

A Sermon for the
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
January 23, 2010
Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

“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...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.”

1 Corinthians 1:10-15, 17-18

“Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali...From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea -- for they were fisherman. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and sickness among the people.” Matthew 4:12-13, 18-23

Be united in the same mind and the same purpose. Be in agreement and let there be no divisions among you. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you. Some of you are saying, “I belong to Apollos,” or, “I belong to Paul,” or, “I belong to Cephas.” In his exasperation, Paul exclaims, “Thank God I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius.” This dividing into competing groups following one person or another is not at all what I preached. My good news message focused on one thing and that was Christ crucified, the cross of Christ, this is the one thing that is to identify you and define who you are and how you live. The cross is the power of Christ, foolishness to many, but for you it is the power of God.

Division and unity seems to have been the challenge that faced the church from the beginning until now. When I listen to Paul admonish the church in Corinth in today's first reading, I can't help but think, wow, how would Paul respond to the church today? There are more divisions, groups, and sects in the church today than Paul could have ever imagined. As Lutherans can attest to in just the last year. Over its history the church has divided over every conceivable issue from whether to eat meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols in Paul's Corinth, over how we understand Jesus' nature -- divine, human, or both -- over how to read the Bible, over how we worship, over whether women should be allowed to be ordained, and most recently, over the place of homosexuals in the church. And that short list doesn't include every kind of social and personal disagreement that occurs in the life of any community that has divided churches over the years. Like the fight that occurred in one congregation over whose land would be the site of the new church building as two prominent families in the church vied for the honor. In the end the decision was division and as a result we have two Lutheran churches a half mile apart in Frederick county.

But in this letter to the congregation in Corinth, Paul not only intends to admonish them for the divisions they have allowed to arise between them, but to focus them again on what it is that unites them. What unites them is more powerful and important than their differences. What unites them is the cross of Christ and what it teaches and demonstrates. When Paul exhorts the Corinthians to be of the same mind and purpose, I don't think he is asking them to agree with one another on every issue and idea. He is asking them to do what he spoke of to the Philippians, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ." Be united in the same mind and purpose Paul says today. That mind and purpose is the mind and purpose of Christ, revealed most completely in his crucifixion.

That the savior of the world was crucified was the pivotal point of the Christian message for Paul. It was the key point Paul had to address in his preaching for, on the face of it, the cross was a message of shame and dishonor, making the idea that a savior would be crucified, foolishness to Gentiles and a stumbling block for Jews, as Paul would go on to say. But Paul's defense was that this "foolishness" was, ironically, the strong core of the gospel, revealing the powerful love of God. Going to the cross, Paul asserted, revealed the presence of God's love in Jesus and how much God loves us. The divine love revealed in Jesus' crucifixion also became for Paul what defines who we are as Christ's brothers and sisters, and what shapes how we are to relate to each other, the mindset we should have as Christians.

So, in this letter, as Paul addresses one issue after another that was dividing the congregation, his approach to the issues might be boiled down to what does the love of God revealed in the cross call upon us to do? After speaking to a series of issues, Paul's argument reaches its culmination in chapter 13. A chapter completely familiar to all of us because of its use in just about every wedding you go to. But for Paul, rather than being a description of the love between a husband and wife, it is intended as a description of the love revealed in the cross of Christ, and of the mindset he hoped that all Christians would be united in. He begins by saying, "I will show you a more excellent way." Referring back to some of the issues that were dividing the Corinthians, he goes on, "if I can speak in tongues of men or angels, but don't have love, I'm just making noise. If I had prophetic powers, or the ability to understand all mysteries, or have all knowledge and wisdom; if I had faith that could move mountains, but do not have

love, then I am nothing. If I practice every spiritual discipline, giving away all my possessions, or worshiping perfectly, such that I feel I can boast of my spiritual maturity, but do not have love, all I do gains nothing.” In other words, nothing works or is of any value without love.

What does this divine love look like? It is patient. It is kind. It is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. In other words, it’s humble and self-denying. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable, resentful, or celebrate the errors or mistakes of others. This cross shaped love bears all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. This is Paul’s description of God’s love revealed in Jesus’ crucifixion. An unconditional, self-giving, forgiving love. When Paul exhorts his congregation to be of the same mind and purpose, he is talking about the mindset and purpose of living in and with this love.

God so loves us that he came in Jesus, lived among us, and demonstrated his love to the utmost, dying for us on the cross. This love is the heart of the gospel for Paul, and the deepest promise and hope to us. And in Paul’s eyes it is the power of God in our lives, changing our lives as we seek to let this love take over as the central practice of our lives. What this means for our divisions is that it relativizes them. That is, God’s love in us becomes the fundamental part of our identity, not all of the ideas and things that we so often use to define ourselves as different from others. The things that were dividing the Corinthian community, and the things that so often divide our churches today, become differences and need not be dividers. The unity Paul was proclaiming was not a call for unanimity, the elimination of any and all differences. That, I think, is a human impossibility, there will always be cultural differences, different tastes in music and worship, and so on. What has changed is that these things have become what Luther called *adiaphora*, things that are secondary. What is primary, and essential, is the presence of God’s Spirit of love. That we love one another as Christ loved us. That the mind of Christ be what defines us. That we are one in the gift of patient, self-giving, burden bearing, forgiving, divine love, that is alive in us through Jesus Christ. Amen