The Message of the Cross

Third Sunday in Epiphany 2020

Matthew 4:12-23 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God to those of us who are being saved.*

*I Corinthians 1:18*

I have often wondered what someone living fifty, seventy-five or a hundred years from now would think, looking back at life in our community, nation, or world in 2020? What would they see? How would they interpret what they see? I don’t have that long view – none of us do who are living in the present reality – but my guess is that a hundred years from now, people will look back and see a nation and a world divided. There’s a lot of *them vs. us* going on in our nation and world. It reaches into every delineation of life: Iran vs. US, progressives vs. conservatives, democrats vs. republicans, pro-life vs. pro-choice, climate change activists vs. deniers. The list goes on and on.

We draw the line in the sand. You’re either for us or against us. We label ourselves. We watch MSNBC or Fox News. We’re either for Trump or against him. We get so entrenched in our groups, and our labels define us, so much so that once you identify yourself as one or the other, you can be ready for a verbal battle or acclamation. It’s gotten so bad, that last fall, there was a plethora of articles and blog posts about how to avoid epic battles when you gathered together for the Thanksgiving or Christmas holidays. A year ago, I gathered with a bunch of grumpy old men who annually escaped the winter blues in Ohio on a week-long golf trip to South Carolina. I had not been on one of these for years and the group had changed a bit. So, before I got there, I asked my friend Phil to whom I should avoid talking politics. Feelings and identifications run high and verbal battles can leave people with bruised feelings and broken relationships.

The church is not immune to such drawing of lines in the sand over closely-held convictions. I spoke a few weeks ago about one of the initial battlegrounds in the early church between Jewish and Gentile Christians. We Christians, despite Jesus’ pleas for unity among his followers, can fight with the best of them. Look at what is happening in the United Methodist churches presently, as they have agreed to split between those who advocate for the rights of GLBTQ persons to be ordained and those who vehemently disagree. We know how to fight, and we do.

And it breaks God’s heart each and every time we do.

The Corinthian Christians found themselves hopelessly divided in the passage we read this morning. In fact, it was the very reason Paul saw fit to write this letter to this church that he helped to begin on one of his missionary journeys.

Preacher Paul Bellan-Boyer talks about the situation there in Corinth: “This may have been even more acute in first century Corinth, where everything depended on who you were with. It *mattered* if you were with Cephas, or Apollos, or Paul. In the society it mattered whose family who were part of, since your family’s (and its head, its father) wealth, power, and influence determined *your* wealth, power, and influence. It mattered which city you belonged to, since each city had its own laws and privileges. It mattered if you belonged to Rome (were a Roman citizen), to Jerusalem (capitol of a conquered nation within the empire), or to the "barbarian" tribes beyond the empire’s control.  
  
Unity was found in this context of banding together against the next family, city, nation... "I belong to... " was a powerful statement. (Even when it was forced upon you by your owner.) It may sound a bit puzzling that Paul criticizes even those who say "I belong to Christ." Haven’t they got it right?  
No. They may have the right name, but the wrong spirit. The problem is not that they have different household in faith, but that they are quarreling. This points out that they lack the kind of unity which Paul presumes is a fruit of belonging to Christ.”

Sadly, I believe Bellan-Boyer is right on the mark. It is an observation we can make about the contemporary church, even as we do so about Corinthian Christians. I shared a story with the Wednesday evening study of a church Jayne and I co-pastored. Like Nu’uanu Congregational Church, it had existed for centuries. Jayne and my pastorate was preceded by two long pastorates, one that lasted 34 years and the immediate next one for 31 years. Sixty-five consecutive years in which the church had two pastors. When we began our ministry there, there were those who kept alive the memory of the last pastor: Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ did it this way, they would say. It’s understandable. Over 31 years, the pastor had deep and lasting influence, some for good and some not. But our allegiance should not be to this leader or that one, but to Jesus, who is lord of all.

That’s what Paul was getting at when he talked about those who claimed to follow Cephas, or Apollos, or even Paul or Christ. Being Christian does not erase or eliminate the real differences that exist between us as people. Differences make for the richness of humankind. In that mantra of the United Church of Christ, we are fond of saying, *No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.* And I for one truly look to that as the ideal we pursue. We can exist in love, embracing the differences that are so much a part of who we are as individuals.

It is only when we make those differences a kind of line in the sand that cannot be crossed and creates a them vs. us atmosphere. That creates a toxic environment so much against the spirit of unity sought by Paul and Jesus.

Unity is not created when we all believe the same way. Paul gives us his take on the root of unity in the church when he says, *The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved. [1 Corinthians 1:18]* The cross? Why the cross? You have to understand what the cross meant to his hearers. The Romans used the cross to provoke terror among all those who had seen someone die by crucifixion. It was a slow, painful death, seeping life out of the one who hung on it. But not only that, the Romans purposely placed those instruments of death alongside the most traveled roadways, so as many people as possible could witness it. It was their way of saying to all who passed by, if you do not want this to happen to you, do as we command. It was an instrument of terror.

And so, they crucified Jesus. But God took the cross on which Jesus died and transformed it from a symbol of terror into an instrument of triumph and victory.

Paul stresses the cross in this situation because he wants to remind the Corinthian Christians (and all of us who overhears his counsel) of the source of Christian unity. Unity does not occur because we all believe the same way about every element of our faith and practice. It does not happen because we are all alike in culture, social standing, or economic status. Heck, it’s not even because we necessarily like each other!

Our unity now, as it was then is the gift we receive in experiencing the cross. Not believing in the cross; experiencing it. To experience the cross means to be transformed by it. Paul knew whereof he testified. From an enemy of the cross, the hater Saul became the apostle Paul. It is that common experience that produces the unity of the church.

When we hold on to the things that divide us, we create a dysfunctional, divided, ineffective church, one that God is challenged to use to do God’s will. Realize and even celebrate your differences, but do not allow it to separate you from your sisters and brothers. Let us celebrate the unity with which God has gifted us. We do not create it. It comes to us in the triumph of the cross. Thanks be to God.