

To Whom Do You Belong?

I Corinthians 1:10-18

January 27, 2008

Pastor Thomas Troeger writes these wonderful fictional stories that help set the stage for readers to understand the scriptures. One of his stories involves a gift to Clyde's Corner Church. Cedric Clyde was a successful farmer near the turn of the century. He chose to show his thankfulness to God for his success by paying for the building of the local church thus earning for him the title of founder. A little before his death, he donated several pieces of furniture for the parlor. He also donated "a giant red horsehair couch whose rich color Cedric fancied would brighten the front of the church. This huge chair had massive curved arms and dark mahogany legs, each carved like the claw of a lion." Cedric donated the chair with instructions that it be placed in the chancel area directly behind the pulpit.

The years passed and there arose a conflict in the church between those who wanted to keep the couch where it was and those, newer members, who felt it didn't belong in the sanctuary. The newer members included several who had moved to the country so that they could raise their children away from the drugs that were becoming a part of their suburban neighborhoods. The farms on which these new residents built their beautiful new homes were obtained for a low dollar because many of them were in foreclosure. They were not only beautiful on the outside but had some pretty fine furnishings inside as well. So, they found the "Victorian Leviathan" couch an eyesore in the plain, but otherwise appropriately decorated church.

The Clyde family had a little different take on the couch. Many of their farms had fallen on hard times as well and when they saw the couch each Sunday they remembered with fondness their great-grandfather and ... that the church they sat in, worshiped in, was founded by him. They found comfort in the fact that even though their tractors were rusting away in their fields, the preacher was at least sitting on their relative's couch.

Troeger has Rev. Kirk, his fictional pastor of the church, comment in his story: "Every sentence I put in the air, I see them all weighing whether it is ammunition for their side or the other side. Here I am preaching about the love of God, and everything I say is filtered through a single question: Is the pastor in favor of the red horsehair couch, or is the pastor against the red horsehair couch?"¹ Something had to be done because the conflict was dividing the church.

We're tempted to laugh, but we know of similar conflicts in other churches – one group of people wanting to rearrange a room and others believing St. Paul himself originally arranged the chairs and that is why they should remain the way they've been since the day the church opened – a piece of furniture here, a picture or plaque on a wall there, questions about whether a pulpit should be in one place or another in the chancel area or whether there should be one at all. (Notice how I'm intentionally not being very specific about anything here at Maple Grove.) It's simply amazing what can cause a good fight in a church by the uninformed innocent comment made by an outsider or newcomer.

While the issues that were causing the conflict in Corinth were more germane to the essence of the faith than a mere piece of furniture, the reason it concerned Paul was the same. Paul was in Ephesus when he heard that problems had developed in the Corinthian church. Paul was the one who was credited with bringing the gospel to Corinth. He won a few converts while he was there and stayed about a year. He taught them as much as he could during the time he was with them. Remember, there was no written account, like the bibles we have today. Whatever they knew, he told them. They were dependent on him for all their information. Finally there came a day when Paul needed to move on – when he needed to go share the good news and plant another church.

We really don't know anything about who "Chloe's people" were. All we know is some people who knew Chloe, possibly some of her slaves, had an occasion to visit Paul in Ephesus and shared with him about these different subgroups in the life of the Corinthian church.

Paul began addressing the situation by complimenting the people for the things they were doing together – sharing the Lord's Supper, worshipping together, standing together as people of faith. It's important to keep in mind that the issue was not that the four positions were already set in stone to the point that there were four established groups meeting separately, like denominations; but rather that they were these four attitudes that had the potential of erupting into the establishment of separate groups if they continued unchecked, unchallenged, unresolved.

