eloquent wisdom” either. In fact, it’s going to sound pretty foolish to people who don’t get it. But to those who are willing to give oneself in love and joy, this is saving power. This is what Jesus did, therefore it is what we will do also.

This is how we overcome division. This is how we live out our mission and witness in the world even when we don’t agree on things that in the long run don’t matter. Christ is not divided. The church, which Paul calls the “Body of Christ” ought not to be divided either. May everything we do – our worship, our practices, our sacraments, our mission ... may it always communicate the good news that God is reconciling the world to God through Christ. In essentials unity, in non-essentials, liberty, and in all things ... charity.”