

Sermon: “Unity in Community” 1 Cor. 1:10-1

One of the topics of discussion that has seemed to result from the recent shootings in Tucson is whether we as a nation and as citizens and elected leaders need to tame our speech when speaking or advocating for our various points of view. The question is being asked from the President on down, “does there need to be a more civil discourse?” Are we getting meaner or too hostile in our political zealousness? Do we just need to tone down the debate a bit? Does this contribute to violent outcomes? I think this national pausing to reflect on our collective speech is a good thing.

The point behind some of this is that despite our differences in attitude towards specific public policies or towards the desirability of one elected leader over another, we are pledged to each other as citizens of the same country, or “one nation under God” to quote the Pledge to the Flag. We recognize, generally, that we all belong to the United States of America. This has been expressed in various ways in our nation and history. For example, in Kentucky, the motto since statehood in 1792 has been “United we stand, divided we fall.” Turns out that phrase belonged to a song written by Pennsylvania patriot John Dickinson, and he got it from the fabled Greek writer, Aesop, who wrote, “Union gives strength.” The ideal of unity goes very far back.

That is my segue to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, our New Testament letter today, and the beginning of what I plan as a sermon series from now the end of February. Paul tells the church at Corinth, “I appeal to you...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 purpose.” (1:10)

What? Does Paul want everyone to agree about everything, even in the Church? Well, if so, we have certainly not taken those words as scripture and committed them to heart. How divided is the Church of Jesus Christ? Where do I start?

There was a fun song by Tom Lehrer in the 1960’s about something somebody advocated for called “National Brotherhood Week.” Can you imagine? Now we could not even agree to use the term “brother” without a bitter gender fight. One line, was “the catholics hate the protestants and the protestants hate the catholics, the muslims hate the hindus, and everyone hates the jews” during National Brotherhood Week.

Well, things really weren’t that bad in the church at Corinth in the middle of the first century of Christ, some 20 years after his crucifixion. The congregation only had about three years together since those intruding missionaries, Paul, Silas and Timothy had evangelized these stoic Romans, Greeks, and Jews into something resembling the “body of Christ, the Church”.

Corinth was a resurrected city thanks to Julius Caesar, whose ancestors had destroyed it 100 years earlier. But now Rome needed this specialized seaport on the isthmus of Achaia, think Panama without the canal. Corinth was a happening place, a vital trade and commerce city, a conduit to Rome from the east. It had been repopulated with Roman army veterans (cheaper to give them land than pay them), freed slaves, and of course merchants and sailors. We can guess what kind of nightlife that brought in. There were some diasporatic Jews, but it was mostly gentiles, not schooled in the ways of Yahweh, the One God. In fact, they had a whole host of temples and shrines, say the archeologists. As Luke puts it in Acts, the people worshipped “gods many and lords many.” They worshipped Apollo, Aphrodite, Demeter, Poseidon, Isis, Serapis, Artemus and many many others.

And with this kind of religious “melting pot” not everybody who was “baptized” into this new Way, Christianity, left all their previous understandings of religion and ethics behind when they put on the white robes. The Corinth church had its various camps who were loyal to their various ministers, Paul, Apollos, even Simon Peter, or Cephas it reads here.

Paul and Silas had gone on to other things and apparently got word from “Chloe’s people” that there were some internal tensions. Can you imagine tensions in the church? Paul’s letter, this first one, is a response to concerns passed on to him or surmised by him. They had a lot of practical issues. Paul had a lot of theology to pass on.

I remember in seminary, we had three basic areas of course work. One was scripture and the Biblical languages behind them. One was theology and the history of the Church. The third was everything else, sometimes referred to as “practical theology.” That’s where we studied about things like moderating a Session, counseling the grieving, supporting Christian education, stewardship, mission, and the real practical, where to put the Christmas tree, etc.

In this letter, First Corinthians, Paul deals with a lot of practical theology issues. Here you have to do your homework, because the issues are not exactly like they sound to us, a world away. Scholars say, when Paul talks of “quarrels among you,” the Corinthian Christians are not having personality conflicts (though I am sure they were), or personal differences (though I have seen such), but were instead hampered in their evangelical work by competing cliques based on favorite religious leaders, like Paul or Apollos, or Peter who had served the church. Here I think of loyalties to former pastors or church patriarchs or matriarchs. And yes, I have encountered that in my ministry, even here, though Rev. Denny and I get along great and I have the greatest respect for Pastor Bucey. But transfer of loyalties in leadership is often an issue to deal with. Ask any corporate CEO, governor or president.

Paul seeks to bring the flock back to the basics. **“Has Christ been divided?”** Or as he would say in Ephesians, One Christ, one God, one Spirit, one church, one faith, one hope, one baptism. It does not make any difference who pours the water on. Though this was debated for several hundred years. And even today, you see various Christian groups demanding “rebaptism.” Forget it, I say, and Paul agrees with me I am sure. For, he says, “Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel.”

You want a word of advice, avoid churches built around the personality of one pastor or minister. They almost never lasts, they can’t, because the personal leader dies or moves on. You can look from Swaggert to Schuller. Personality can never replace unity in Christ. The Cross of Christ is the gospel. It is not, nor cannot be, human wisdom, eloquence or charisma or charm that is most important.

In 1997, Cliff Kirkpatrick and Bill Hopper wrote a book called *What Unites Presbyterians: common ground for troubled times*. Fourteen years ago, they dealt with issues the church is still debating or fighting over. I looked back at a sermon I wrote on this passage in 2005 and we are still discoursing and legislating the same issues: property, lifestyle, sexual orientation, and reproductive rights.

There is more voting in Cincinnati Presbytery next month on amended rules. Paul never expected there would be one point of view in the church. He’d probably be surprised how we have codified some of his teachings or advice to very specific situations and we have generalized to death, like the place of women in ministry. At least the Presbyterians USA got that one right.

We do not have to agree on every theological ‘jot and tittle’. That’s what I think Paul is saying. God’s work is a process. God is working it out with the help of the Holy Spirit and us. The Reformed church believes it is always to be reforming.

One of the hallmark’s of this denomination’s expression of its faith is its adherence to unity amid diversity. We believe in process, specifically a democratic representative process. We believe in doing God’s work “decently an”d in order” again borrowed from Paul. We believe in tolerance, inclusiveness, openness, and oneness. We subscribe and pledge to honor the “peace, unity and

purity” of the Church as officers. That is not always easy. But we believe we do it for Christ’ sake and in his memory. We are striving towards a goal that John’s gospel called “becoming one heart and mind” and that with God.

Paul reminded the Corinthians in their world, the cross is foolishness from the world’s perspective, losing to find, saving the lost. It can only work if you believe in the power and love of God, who gave us Jesus Christ, and for our salvation. And if we work together in unity in Christ.

Alleluia! Amen.