

January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023

## 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 “United in Mind and Purpose”

Disunity and division are a big part of our scripture lesson this morning. The reading is from the first of two letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, Greece somewhere around 53 AD. That was about 20 years after the church was born in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Twenty years isn't that long when you think about it, but in that short time the good news of Jesus spread from Jerusalem to Corinth which, according to Google Maps, is about an 1,800 mile drive give or take ... about the distance between Chico and Kansas City. The church in Corinth was in its infancy which may explain why their members were acting like infants. We have this notion that the early church was somehow pristine and perfect. Even the founders of our denomination started out with the goal of “restoring the primitive church” which I totally understand. They were reacting to the mess that the church had become after the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. By 380 AD, Christianity had become the official state sanctioned religion of the Roman Empire. A lot of folks say that this is when the church stopped being a religious movement and became an institution. This letter was written 350 years before that happened. This was about as “primitive and pristine” as it gets. So, with that in mind, let's think about what Paul might have been going through when he wrote this letter to them. Verses 11-13 of today's reading says,

“For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

So let's break this down one step at a time here and see if we can figure out what was going on. Let's see if we can find anything that sounds ...

familiar that we can relate to in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. Paul writes, “For it has been reported to me.” What does that sound like to you? Sounds like someone’s tattling! Tattling to the preacher or the Regional Minister in Paul’s case. Well then, we can cross that off our “sounds familiar list” because church people have been tattling on one another ever since! Second thing – “There are quarrels among you.” What? Quarrels in the church? Wasn’t the early church supposed to be the perfect example of what it means to be a true community in Christ? Listen, the disciples who followed Jesus in person could barely get along with each other. What more could you expect 20 years later with people who never even met Jesus in person? So quarrels – let’s cross that off the list too. Okay, what next? Paul writes, “What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’” Cephas, by the way, is “Peter” if you’re speaking Aramaic. So what this tells me is that there’s a personality contest going on between the Apostle Peter, the Apostle Paul and someone named Apollos. No surprises here. It was no big secret that Peter and Paul didn’t see eye to eye on everything related to the church. According to this, there was a “team Peter” and a “team Paul” in the Corinthian church. Nobody really knows who “Apollos” was but it’s clear he had a fan club too. Everyone had their favorite leader and didn’t bother trying to hide it. Again, we’re still in familiar territory. There are very few multi-staff churches I know of today where there aren’t fan clubs. Healthy congregations with healthy ministerial staff who practice healthy clergy boundaries just laugh about it like Katy and I used to. Those who *don’t* practice healthy clergy boundaries end up getting sucked up into the game and pretty soon you’ve got people playing one leader against another and it all falls apart. These people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century had flaws, just like people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There’s no shame. It’s just human nature. Finally, Paul writes, “Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” You know what this sounds like? This sounds like a frustrated clergy person being a smarty-pants and we *know* that still happens in churches today, right? But poor Paul. I can’t blame him. He couldn’t figure out how this group of people in Corinth got so bogged

down in their own balderdash that they'd forgotten the heart of the gospel – the heart of the good news that the church was called to proclaim: God is reconciling the world to God through Christ. That's it. That's the heart of the gospel message. And this church in Corinth that was supposed to be bound together by this good news was unraveling at the seams. They were divided. They were fighting. They were playing "ecclesiastical tiddlywinks" instead of becoming a faithful, growing church, that demonstrated true community, deep Christian spirituality and a passion for justice. At this point in time, they seemed pretty clueless. This letter was Paul's response to that cluelessness which included a game plan on how to get back on track.

It's not hard to understand why the church struggles so much to share the good news of Christ with folks outside the church. It doesn't help that the Church can't seem to get its act together when it comes to how often we fall on our faces and get wrapped up in scandals. We are often bitterly divided on so many issues that it's hard to believe we're even under the same banner. So we come stumbling into the room and say, "Here's the gospel message y'all – God is reconciling the world to God through Christ!" How is that going to sound even remotely credible when we can't even model reconciliation among ourselves? So many people outside the church say that our division, our animosity and our hypocrisy are the biggest reasons they won't set foot in a church.

