

FOCUS: The Good News is we are called to be united in Christ. (First of a series of two sermons)

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 same purpose. For it has been reported to me by some people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean to say is that each of you says “I belong to Sam,” or “I belong to Michael,” or “I belong to Art,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Was Art crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Art? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Ashley, Heather, and Randy, so that none of you can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Butch; 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 of about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Some might suggest that I should offer apologies to Paul for the use of his words. Others might suggest that I have stepped across the lines, adding to or changing the words of Holy Scripture. Some might wonder where all this is leading. In any case, I pray that you will stay with me, and that the Holy Spirit might fill you through these words.

Paul was writing to a church he founded during his second missionary journey in 49 or 50. Paul was the organizing pastor of the church, if you will, and spent about two years preaching, teaching, and evangelizing to the people of Corinth. After about two years in Corinth, Paul moved on to other places on his journey, but kept in touch with the Corinthians by letter. We don't have all of those letters, particularly the ones *from* Corinth, but from the letters we have—and the two Letters to the Corinthians in the New Testament appear to be the combination of at least four letters from Paul—give us some insight into the situation in Corinth and about what Paul is concerned. While we aren't certain exactly the issues at hand, it's rather apparent that at least *one* of the issues causing discord among the community is an attitude that some of the members are better or more special than others because of by whom they were baptized or how long they were members of the fledgling community or where they stood on the social ladder. The people at Corinth were placing loyalty to a leader over their fidelity to Christ, and, to put it mildly, Paul was angry. In the course of sixteen chapters in this first letter, he addresses the topic of dissent and division at least three times—here in the first chapter, again in chapter three, and yet again in chapter eleven as Paul reminds the Corinthians that he brought to them what the Lord Jesus Christ had given to him—the Eucharist and specifically the Words of Institution.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he wasn't sent to be the most eloquent speaker. In fact, compared to the great Greek or Roman orators and rhetoricians of the day, Paul was a pretty lousy public speaker. However, that didn't matter to Paul. For Paul, it was only important to faithfully proclaim the gospel message—that Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, was born and lived and taught and preached and died on the cross as a living, breathing human being for the sake of all of mankind. Then, on the third day, Christ rose from the dead as a final victory over death and the grave so that no one who believed in him might perish, but instead have everlasting life.

One year ago, we gathered together in this very spot. We gathered the night before for dinner, fellowship, and worship. On Sunday morning, we gathered here for worship, to hear the Word of God proclaimed and interpreted, to share in the Eucharistic feast, and then to call on the Holy Spirit to discern if it was proper to call me as your pastor and for me to accept that call. For about sixteen months, you gathered here as a community of faith—the Body of Christ—praying for a pastor to be called to lead you. And, for about the same time, Debbie and I prayed for the Holy Spirit to lead us to a congregation in which my skills and education and experience might be just what the Holy Spirit saw necessary to serve the Body of Christ in this place. We prayed, in fact, that Abiding Presence might be that congregation. We prayed that, by the work of the Holy Spirit, we might be led to you and you to us. And one year ago, we were led by the power of the Holy Spirit to this sacred space. In an act of unity rarely seen in this synod, you as a gathered Body of Christ humbled me by voting without dissention to call me as your pastor. You called me to continue watering the planting work of Sam and Michael, so that God might reap the harvest. We were brought together by the work of the Holy Spirit as servants of God.

Since that time, division has developed in the Body of Christ. There are some in this community who have sought to divide rather than unite. Within that division, groups and cells have begun to take root. Each group thinks that it, and it alone, has ownership of the mission and work of this congregation. Sisters and brothers in Christ have begun to walk in different directions to the detriment of the work for which the Holy Spirit has called us. Sisters and brothers in Christ have chosen not to speak to one another, or to look at one another in the eyes. Sisters and brothers in Christ have chosen to ignore the Lord's commandment that we should "Love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, "You should love your neighbor as yourself."¹ We have strayed away from these *commandments* of our Lord Jesus Christ. We, like our Corinthian brothers and sisters before us, have let human emotions and actions stand before the commandment—not the suggestion or recommendation, but *commandment*—of Christ.

Dear sisters and brothers, it doesn't have to be that way. Paul's letter to the Corinthians is a letter to the Beltsies, too. In the third chapter, Paul writes, "Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their craftiness,' and again, 'The Lord know the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.' So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas (or Sam or Michael or Art) or the world or life or death or he present or the future—all belong *to you*, and *you* belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God."²

We human beings, children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ, do not own the church. We are here only as tenants and stewards of *all* that God has created. When we begin to think of the church in terms of ownership, we are thinking of things not from God. When we begin to think of the church as a place for a certain kind of language, music, style, or socioeconomic group, we are thinking of things not from God. When we begin to think that

¹ Matthew 22:37-39 (NRSV)

² 1 Corinthians 3:18-23 (NRSV)

we know what is on the mind or hidden in the actions of a sister or brother in Christ, we are thinking of things not from God.

Pastors are called to proclaim the Good News—the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That proclamation comes to the Body of Christ in many ways—sermons, symbols, liturgical and pastoral acts, way of life. A challenge for pastors is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't always make us feel good. It doesn't always allow us to stay comfortable. Sometimes, it's not easy standing before you to proclaim the Good News, because in the Good News is a healthy dose of the Law. And the Law, as all good Lutheran confirmands are taught, convicts us of our sins and sends us screaming and crying for the Gospel. The Law, the commandments of God, is set forth so that we might live in harmony with God and one another or in safety from ourselves.

But if we simply follow the Law, we are not assured salvation. If we simply follow the Law, we are not promised life everlasting. We can't simply follow the Law, because we are unable to live the Law without sin. So we confess our sins and go running for what Christ has commanded and God has promised to us without qualification, reservation, or a single good work in return. We run for the grace of God, granted to us in our baptism and of which we are reminded every time we come to this Table to partake in the bread and the wine which *are* the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, given and shed for you and me and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.

There is more, dear friends, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians that we will hear next Sunday. Next week, we explore further the "message about the cross [which is] foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" as we explore our call—the same call Jesus made to Andrew and Peter and James and John when our Lord said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."³

³ Matthew 4:19 (NRSV)