

“No Divisions in Christ” 1 Corinthians 1:10–18 Epiphany 3A January 22, 2017

*Last week, we looked at St. Paul’s encouraging opening to the believers in Corinth, a church with many problems that he would be addressing in the rest of the letter. He first wanted them to know who they were in Christ, redeemed by His blood to be God’s people. As God’s people by grace they could receive his correction without feeling condemned and desire to grow in faith. In today’s text he begins the admonitions with the issue of divisiveness in the congregation.*

Watching the media reports before, during and after the inauguration this weekend certainly confirmed that we are a divided nation. The division itself is not the problem, but what we are divided over is. Citizens have different beliefs about what is moral and immoral, as well as what is helpful and destructive. We are also divided on how to address those issues we can agree are problems. That has to do with how we understand human nature and history, and if we can learn the limitations and lessons of both.

As always at this time of year, pro-life and pro-choice divisions are on display over the sanctity of human life. We can’t even agree on the value of human life! It is especially apparent this year, as the presidency has again been transferred between two men with profoundly different positions.

In a nation with many faiths, cultures, and philosophical differences, it’s not surprising that we have divisions. Nor is it all that tragic, because we also have a system of government that allows for the differences to co-exist, to temper one another so we are not falling off cliffs of one extreme or another.

Divisions, however, are particularly sad and should be surprising among people of the same faith, same baptism, who pray to the same God in the name of the same Lord Jesus Christ. In Corinth, these divisions were evident in allegiances to the different leaders of the church. We don’t know for certain, but perhaps the Paul faction was made up of Gentiles, while Jews made up the party of Cephas, better known as Peter. Perhaps others were drawn to Appollos for his oratory skills, which Paul lacked. The Christ followers maybe were guilty of a superior attitude, in that they didn’t need a human teacher—just Jesus. More recent divisions have come about among the followers of John Wesley, John Knox, John Calvin, John Wycliffe, and that fellow not named John, Martin Luther.

Divisiveness was seen in regard even to the sacraments. So Paul rejoices that he only baptized a few, so as not to make who baptized who a dividing line. In chapter 11 Paul offers some very helpful instruction about the Lord’s Supper. This was in response to the divisions over what the Supper meant and how it was eaten.

Sometimes divisions are just personal. Someone’s habits or opinions can grate on your nerves. Or you just got off on the wrong foot with someone and have never made amends or talked it out.

True unity among Church members happens at the cross. There we acknowledge our common sin and our common savior. It is expressed at the Communion table as Paul wrote in chapter 10 of this letter. *“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”*

But Paul is not only concerned that they agree in their hearts and minds about things, but that they profess that agreement outwardly. The word translated “agree” means to confess common faith publicly, as we do in the Apostle’s Creed. At the cross, the centerpiece of the church’s confession of faith, we are reminded that we are united by a common need, a common cure, and common goal.

Isaiah expresses the need and cure in 53:6 *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* Words like *all* and *everyone* are words of unity. We have *all* gone astray. We are different in how we sin, but not divided in that we do sin. Our common need is to have sins removed. God provided the common cure by laying on Jesus the iniquity of us all. All means all. In Christ alone the one cure is for all who have the one need.

And then we have one common goal. If we could stay focused on that goal, we wouldn’t have time to turn our differences into divisions. In Chapter 12 of this letter, Paul writes: *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* Words like *common*, *all*, *everyone* and *each* tell us that we are different in our gifts but not divided in our goal: Each of us is to use our spiritual gift, which we all have from one God, to build up, not divide, the body of Christ.

So what do we do when tempted to let a difference cause a division between us and another brother or sister in Christ? We recognize that with that spiritual sibling we share a sinful nature seen in sinful deeds, words, and thoughts. We remember that the cross upon which our iniquity was laid bore their sins as well. We remember that there is too much to do and too many gifts to use to be engaged in divisive arguments. So perhaps we can pause before judging a fellow believer and ask ourselves, “Am I without sin?” (If so, I have a right to judge you.) “Am I forgiven for my sin?” (Then I should forgive yours, also, as Christ did. “Am I doing what God has called and equipped me to do?” (If not, then why am I wasting my time and God’s gifts on what is not my concern?)

Remember that in Christ we are united, not divided. Think of this illustration from God’s creation. When you are physically far away from loved ones, you can look up into the sky and know that the sun you see is the same one they see too, wherever they are. We are not that far away after all.

So we who look up to the same Savior, to the same Son of God, are not divided. We have the same need, same cure, same goal, same Jesus. Closer than best friends, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are family. Different, but not divided. By God’s Spirit, may we live in true unity. Amen.