

Epiphany 3A Sermon, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity²

January 22, 2017

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 *Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 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 the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

Many of you are aware that this year marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, which is commonly considered to have started on Oct. 31, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg church, an act which soon led to many different groups of Christians making a break with Roman Catholicism. First there were followers of Martin Luther; then followers of John Calvin, then Ulrich Zwingli, and on and on. As the two archbishops of the Church of England noted this past week in a joint statement* about the anniversary of the Reformation and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the division of Christianity has continued to this day, with *The World Christian Encyclopedia* estimating there are now 33,000 Protestant denominations in the world.¹ This does not include the plethora of *inter-denominational* and *non-denominational* churches.

In our Epistle today, St. Paul has just received word that the church he had started in Corinth has split into 4 factions. Some of the Christians in Corinth are saying, "I belong to Paul;" others say, "I belong to Apollos;" others say, "I belong to Cephas [Peter];" and still others say, "I belong to Christ." (1 Cor. 1:12-13) It is strikingly similar to those Christians 1500 years later who would say, "I belong to Luther," or "I belong to Calvin," or "I belong to Zwingli," or "I belong to the Pope," or "I belong to *Christ*" (by which they mean of course, that all those *others* don't **really** belong to Christ).

In response to this factionalism, St. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth – and I believe to you and me: "*Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of*

our Lord Jesus Christ... that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” (v.10) Bible scholars are in agreement that **this** verse states the theme of the entire First Letter to the Corinthians. The whole letter warns against dissension in the Church, and emphasizes the fact that there is *one indivisible* body of Christ, composed of many different but equally important and indispensable members. (see 1 Cor. 12)

My friends, let us be honest and admit that the sad divisiveness Paul admonishes against in the young church he started in Corinth continues today, or we would not *need* a “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity,” which we celebrate this week.² I have 2 good friends here in Canon City who could not find a church among the roughly 50 churches in our area that agreed with their own particular understanding of the Bible, so each of these friends started a church of their own. Each claims that he or she has the “correct” interpretation of the Bible – while the other 50 churches in town just don’t quite get it. My friends, we have taken one of the great gifts of the Reformation – the Bible in our own language, available to all – and made it a principal source of division. The cry of the Reformation was, “Sola Scriptura!” – Only Scripture! But if we were honest about the divisions the Reformation produced, we would recognize that what was *really* meant was, “Only **my group’s** *interpretation* of Scripture!” Only nine years after Luther’s 95 Theses the Swiss city of Zurich, in disagreement with the Anabaptists, released a mandate that no one should re-baptize another under the penalty of death by drowning.³ Divisions occurred after the beginning of the Reformation as quickly as they occurred after the establishment of the Church in Corinth.

“Has Christ been divided?” Paul vehemently asks the Corinthians. (v. 13) A more literal translation would be, “Has Christ been divided up and parceled out?” “Christ is being treated as a commodity or a possession to be haggled over,” one scholar notes.⁴ The church is being *dis*membered at the same time that it outwardly observes Christ’s command to “do this in *re*membrance of me.” The purpose of our Eucharist is to *re*member the body of Christ in this time and in this place. (see 1 Cor. 11:17-33)

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ... that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

And this is not the only time Paul exhorts his churches to be of the “same mind.” Dissensions also developed in the Church Paul started at Philippi, and Paul wrote to *them*: “...be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”⁵ Then Paul goes on to describe the kind of life which flows out of having this same mind: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” he writes, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. [Contrast this with the “our interests come first” claims that we hear in our world today...]⁶ “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” Paul continues, “who though he was in

the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross...⁷ Humility, self-emptying, identifying fully with his fellow human beings, looking out for the interests of others, not self, obedient to God, even unto death on a cross. **This** is the mind that Paul exhorts the members of his churches to have: nothing less than the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Now, we are not going to bring about this mind of Christ by more fervent moral efforts on our part. Our unity is not accomplished by any consensus of human opinion, but by the grace and Spirit of God flowing through and amongst us. It's God's claim upon us that unifies us, not **our** claims upon *God*! This is what all the baptism language in today's Epistle is about: It is not Paul, Apollos, Peter, or our priest or our church or our nation who name us and claim us and give us our identity: it is God. And it is *who we are in God* that is the bedrock of our identity and the source of our unity – not our nation or denomination.

But my, how we love to put claims upon God! Portraying God as liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, creating God in our own image and likeness; while in reality it is *we* who are created in **God's** image and likeness, meant to have the mind of Christ. Our unity is accomplished by God the Father in creation, by Christ in redemption, by the Holy Spirit in love.

