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DIVISION IN THE CHURCH

The early church was often a church divided. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the portrait we have of the church at Corinth. The Corinthians had differing views of what it meant to be a disciple of Christ, and they were separating themselves into "factions" in order to express those differing beliefs.

In fact, we can infer from Paul's letters to the Corinthians that many of the folks in this church could be fairly characterized as braggarts. Some bragged about being faithful to the teachings of a particularly charismatic leader. Some bragged about having more knowledge of the truth than other "lesser" Christians. Some bragged about having more money and social standing. And some bragged about having more "spiritual gifts" than other Christians.

Sometimes we have to do a lot of interpretive work in order to see how a passage of Scripture applies to the world in which we live. Such is not the case for today's Scripture. We can readily identify with the problems of the Corinthian Church. Competition, personal conflict, and class consciousness still plague the Christian church. In the week that we celebrate what would have been the 75th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, it is still true in most communities that the Sunday morning worship hour is the most segregated hour of the week. Competition, not cooperation characterize religion in our country.

IDOLATRY

Now I understand, of course, that there are theological, cultural and practical reasons why there are different denominations and different churches in our community. Sometimes we are able to overcome those differences and work together on common projects. But, many of the divisions in the Christian church exist because we have an inadequate, even idolatrous view of what it means to be a Christian. Faith becomes a way to baptize what we already believe instead of becoming conformed to the image of Christ.

I'm not talking about someone else when I say this. I'm talking about all of us. All of us, when left to our own devices are prone to be idolatrous. We are prone to worship a charismatic leader or money or social status or even a particular political or theological viewpoint.

We can't help it. It's in our nature to worship something. Trouble is we usually end up worshipping something or someone less than the one true God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Paul identified idolatry as the root cause of division in the Corinthian church. He told them that before they became followers of Christ they had been led astray by "idols which could not speak." But, now they were committed to a different Lord, namely Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, "Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." 1 Corinthians 12:3

We can infer from this passage that some in the Corinthian church were talking about Jesus, but they were talking about Him in a way that did not acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior. The same thing often happens in the church today. Using the name of Jesus is not the same as confessing him to be Lord.

This is something that I talk about quite often. But, analyzing the problem is the easy part. The sixty four dollar question is this, "How can we avoid this trap? How can we truly confess Jesus to be our Lord and not have our confession tainted by our own desires? How can we escape the ever present temptation to lay down our lips for Jesus without laying down our lives?"

THE SPIRIT AND THE COMMON GOOD

According to Paul, the answer is to be found in an affirmation about the church. Paul wrote, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." 1 Corinthians 12:7 Later in this chapter he expressed this same idea using the famous image of the church as being the Body of Christ. He wrote, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." 1 Corinthians 12:27

We, you and I, all of us are the body of Christ. In other words, we need each other in order to live the life that Christ would have us live. All of us are a part, an important part of the Body of Christ. Yet, none of us are self-sufficient.

In order to avoid idolatry, we have to remember both sides of that equation. But, we have a hard time achieving that balance.

SPIRITUAL PRIDE

Some of us, like many in the church at Corinth, err on the side of spiritual pride. We think that our opinion is the final word on any subject. We are the ones who have the really good spiritual gifts so we should be the ones making the decisions.

Now those of us who err on this side of the equation are not necessarily bad or unpleasant people. Quite often those of us who succumb to this temptation are hard workers who are quite benevolent to others. But, we see the church from only one perspective. We often resent those who do not serve the church in the particular way that we serve the church. We may even talk disparagingly about those who lack "true commitment."

Now this seems like an obvious error. Of course we shouldn't be this way. But, what we know and what we do are often two different things.

I have to admit that this is sometimes my problem. I sometimes have a hard time listening really listening to and carefully considering the opinions of others. Quite often I have not thought that diversity in the church is a gift. I have considered it a problem, a thorn in the side that should be removed as soon as possible!

But, Christian unity does not mean Christian uniformity. Indeed I believe that God often uses the controversial, difficult issues of life to help us grow in discipleship. I believe that God has deliberately sent people into my life whom I have come to love despite the fact that I disagree with them in some rather significant ways.

In some cases I have changed my views because of what they have taught me about the gospel. In other cases I have kept the same viewpoint, but the sharp edges of my personality have been rounded off and softened by my encounters with another perspective on what it means to have faith.

In a world which operates on a win/lose paradigm, I think that God is calling us to create a counter community that is based upon a win/win paradigm. I think God is calling us to create a community in which how we say something is every bit as important as what we say. Paul was telling the Corinthians (and us) that our congregation can be talented, the music can be beautiful and the sermons can be first rate, but it won't mean a thing if we don't use those and other spiritual gifts for the common good.

What good is orthodox theology if it is used to alienate those that Christ came to save? What good is a commitment to peacemaking if we do it in a way that creates unnecessary conflict?

How we do things is just as important as what we do. There is no room for spiritual pride in the Body of Christ.

NO GIFT TO SHARE?

But, there is another (and perhaps more common) problem in the church. There are many people who think that they have no role to play in the drama of salvation. There are many people who never attempt anything for God's kingdom because they listen to that pernicious inner voice which says, "You're not that important. You don't have any spiritual gifts."