Then there's the awkwardness of the gospel message itself. Even if we managed to show a more united front to the world, the message of the cross isn't very compelling or even intelligible. In a world that is obsessed with the pursuit of success, power, money and celebrity, the idea that the life that's worth living is found in one who was dismissed as a loser and who died as an apparent failure ... that's going to be a hard sell to most folks. We have enough difficulty coming to terms with this ourselves, let alone confidently proclaiming it to anyone else. Then there's the branding issue. Who is the best among the churches? Which faction is the strongest? Who has the shiniest toys and the best music? Which version of the truth is the most compelling? Everybody wants to

be on the right side. Pretty soon, people are defining themselves by what they are for and against, and by whom they are for and against. If I feel strongly that my side is right, then I'm going to feel strongly that your side is wrong, and therefore *you* are wrong, and therefore we are no longer friends. We are adversaries.

I like how Paul acknowledges that one of the reasons we split into factions has to do with how uncomfortable we are with the apparent foolishness of our message. We want to be successful. We want to be profound. We want people to take us seriously. We want people to be on our side. So we identify who we think are the "winners" and align ourselves with them. We want to be on the side that has the most compelling and attractive and effective version of the message. It doesn't take much searching to see how this plays out in some of the divisions we see in today's church.

Once upon a time it was all about denominational divides. Where are your loyalties? The Methodist Church? Episcopalians? Quakers? Disciples of Christ? Baptists? And if so, *which* Baptists? There's a bunch of them to choose from! No, that's "old school." That went out of style decades ago. Now it's all about whether you're a 2,000-member mega-church who's out there trying to overthrow the government and establish a theocracy *or* a little steeple church whose out there calling everyone who isn't like them a sellout. What's better, being smug about being "successful" or being smug about being "right?" Both are primarily concerned with how others perceive the church, and both are equally dismissive of the other. Both are ready to sacrifice the reputation of the other and sacrifice unity with the other for the dubious prize of being the winners. Whose side are you on? Team Paul? Team Peter? Team Apollos? Pick a side! Oh come on Jesse. Where's the hope? Where's the good news here? Surely we can't just keep making the same mistakes and repeating this whole cycle for another 2,000 or more. Is there a way out? By our own efforts, no. By God's grace, yes.

There is no way for us to free ourselves from this mess we're in by our own efforts. Because we are human we're caught up in a system that defines us by excluding and dismissing those we have defined ourselves against. What?! We can't seem to be "us" without a "them." "Those people." And our very best efforts to reform ourselves just seem to dig us in deeper. Remember a few weeks ago when I said that in order to cultivate a deep Christian spirituality we'll have to talk about sin? This is what I was talking about. This sin is so deeply imbedded in our nature that we can't do anything about it. We can't remove this sin. We can't do it surgically. We can't do it psychologically. Heck, we can't even do it theologically. We ... cannot ... do this. What we can do is surrender ourselves to God's grace. God can heal our divisions.

Even when we crash and burn and turn on one another and dismiss one another, Christ is there offering us grace. And there is nowhere we can go and nothing we can do that will cause God to give up on us and stop offering us his extravagant love and mercy. No wonder this message sounds foolish to the ears of those who have not surrendered to this grace. It makes no sense at all in a world bent on winning at all costs and rising to the top at the expense of those we think are expendable. It makes no more sense than gathering here each week to worship and pray and follow God's executed messiah. It makes no more sense than expecting to encounter the Risen Christ in these little hermetically sealed fragments of bread and grape juice that we share at this table every week. But here we are, because we are surrendering ourselves to God's desire to save us. And in doing so, we see that the foolishness of God will indeed prove wiser than the wisdom of the world.

## **Prayers of the People –**

I offer this prayer from a collection of handwritten prayers that Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote when he was 24 years old for a possible radio broadcast from the Ebenezer Baptist Church where he served as a young pastor -

O thou Eternal God, out of whose absolute power and infinite intelligence the whole universe has come into being. We humbly confess that we have not loved thee with our hearts, souls and minds and we have not loved our neighbors as Christ loved us. We have all too often lived by our own selfish impulses rather than by the life of sacrificial love as revealed by Christ. We often give in order to receive, we love our friends and hate our enemies, we go the first mile but dare not travel the second, we forgive but dare not forget. And so as we look within ourselves we are confronted with the appalling fact that the history of our lives is the history of an eternal revolt against thee. But thou, O God, have mercy upon us. Forgive us for what we could have been but failed to be. Give us the intelligence to know thy will. Give us the courage to do thy will. Give us the devotion to love thy will. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.