

FINDING UNITY IN DIVERSITY

I Corinthians 1:10-17

Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Paul's letter to the Corinthians speaks to a problem that at one time or another impacts the life of every faith community. And when it does effect even a healthy congregation that's when we need to remember the tools and the will are still provided from above so in the Spirit of Christ we can still work together for the common good.

When Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were asked to come up with the definitive national motto for our new nation they proposed E Pluribus Unum, "**From the Many, One**," four words that sum up our call to unity despite our diversity.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians reminds us our Christian faith is primarily about our relationships with God and each other. Seeking out God in your life, every day, being grounded in God's love, everyday, guarantees the quality of our relationships.

Christianity is essentially all about Jesus. And what does Jesus call you and me to do? "**Deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me.**" What does he mean by this? Set aside anything keeping you from completely giving yourself over to Jesus and your neighbor. It means letting go of anything in your life that's spiritually unhealthy. Give these things up so there's nothing left keeping you from Jesus.

That's the ideal, but that ideal isn't always lived up to.

A story, not in the Bible, tells of Christ after he ascended into heaven having a conversation with an angel.

The angel said, "**Lord, let me get this straight. You've come back up here to heaven, and you're going to let Peter and that gang set up your church? Is that wise? Look at their track record. They fight among themselves, each one thinks he's the greatest and when you needed them the most on Good Friday they all ran away. What are you going to do when they mess up again? What's your plan `B'?**" Jesus smiled and answered, "**There is no plan `B'.**"

You see, we're it. Jesus depends on us to pull together. He's given us the keys to the Kingdom, and since there's no plan "**B**", Jesus counts on us to be faithful to Jesus.

Like the disciples we all go through times of testing, especially when there's unexpected and unwelcomed changes going on. I've shared with you numerous times that we're living through an era of great change in the culture that impacts the way we "do" Church.

Speaking personally, I don't like all these changes in the culture because it means we have to change the way we "do" church and change hurts. I don't like that our mainline denominations are losing members and that in the next ten years there will be even more churches within a three-mile radius that will be closing their doors.

These are unsettling, messy times impacting our lifestyles, challenging our work ethic, upending the upbringing of our children and even questioning how we communicate with one another. But out of these messy times there comes the opportunity to live and serve together in the Beloved Community, not only within the confines of these four walls, but especially out there in the mission field, on the street in the neighborhood where you live.

If we are going to be the Beloved Community, we'll need to heed the call to unity and not let diversity, and by that I mean anything that can divide us, get the upper hand, because as Jesus said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Still, we like to divide ourselves and justify it at the same time.

An angel in heaven just finished composing a lovely song, her gift to humankind. She took her finished manuscript and spread her wings and rushed to earth clutching the sheets of music in her arms. Unfortunately a great gust of wind blew all the sheets of paper from her hands, blowing them every which way to the earth below. People all over the world picked up a sheet here and a sheet there and then started running about shouting, "**I have the heavenly anthem, I have the heavenly anthem!**" not realizing each had only a tiny piece of the big picture.

How we manage our diversity and strive for unity, will determine the Church's role and influence in the world and this congregation's influence in our neighborhood.

One of my responsibilities as your pastor is to preach the gospel, and encourage you to be 21st century disciples. But I don't own this responsibility by myself. I share it with the elders you elected to discern God's vision for our church. Together we ask God, "Lord, where do we go from here, how do we get there and where are you. Are we on the right track? Are we leading in the right direction? If we are, affirm us, if we're not, correct us."

The vision for Babcock we believe God is giving us is this: become even more Christ centered and then even more Community centered. How? We evangelize ourselves first and then, with equal fervor, reach out with the missionary zeal of the apostles to do all we can to serve people who may be different than us and may never go to church, but still recognize a deep spiritual hunger needing to be satisfied.

So, we need to be changed, transformed, remade in Christ's image, fully realizing when you make the decision to go through a period of change or transformation, we will sooner than later experience growing pains that come from counting the cost of following

Jesus. Growing pains come whenever you risk yourself for the sake of the gospel.

Growing pains can also bring on fear and insecurity which then can lead you to want to hold on to what you already know even if God wants you to do something new. But if we're not careful, growing pains could eventually lead to division, as people divide themselves up into groups and we lose our sense of being one in Christ.

Let's go back now to Paul and the Corinthian Church. God put before Paul a challenge. Speak the truth in love. Address the divisions in the Corinthian Church head on. Take a firm and loving stand for Christ and his Kingdom.

So, right after his customary greetings to the Corinthians he jumped right in.

"By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, I appeal to you to agree in what you say so there will be no divisions among you. Be completely united with only one thought and purpose."

Now is Paul saying there's no room for animated, healthy debate? No. But what he is saying is when the day is done and you still have differing opinions, go back to the source and rediscover your unity in Christ.

Paul then goes on, **"Let me put it plainly. Each one of you says something different. One says, "I follow Paul." Another, "I follow Peter," another, "I follow Apollos," and another, "I follow Christ."**

This is where Paul gets very direct. **"Christ has been divided into groups. Was it Paul who died on the cross for you? Were you baptized as Paul's disciples?"**

In all fairness we have to give Corinthian Christians their due. They were the first generation of spiritual pioneers. They had no long history or traditions to fall back on. They were doing the best with what they had, probably very aware that there was no Plan "B."

So these young Christians were struggling to embrace a new faith while being engaged in the process of change and growing pains and grief for what was lost.

That's why Paul called them from the brink and back to the basics. **"Christ sent me to tell the Good News in order to make sure Christ's death on the cross is not robbed of its power."**

I've quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer before, **"When Christ calls you, he bids you to come to him and die."** There are many ways of dying, but in this case Bonhoeffer means letting anything in you wither away and die if it gets in the way of your relationships with

Christ and each other.

There is something else we need to remember before we can follow Jesus in the new way: repent, do a 180° so we can turn and walk away from the hell we create for ourselves.

Remember the movie Gandhi? There was one scene that really spoke to me in a powerful way.

India finally gains independence from Great Britain, but as the British army leaves forever, riots break out between the Hindus and the Moslems. In protest, Gandhi goes on a hunger strike refusing to eat and willing to die unless peace is restored.

While Gandhi is lying in his bed, slowly starving to death a young Hindu man, his face filled with terror and shame cries out, **"I'm going to hell."**

"Why are you going to hell?" Gandhi asked.

"In the riots, my only son was killed by a mob of Moslems, so in revenge, I went out and found a Moslem boy, the same age as my son, and I killed him."

He began sobbing. But then Gandhi spoke. **"I think I know a way for you out of hell. Go out and find another boy about the same age as your son whose parents were killed in the riots, only make sure he is a Moslem...and raise him as your own, but raise him as a Moslem."**

When Gandhi told the man to find an orphan and raise him as a Moslem, he didn't ask him to forsake his life as a Hindu, but to be able to embrace and love someone he saw as being different than he was.

One of the challenges we face as human beings created in the image of God is learning how to love and serve people who are different than we are because of race, politics, gender identity, and what ever other differences you can come up with. Having said that I believe Gandhi's way out for that tortured man has something to say to us. We need to be willing to surrender to Christ any and all preconceived notions and prejudices before we'll ever be able to become the disciples Christ needs to bring the Good News that brings change to people's lives.

Remember, never let our call to unity be stymied by diversity. Remember, give up anything keeping you from giving yourself to Jesus. Remember, Jesus is counting on us, there is no Plan B.