

Feel Free to Disagree

I Cor. 1:10-18

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“Now listen, saints.” That’s what the preacher said from the pulpit a few years ago during the MLK service. Dr. Victor Sholar, when he would want us to pay attention, would say, “Now listen, saints.” I kept looking around to see if he was talking to somebody else. Saints? Really? I’m not sure the kind of people he had in his church, but I know the people that are my church...Saints? Hmm. Nope. Me included.

I think what the preacher was doing to us was a sly trick also used by the apostle Paul in today’s reading. You see, Paul is writing to the Corinthian church to address some of the deep divisions that have torn through that congregation. Everybody was sitting stiff-backed with their arms crossed, stubbornly refusing to be the body of Christ they were called to be. But notice Paul starts this section by saying, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters.” Calling a group of conflicted, fighting Christians “brothers and sisters” is about as silly as calling a room full of imperfect human beings “saints,” but there you have it. Sometimes God has a name for us that we need to hear spoken out loud before we can truly live into it.

While Dr. Sholar’s audience was not in active conflict with each other like Paul’s congregation, there was still present in that group at Central Christian Church the ghosts of segregation and racism, which will hover over us tonight, as well. As black and brown and white come together in one of the most diverse worship services I have ever seen, we will acknowledge all the things that keep us apart while proclaiming praise for God’s diversity and Christ’s power to bring us together. We’ll hold hand and sing and commit ourselves to God’s unity.

And yet, tonight is only one night. Lasting unity among churches or denominations or races is incredibly difficult to sustain. It’s like Charles de Gaulle said about France, “Only peril can bring the French together. One can’t impose unity out of the blue on a country that has 265 different kinds of cheese.” The church may not have 265 kinds of cheese, but we do have about 265 ways to interpret scripture and to conduct worship and to govern ourselves, and that may be a conservative estimate. So how do we honor Christ’s call for us to be united together when, if you look at the history of Protestantism, we have branches and splinters and schisms that make our family tree look like a bramble bush?

Our own denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), has been both a proponent of unity and a violator of its principles. One of our founders, Thomas Campbell, broke away from his denomination because of the multitude of splits that had taken place. He got tired of pastoring churches with names like the Old-Light Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterian Church, not just because it wouldn’t fit on his business card, but because each word represented a split within his church family. And yet, our own denomination, with unity as its polar star, has splintered several times in its history.

Here at Crestwood, we have been blessed throughout our history with a spirit of unity. The fact that our church is turning 66 years old this year and I’m only the fourth senior pastor is a testament both to the leaders who have served this church and the commitment of everyone involved to be the body of Christ here in Lexington. Sure, we’ve had our dust-ups and there are a few rascals here and there, but I’d say we’re about as healthy a church as I’ve ever seen.

Not so for the Corinthians. Paul was dealing with a church that was becoming untied instead of united. He spent 18 months in Corinth helping to found the church there, but after he

left the congregation quickly began to fall apart. The church was split into quarreling factions, immorality was running rampant, they were taking each other to court for petty reasons, they flirted with idol worship and they even got drunk at communion.

In today's passage, we learn that the congregation has begun taking sides, aligning themselves with human leaders instead of lining up behind the cross. Some were saying the belonged to Paul, others to Apollos, still others to Peter and some were using their relationship with Christ as a dividing wedge instead of a cohesive bond. As Abraham Lincoln said, "A house divided cannot stand," and Paul feared for the collapse of the Corinthian church.

So, he sends this letter to them to try and restore peace and to appeal to their sense of unity and common heritage as children of God. Paul reminds them that at their baptism they were claimed by God, not the person doing the dunking. Doesn't matter if it was Lollis or Blondell or McDonald or Wilcoxson or somebody else. There is only One to whom we belong, and that is the One who was and is and is to come, our Lord Jesus Christ.