Here's the way bible scholar William Barclay explained it: "Paul identifies four parties in the Church at Corinth. They have not broken away from the Church; the divisions are as yet within the Church. The word he uses to describe them is *schismata*, which is the word for *rents in a garment*. The Corinthian Church is in danger of becoming as unsightly as a torn garment. It is to be noted that the great figures of the Church who are named, Paul and Cephas and Apollos, had nothing to do with these divisions. There were no dissensions between them. Without their knowledge and without their consent their names had been appropriated by these Corinthian factions."²

Bible scholars try to describe what was going on by offering words of explanations about what the named groups might have stood for. Those who argued that they belonged to Paul, for example, might have been those who felt a natural affinity with Paul because he was the one who founded the church. This group probably had in it persons who especially appreciated Paul's inclusion of Gentiles and the idea that they didn't have to embrace all of the Jewish laws and customs in order to be a Christian. The scholars also suggest that perhaps there were persons in this group who argued that their new spiritual liberty gave them license to sin. Now, there's no way Paul would have accepted such an idea or taught them such a thing, but some of the things Paul said they construed allowed them to have such a position.

Then there was a group who argued that they belonged to Apollos. Apollos was from Alexandria and from other sources we know that he was an intellectual. He was a really fine orator. He was a persuasive speaker. Some may have been impressed with the eloquence and wisdom with which he spoke. Some have suggested that those who followed Apollos were the intellectuals who were regarded Christianity as more of a philosophy than a religion.

A third group referenced in today's text was the group who claimed they belonged to Cephas. Since this was Peter's original Jewish name, it is thought that this group of people probably thought it was important that they keep the Jewish laws and customs along with this newly-discovered truth. They were probably people who believed that legalism was still the primary method of access to God and that grace was a nice concept but one that needed to serve the law rather than replace it.

And then, there was that fourth group – those who claimed to belong to Christ. This group seems to be a bit of a puzzle to biblical scholars. They are less sure who this group might have been. Some note that perhaps they were those who thought they had the true understanding of who Jesus was and thus tried to elevate themselves above the rest of the party labels. The title they chose may well mean they were a little, intolerant, self-righteous group.³

Paul's goal is obvious – he wants unity. He wants followers of Jesus to live together in harmony. The sad truth is though, that we've had our share of conflict down through the centuries of Christendom. Church history is laden with schisms, divisions, conflicts. It's a problem that is still with us. It's an embarrassment that still causes us to cost us credibility with the rest of the world.

One preacher offered this observation: “Just think of the different personalities, attitudes and lifestyles represented in a typical congregation: young and old, those who prefer formal worship and those who wish more spontaneous celebration, conservatives and liberals, left-brain and right-brain people, traditionalists and risk-takers. How can we ever get all these people to live in harmony and work together?”⁴

The goal is unity. Now, this is not the same as uniformity however. The goal is not to get everyone thinking the same, worshipping the same, toeing some party line. The goal is not to deny our diversity of thinking and acting but rather to keep foremost that Christ is the center of it all – an acknowledging that while we might believe different things, act different ways, it is the same Jesus Christ that calls us to the table – that we are one in our belief in him and his redeeming.

Quarreling in the life of a church does not make the church attractive to those who are in need of a place to call home – a place where they can be accepted and loved. We can have our differences but we need to continue to be mindful that those with different opinions than us deserve to be treated with respect and love. We need to keep in our hearts the attitude that those who belong to the community of faith with us believe in Christ just as we do – he is what cements us together.

So, does snobbishness, jealousies, quarreling exist in our midst? It would be easy to start pointing fingers in any church. To do that would be the opposite hope Paul had when he wrote this letter to his brothers and sisters in the Corinthian church. In the middle of one preacher's sermon he suggested that instead of calling to mind those we think might be guilty of creating dissension in the life of the church, we ought to do a little soul-searching, a little looking inside our own hearts and minds to see if there are any attitudes which might contribute to our being a questionable witness of Jesus Christ and thus a hindrance to the church's mission in the world.

He suggested that we ponder in our hearts such questions as: “Are there any personal conflicts between us and any other members of the church that we have not yet resolved? Are there any hurt feelings that we insist upon remembering and allowing to create againstness, any personality conflicts that we have not been able to overcome with simple acceptance, any old arguments that should have long since been laid to rest? Are we allowing any things like that to get in the way of the friendship that should be the quality of life in the church? Are we allowing things like this to influence our dealing with the real issues that must be decided in the church rather than thinking them through in terms of the really relevant factors?