Now, this **unity** of which Paul speaks is *not* uniformity. Later in this same letter⁸, Paul will write: "... there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit... For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free." My friends, we need to recognize that Paul could not have imagined any *greater* opposites in his day than Jews and Greeks, slaves and free – yet these were the mix of people Paul drew together into his churches! Think of the greatest opposites **you** could imagine today, and imagine what it would be like to have them all together in this congregation, united in love. Paul continues: "But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." Again, **this** describes the "same mind and purpose" which Paul exhorts us to have.

I just watched, for the third or fourth time, the TED Talk given by Jill Bolte Taylor,⁹ the brain researcher who had a massive hemorrhagic stroke in the left side of her brain – that side of our brains that makes distinctions, judgments, binary or dualistic determinations of good or bad, right or wrong, black or white, etc. Deprived of this critical, judging part of her brain, Taylor found that she had an overwhelming sense of her oneness with all people and all creation. Now, it is

too simplistic to say that all we have to do to be of one mind is to live out of the right hemisphere of our brains; but I think the illustration hints at “the mind of Christ” that Paul exhorts us to have. For operating out of the mind of Christ **does** mean operating from a *different* place than our constantly critical, dualistic, good-or-bad, judging, dividing mind, where we live most of the time in our modern culture. Perhaps it would be more faithful to Paul’s understanding to say that we should live more out of our heart-consciousness rather than our dualistic, calculating, judging left brain – not that our left brain is bad, mind you; it’s critical to our survival. But it shouldn’t rule our consciousness, as it often does – at least with me.

My friends, **our** divisions may not be those of the First Century Corinthians. Most of us don’t fight over who baptized us, or whose earthly disciple we are. But our divisions are no less real; **our** divisions are simply more likely to form around politics, issues like homosexuality, immigrants, abortion, gun control – you know the list.

Perhaps, in faithful response to Paul’s (*and Jesus’!*)¹⁰ exhortations to unity, we could ask ourselves when we go home today: What are the things that divide **me** from others and undermine the reconciling work of Christ in my life? What are the things that cause me to deny the truth that we are all one Body in Christ? What are the things which cause us, in the words of Jesuit scholar Walter Burghardt, to “ex-communicate one another more easily than any pope ever dared”?¹¹ Can we put these things aside – repent of them in ourselves, forgive them in others, pray for one another, heal our divisions with godly love? There will **always** be things in which Christians disagree, but can we go deeper than those disagreements and, as Paul writes in Ephesians, “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace,” a unity which makes our disagreements pale in comparison. Can we live into the bedrock truth that we have been made one in Christ through the Paschal mystery, what Paul calls “the cross of Christ”?

Allow me to conclude by quoting the words of Walter Burghardt, commenting on today’s Epistle:

“My sisters and brothers in Christ: History and experience tell us that within our one [Christian] body we will always have our differences. Differences large and differences small. For the most part, the differences are not in basic belief. But they **can** divide us, and they do. Understandably; for the mystery of Christ is too vast to grasp, and we can be dreadfully petty. The crucial question is: Can we differ without disliking? Can we contradict without condemning? Can we debate without hate?

“We had better—for our salvation’s sake. You know, I spend most of my waking day playing theological detective, trying to unravel the mystery of God-with-us. But when I stand before the judgment seat of God, the judge who died for me will not ask me: Did you solve the mystery? He will simply ask: Did you love me

above all else? And did you love your brothers and sisters [which is everyone on the face of the earth] as if they were your own self?”¹²

AMEN

* A short statement, worth the read:

<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5826/reformation-anniversary-statement-from-the-archbishops-of-canterbury-and-york>

¹ <https://theway21stcentury.wordpress.com/2012/11/23/how-many-christian-denominations-worldwide/>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Week_of_Prayer_for_Christian_Unity

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Manz

⁴ Richard B. Hayes, *1 Corinthians, Interpretation Commentary Series*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997, p. 23

⁵ Philippians 2:2; see also Philippians 3:15, 4:2; Romans 12:16, 15:5; 2 Corinthians 13:11

⁶ e.g.: “From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first, America first” and “it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first” – President Donald Trump, in his Inauguration speech. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/read-donald-trump-full-inaugural-172850356.html>
see also: www.britainfirst.org/policies

⁷ Philippians 2:2-8

⁸ 1 Cor. 12

⁹ http://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_s_powerful_stroke_of_insight

¹⁰ John 17:20-23

¹¹ *Lectionary Homiletics*, 2002, pp. 31-32

¹² *ibid.*