

Lexington Presbyterian Church

August 30, 2020

Rev. Bernard Bangley

Prayer

Oh God, we are reading from a letter this morning a letter that was not written to us, but to another church far away and a long time ago. As we read it, help us to place ourselves among that congregation.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Scripture

I Corinthians 1:10-17 (CEV)

My dear friends, as a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ, I beg you to get along with each other. Don't take sides. Always try to agree in what you think. Several people from Chloe's family have already reported to me that you keep arguing with each other. They have said that some of you claim to follow me, while others claim to follow Apollos or Peter or Christ.

Has Christ been divided up? Was I nailed to a cross for you? Were you baptized in my name? I thank God that I didn't baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius. Not one of you can say that you were baptized in my name. I did baptize the family of Stephanas, but I don't remember if I baptized anyone else. Christ did not send me to baptize. He sent me to tell the good news without using words that sound wise and would make the cross of Christ lose its power

Sermon

We tend to look back on that primitive Christian church as a kind of second Eden where everybody got along with everybody else. Faith was pure and simple. We read the Bible sometimes with wide eyes and aching hearts. Such examples of Christian love and harmony! Like a week at Massaneta, we see them sharing things, worshipping together, revering the authority of the apostles who had ministered unto Christ and we imagine this was the golden age; that this is the pure Church and that it was centuries later that ugly disagreements and politics rose like the first fever in a baby.

But the New Testament does not allow that kind of fantasy. Luke, the church's first historian, reveals searing controversy in his Acts of the Apostles. A major issue then was whether or not Christians needed to become Jews first. Being converted from a pagan world, should they become first Jews and then be baptized Christians? This one was hotly contested. Luke describes personal friction even between Christian missionaries on this subject. Paul and Barnabas had difficulty working together. Recent

scholarship has disclosed that even the four gospels were targeted to different groups of Christians with various ways of believing and behaving. Early Christianity was far more diverse than we would imagine. Those first and second generation Christians were not all the same. They were scattered widely around the Mediterranean in a time of poor communication. They developed in ways that differed from one group to another, from one congregation to another. The letters of Paul openly deal with church fights. Not the least of which was the turmoil in Corinth that I just read you about.

In this same way, we may have an unrealistic image of the church in America today. There are important differences among us. The day is already here when the English language alone is not sufficient to speak to American Christians. One of the most enthusiastic congregations I ever spoke to required a Korean interpreter standing at my side. We cannot use the same approach with every Christian, not even with every Presbyterian. There are varieties of religious experience and expression. To pray for church unity then is not to pray for uniformity. Christ welcomes diversity within his family. People are different. We bring different experiences and different expectations with us when we come to church.

But however diverse we may be, we are all extraordinarily similar. We all believe. We all carry burdens. We all have problems, disappointments, aspirations, hopes, dreams, and only those who deceive themselves think they have no sin. It is the glory of the church that all of us have the right to our own mind and conscience in matters of faith and its interpretation.

Jeremy Taylor, an English bishop in 17th century, wrote this:

As long as we have a mixture of ideas, differences in the level of education, varieties of temperament and degrees of enlightenment, it is impossible that everyone will agree. If it is not possible, it is not necessary. One heaven with people of several opinions? Factions and divisions are the tools of hatred, persecution and war. Such things are not the natural result of different opinions.

Jeremy Taylor explains what happens: The problem is that every opinion is made an article of faith. These become the faces of quarrels and every quarrel results in a faction. Factions are led by aggressive true believers who are convinced God agrees with them. We are urged to believe that the only way we can love God is to hate the person who disagrees with us. They tell us we have no religion unless we persecute all religions but our own.

Paul had converted the Corinthians from a rough and tumble paganism to Christianity. And he had done that just a few short years before he wrote the letter I read. They needed a lot of guidance and they caused Paul tons of grief and struggle. The issue mentioned in the passage we read this morning was one of rival parties. Each centered around a personality. Some church members were saying, "I belong to Paul" who admitted he had a rather unimposing public appearance. Or I belong to Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria who the New Testament calls eloquent and well-versed in Scriptures. Or I belong to Peter. (Sometimes the English translations here would use his Aramaic name: I belong to Cephas.) And then there was the group who said, "We belong to Christ", which indicates an arrogant spiritual superiority ... "A plague on all your little parties. We are the one true group."

Paul quickly saw there was no place in the church for that kind of factualism. It is beside the point. It hinders the body of Christ. "It has been reported to me that there is quarrelling among you. " I have been

at this for a long time. I have seen all kinds of church quarrels. I knew one woman who quit church because it was determined that someone else in the church was the oldest member. Congregations have been known to fight over the color of the new offering envelopes. I suppose the granddaddy of all church quarrels can best be illustrated by the experience of a stranger who was passing through a rural community one Sunday night and decided to attend an old fashioned evening church service in the country. The lights were on so he pulled in. To his amazement, he was the only person in the congregation. The preacher didn't let that stop him. The two of them went on with the hymn singing and the prayers. Even took up an offering. About half way through the sermon a late comer entered and came over to the stranger and said, "I'm sorry but you are sitting in my seat."

What Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians and what all of us need to hear, is that if Christians consume themselves fighting each other, they will be diverted from their greater struggle with the powers of darkness. We will waste valuable energy on heat that could be generating light. The proclamation of the gospel and the healing of hurt souls is the church's business. Anything that gets in the way of that-- any diverting of attention, any sapping of strength, any polarization of allegiances, any rambling theological doctrinal digression-- is a sidetrack. Our littleness can jeopardize the great work of the church. Every kingdom divided against its self is brought to desolation. That's what Jesus said. And he said every city or house divided against its self shall not stand. An early American statesman John Dickerson put that in six words: *United we stand, divided we fall.*

When the lightning flashes and the thunder rolls, the sheep look not at the sky, but at the shepherd. Jesus the good shepherd is Lord. He is our common denominator. In him and through him we can be united in the same mind and same judgment while enjoying all manner of individual differences. He's like a magnet. He draws everything to himself. At the moment of contact with him, his power flows to us and through us. Dip a magnet into a pile of paper clips and see what happens. They form a chain clinging to each other by no other power than that from its source, the magnet above. If you and I have made any contact with the Lord, we will feel it flowing through us binding our hearts in Christian love to others who may be quite different from us.

Let us pray.

Oh lord our God we desire to be united in Christ to share a oneness of purpose and mind. We thank you that though we are many, we are yet one in Christ in whom there is neither east nor west, Jew nor gentile, bond nor free, male or female. Amen