And so we succumb to our fears instead of responding to God's call. We are paralyzed into inaction by a view of ourselves that does not accord with the teaching of the Bible. Remember last week we talked about the fact that we are all God's children. We have received the blessing of God and God's Spirit. Through Christ Jesus we have been adopted into the heavenly family. We are somebody because God has said that we are somebody.

So we need to remember who we are and act accordingly. We are the Body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it. That means you and me.

I did a Bible study on this passage once in which I asked if there were any body parts that which we could do without. After a few moments of consideration, we concluded that all of our body parts were necessary! Some remarked that even seemingly unimportant parts like the toes had an important role to play in helping us maintain our balance and walk.

The same is true in the church. There are no unimportant members. There are no members that we can easily lose. We are less than we should be if you are not striving to find your particular role in the ministry of the church.

I would liken the church to a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. The parts are different. Some parts are large. Some parts are small. All the parts have a different shape. But, all the parts are necessary if we are to see a clear picture.

In the same way, if some members are missing or don't do their part in the church, there will be a gap in the puzzle. Our lack of participation will prevent the church from presenting a clear picture of who we are and what we are called to do.

Paul didn't say, "You can be the body of Christ, if you only try harder." Paul said, "You are the body of Christ." This has already been accomplished. We don't have to do anything to prove ourselves worthy. Our inclusion in the body is an accomplished fact. All of us are needed, but none of us are self-sufficient.

THE GIFT OF WEAKNESS

Perhaps some of us feel that we have nothing to offer God's kingdom because we have so many disappointments and failures in our life. The way of the world is to label folks who fail. We call them losers or criminals or addicts.

The way of the church is to call such people saints. The way of the church is to call these wounded people to a life of service because we know that it is often our wound which serves as the source for someone else's healing.

The idea that our failures might be spiritual gifts shouldn't surprise you given the central symbol of the Christian faith. The cross, "that emblem of suffering and shame" as the old hymn puts it, is in God's hands ... transformed into the sign of our salvation. So, the emblems of suffering and shame in our lives the disagreements and heartaches are changed by the power of God into spiritual gifts that build up the body of Christ.

A member of the Pulpit Nominating Committee had finally lost patience. They had been searching for a minister for over a year, but every applicant was rejected for some reason or another. One was not a good enough preacher. Another did not have enough experience in administration. Another didn't seem like he would be a good counselor. One candidate was too young and another was too old. They all had faults which, at least in the committee's eyes, disqualified them for the job.

It was time for a bit of soul searching on the part of the committee so the disgruntled member of the PNC stood up and read a letter from yet another candidate. He read,

"Gentlemen Understanding your pulpit is vacant, I should like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications. I've been a preacher with much success and also had some success as a writer. Some say I'm a good organizer. I've been a leader most places I've been.

I am over 50 years of age, and I have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places I left town after my work has caused riots and disturbances. I must admit that I've been in jail three or four times, but not because of any wrong doing.

My health is not too good though I still get a great deal done. The churches I have preached in have been small though located in several large cities. You should also know that I've not gotten along too well with some of the religious leaders in the towns where I've preached. In fact, some have even threatened me and attacked me physically.

I'm not too good at keeping records either. I have been known to forget whom I have baptized. But, if you can use me, I shall do my best for you."

The committee member looked up at the other members and asked, "Well, what do you think? Should we hire him?"

The committee was amazed that he would even waste their time reading such a terrible resume' Hire an unhealthy, trouble making, absent minded ex-jail-bird? Had he lost his mind? Who had the nerve to present an application like that?

The committee member eyed them all keenly before he answered, "It's signed, The Apostle Paul."

We sometimes think of people like the apostle Paul as superhuman heroes who were above the everyday strains and stresses that come our way. But, the fact of the matter is that all the so called heroes of the Bible were not heroes at all. They all had feet of clay. They all failed in significant ways sometimes over and over again. But, despite their failures God used them. And so it is with us.

DON'T ABANDON SHIP

St. Boniface wrote, "The church is like a great ship being pounded by the waves of life's different stresses. Our duty is not to abandon ship, but to keep her on course."

I must admit that sometimes I would like to abandon ship. There are times when I get fed up with my own lack of faith, and there are times when I get fed up with those in the church who seem bent on tearing down everything that I think that God would have us do.

But, then I remember the promise. This diverse, rag tag, ill-prepared group called the church are the ones that God has called. We are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a part of it. It takes great faith to sail on this ship called the church. She tosses to and fro. She leaks, and her sails are tattered.

But, she sails on the strong, sure winds of the Spirit. God Himself is with us on this journey. Hang on tight. We may be in for a rough ride. But, we will make it home.

Diversity need not lead to division because we depend not upon ourselves and our ability to bring about good but upon the power of God's Spirit working through us.

In his book, *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer explained the unity of the church in this way. He wrote,

"Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but another standard to which each one must individually bow.

So one hundred worshipers [meeting] together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship."

Friends, let us not concentrate on our differences. Let us concentrate on that Presence to whom we are all tuned to sing a common song. May the words of the praise and worship song become a reality for us. May we truly be able to say, "There's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place, and I know that it's the Spirit of the Lord."

Amen