“If we are old members of the church, or major contributors, or prominent citizens, or people with some other kind of status in the church, do we expect to be honored? Do we expect a little more attention to be paid to our opinion than to others when decisions are being made? Do we think the church ought to organize its life to meet our needs more than to meet the needs of new people who should be attracted into the church? Do we insist on sitting in our favorite pew and make anyone else who sits there feel like a trespasser?

“...if you are not a part of what you perceive to be the ‘in’ group in the church, do you resent those who are? Do you let that resentment get in the way of your participation in the life and fellowship of the church?

“Are there some members of the church you wish would go away? Are there some kinds of people you hope will not come to your church?”⁵

While these attitudes can sometimes be subtle they can play havoc with a church’s ability to create the kind of space fertile for others to come into a loving relationship with God and with God’s people. Over and over again, Paul offers his loving counsel that we need to keep central our mission – to make disciples of Jesus Christ. There’s no set of beliefs, no style of worship, no past religious leader/pastor/youth leader, no current popular religious writer that we are to be loyal to above our unity in Jesus Christ.

We can no more today belong to Newton Fritchley or Charles Hill or Joel Baer or Laurie Clark or Bill Croy or Jeff Allen or Philip Yancey or Henri Nouwen or Elizabeth O’Connor or Rob Bell or Rick Warren, then those in the Corinthian Church belonged to Paul, Peter, or Apollos.

Paul provides some beautiful images in this letter of his of what it means to work together in the church. He pointed out that he and Apollos weren’t competitors but partners. He drew upon the image of farming in the 3rd chapter of I Corinthians to make his point when he wrote: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” In another portion of his letter he illustrated his point by referencing construction work: “...like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it.” But my favorite one of all, the one that makes our relationship with one another the clearest in my mind is the part of his letter where he talks about how the community of faith, the church, is like a human body. “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” And then he goes on and talks about how dependent the different parts of the body are on the other parts and how that is true in the community of faith as well. There’s no doubt that Paul believes our diversity is something that has the potential of strengthening the church if we will keep in mind that we love each other and the variety of gifts, skills, talents, perspectives, we each bring to the table and we are committed to loving one another and appreciating one another because we have in common our relationship to Jesus Christ.

There’s a story told about a Catholic Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma that placed an advertisement in the Tulsa World inviting all lapsed Catholics to return to the church. The ad especially welcomes “singles, twice divorced, under thirty, gay, filthy rich, black and proud, poor as dirt, can’t sing, no habla Ingles, married with pets, older than God, more Catholic than the pope, workaholics, bad spellers, screaming babies, three times divorced, passive-aggressive, obsessive-compulsive, tourists, seekers, doubters, bleeding hearts ... oh, and you.”⁶

One person who read the ad asked, “If they all came, could they all get along?” Paul’s answer would be: “If they have the love of God in their hearts, they can.”

To whom do we belong? What will people experience when they visit our church? Will they find here persons sharing love with one another, working together to serve others with one purpose? Will they find us eager to welcome them into the fellowship and ready to make a place for them?

Thank God for all those who have nurtured us in the faith. Thank God for all those who challenge us with their different ways of expressing their faith.

Let us pray.

O God, remind us that we are one body with our brothers and sisters in this congregation and with those who share our faith in other communities of faith. Show us how to put aside our petty squabbles so that we can be untied in faith through your Holy Spirit. Teach us how to respect one another, so that even when we disagree, we can stand together and affirm each other. Empower us to stand together as a family of faith, supporting one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Pour forth your Spirit upon all flesh, that discord and strife may be brought to a perpetual end. Deliver people everywhere from all contempt for others not of their race or color, condition or creed. Quicken by your Gospel the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood among all peoples, and bring us to true unity of spirit, in the bond of peace. Amen.

1. Thomas H. Troeger, The Parable of the Ten Preachers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), pp. 2022 as used in King Duncan's sermon "United We Stand, Divided We Fall," Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
2. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Corinthians (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 15-16.
3. Richard A Hasler, "Live Together In Harmony," Empowered by the Light (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1995), 0-7880-0472-7.
4. Ibid.
5. James L. Killen, Jr., "Removing Obstacles," Sermons for Sundays: In Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany From Expectancy to Remembrance (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 0788023241a.
6. Christian Century, July 2-10, 2002, p. 8 as quoted in "Removing Obstacles."