We usually don't have any problems saying to whom we belong; the challenge comes when we're called to acknowledge to whom others belong, especially others different than us. Isn't that the whole source of the schism of racism, that the other person who looks and acts and believes differently than us can't be from the same God as us and loved as much as us? We know our God; we're not so sure about their God. Better to build the wall higher than to do the work of tearing it down brick-by-brick.

Tonight's service will be the removal of another brick, but there are still a lot of them left. And they don't divide only the races; they divide Christians of all stripes. All of us who call ourselves Christians worship the crucified Jesus, and yet we let so many other things get in the way of that unifying truth. How we do baptism, how often we do communion, who can be ordained, what is and isn't a sin, the relationship between the church and the state...all these things, as important as they may be, pale in comparison to gospel of Jesus Christ we all proclaim. Church should be the place where people who have no other natural reason for associating with each other come together in unity and love around a common belief.

But that's not the church today, not even close, and so we have to live with that reality. How do we continue to work for unity in a world that emphasizes differences and draws attention to conflict? Once I did a team-building ropes course with a group of junior high kids. We started with a good old-fashioned tug of war, with one half of the group pulling against the other half. With me as the anchor, my team emerged victorious – thank you, donuts! - and very demonstratively let the other team know they had lost, which included a lot of name-calling and chest-thumping and finger-pointing. The kids on my team were even worse.

Then we moved onto a series of activities that forced all of us to work together, which included being led blindfolded through an obstacle course by the exact same kids we were just tugging against. As we accomplished each goal there was no trash talk because there were no losers. Instead, there was high-fiving and back-slapping as we celebrated what we had all accomplished together. When you've got all your oars rowing in the same direction, you stop going around in circles and start moving forward.

We Christians are tugging against in other in so many ways. Conflict is a natural part of being human in this broken world, and we're not always all going to get along. If there's not someone in your life with whom you are in conflict, you must not be getting out much, because this world is bombarding us with reasons to hate, to fear, to divide, even from those closest to us. How do we stay in relationship with those whom we disagree?

In this passage I don't hear Paul calling for uniformity, where we all have to do the same thing. I also don't hear Paul calling for unanimity, where we all have to agree on the same thing. He's calling for unity, a state of wholeness or oneness that exists at a deeper level than anything that separates us. By ourselves, we can't achieve that kind of unity. But through Christ, all things are possible.

That may seem foolish to some folks. After all, if you disagree with someone, why would you still want to be in a relationship with them? Isn't it better to leave them behind and find someone else who is more like you, who looks like you and acts like you and believes the way you do? That would probably be the easier thing to do, but that's not the Christian thing to do.

I had coffee yesterday with a friend who is also a political scientist and a Christian and we were discussing this very issue. How do you still love someone with whom you vehemently disagree? I'm still thinking about their answer this morning. They said they see everyone as a soul, created by God, caught up in human systems of greed, prejudice, and a hunger for power. No one chooses to hate by themselves, but instead, does so in the context of the systems in which they live and are influenced. No matter how much they kowtow to those systems, they are still a soul, created by God. I'm not sure exactly what to do with that answer, but it sure seems like a starting point toward more hopeful than where we are now.

We are called to hang in there, to keep working for unity, to gather with our brothers and sisters of different races and colors and creeds, to join our hands with theirs and proclaim the goodness of the God we all have in common. And if we keep doing that, if we persevere and work through our differences and agree to disagree while still being in relationship with each other, who knows what might happen?

Theologian Frederick Beuchner says, "If all the competing factions of Christendom were to give as much of themselves to the high calling and holy hope that unites them as they do now to the relative inconsequentialities that divide them, the church would look more like the kingdom of God for a change and less like an ungodly mess." Now listen, saints. Who's going to do that work? Who's going to reach across the aisle? Who's going to make a stand against the injustice that still exists today? Who's going to live like the same God that created you and me also created the rainbow of people we brush shoulders with every day? Who's going to help make the diversity and acceptance of God's kingdom real here on earth? Who's gonna do that? How about us, brothers and sisters? How about us?