

“Unity in a Divisive World”

A Sermon preached by Margaret Wallin at
First Congregational Church Breckenridge on
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Based on 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the first of Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth that are part of the Biblical canon. Paul founded this faith community and has a special interest in its wellbeing. There were, of course a series of letters between Paul and the church at Corinth. Two have been preserved for us in the canon that we know as the Bible. The first of these preserved letters is estimated to have been written about 54 CE, at a time when Corinth had been reestablished as a Roman colony for 10 years, and the city had become a thriving melting pot where social mobility and economic opportunity fostered competition in the marketplace of goods, ideas, and even physical feats. With that dominant ethic of competition and self-promotion, divisions arose within the church. Word got back to Paul about the behavior of the church members, and Paul writes to the church in part to challenge them to forgo engaging in the Corinthian social expectation of self-promotion and competition. Instead, he urges them to co-exist in the unity that results when people follow Christ’s pattern of self-sacrifice. Paul’s letter then, seeks to set the Corinthian church back on track as a beloved community of those who follow the truth of Christ. Hear now the Word of God from

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

A Church Divided Over Leaders

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[a] in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas^[b]”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Christ Crucified Is God’s Power and Wisdom

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Here ends the reading. May God add blessings of illumination and understanding to this reading of the holy word. Amen.

I suppose that it is no surprise to any of us that our society has always had its divisions, classifications of people and their loyalties. Whether you divide folk by skin color, religious affiliation, economic status, educational accomplishment, or employment, there are plenty of ways in which we recognize divisions in our society. Perhaps this is a natural result of a free market society. We each have a pretty good idea where we fit in the social order – to the good or the bad. Of course, it is highly likely that whatever our own group is, that is a good group, no? And we may find it natural to defend our own group, arguing for its legitimacy, its respect, its value to society as a whole.

There is nowhere in our society more evident of division than in our politics. Every election cycle, we see candidates pushing against the status quo and vying for our vote and our allegiance. This has always been true, but this last election cycle has seen a polarization of parties of interest that seems to be well beyond the “normal” election year rhetoric. It continues even now, as our new president was sworn in question still linger in some quarters about Donald Trump’s ethics and character. Yet, many who supported Trump cited their deep mistrust of the ethics and character of Hillary Clinton. And we have seen an unusual amount of **triumphalism**, especially for such a closely contested election where the popular vote and the electoral college results differed. And on the other flank, there are those who claim that Donald Trump is NOT THEIR President, and dissension flares over each of his picks for cabinet positions.

We are likely to require an extended time and significant energy to heal the fracturing that has occurred between not only the candidates or their parties, but between their respective supporters as well. Supporters on both sides have often been less than hospitable to the other. Division and derogation seem to be the way of the day. I mourn the lack of reasoned public discourse and the statesmanship that was once expected of our national candidates.

It’s not just in our politics where division is rampant -- factionalism and bickering can be found in the Church with a big C as well. From denominational ruptures to splits in local congregations, the Church is not immune from the tensions facing our nation. It seems there is no end of things Christians can and do disagree about. The Episcopal Church is being challenged by members and leaders who abhor the witness made by the Washington National Cathedral in hosting the inaugural prayer service yesterday.

Closer to home, many churches experience tensions within the congregations which have little to do with national politics: who can be ordained, who can serve communion, how we approach the challenges posed by immigration, where we stand with Black Lives Matter. It seems that division is a symptom of human brokenness. Thank goodness we are Congregationalists and don’t worry about such things.

You might recognize the name Philip Yancey, who is a relatively prominent evangelical writer. Yancey recently wrote a moving piece in which he reflected on the election -- and like Paul did for the Corinthians, he pleaded for Christians to bridge the gaps that divide them: from each other, from those in the larger society, and within our society. Yancey quotes French sociologist Jacques Ellul, who noted that “politics is the church’s worst problem. It is her constant temptation, the occasion of her greatest disasters, the trap continually set for her by the prince of this world.” Yancey says that “Christians have a divided loyalty, committed to helping our society thrive while giving ultimate loyalty to the kingdom of God. We are resident aliens, taking guidance not from a party platform but from the life Jesus modeled for us. Sometimes that means crossing the gap, rather than widening it.”

Following Election Day, thousands of Christians gathered in churches to pray and sing and to remind themselves of God’s sovereignty in their lives. The idea for doing a community communion service at the conclusion of an election began in 2008, when a pastor who was preparing communion for his Mennonite congregation fielded a robo call from Sarah Palin, who urged all Christians to vote Republican and take back the country. In his annoyance at the interruption of his readying the table for his people, he thought that a good way to counter the divisiveness of elections might be to bring the people around the table of the One Lord. It took another election cycle to have it happen, the first post-election communion service was in 2012. But this year it seemed especially important to have a service of healing for Christians.

The communion service is not intended to diminish the importance of voting and taking part in the democratic process. Rather, it is about seeing the issues, the dissension, the polarized folk in a new perspective. As electors, we have power alone in the voting booth, but before the table of the Lord, we are reminded that our power, **all** power is dependent upon God, and we are all One in Christ Jesus.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses a group of people we would now identify as Christians, who are smack in the middle of a confused and changing world. Paul sees the unifying force for these folk in the calling placed upon them by God. Like Paul, the people in the Corinthian church are called by God. They are set apart, sanctified, for service to God in the place where they find themselves (1 Corinthians 1:1-3). The call that Paul received from God is what authorizes and motivates him to proclaim the gospel. It is not his eloquence, his rhetorical style, or his charismatic appeal that allows him to preach and baptize and build churches among the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:14-17). Paul acknowledges that his work is initiated by God’s hand, and is accomplished by God’s will.

Similarly, the church -- Corinthians, together with all the saints -- are called by God and set apart to serve God. They have been enriched by God in speech and knowledge. They have received God’s grace and strength and spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 1:4-9). In the early verses of his letter, Paul identifies the roles of God and the people. God initiates; God is the one who calls. The church -- Corinthians and the larger body of Christians – then responds to God by

proclaiming the gospel of Christ.

It is in Christ's name that Paul appeals to the church. See, in verse 7, he lays out the message he will repeat throughout this letter: "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." He is writing to a community toward which he feels great affection. Paul founded this church. When he last saw them, they were relatively harmonious. Now he is hearing reports of division: "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Paul responds to this with: Has Christ been divided? (1 Corinthians 1:12-13). The individuals named as leaders were presumably themselves faithful Christians. It is likely that they were not leading people away from Christ. Yet aligning with one leader over another is having a bad effect on the body of Christ at Corinth. The body of Christ at Corinth is being stressed, and fracture is a distinct possibility. Paul's words then, call the people to return to the gospel they share, and to remember the one thing that unites them: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is not just saying to the church like the Nike Ad "Just Do It" – Just get along, come together, be united, be in agreement. We would not expect that merely invoking the appeal to come together would be enough to unify factious groups. And he is not saying that we all have to think exactly the same thing. Rather, Paul's message to the Corinthian community is for them to not be divided over different leaders, or over charismatic personalities, or over who baptized whom. By reminding them of the fundamental ground of their unity (i.e., Christ crucified), Paul calls on the community as a whole to take responsibility for stepping beyond (or letting go of) their divisions and moving toward the wholeness that God authors and desires for the world. When the peace and wholeness that God desires for all people is kept in focus, kept clear in our minds and hearts, then rivalries, nationalism, and petty judgments are relegated to their proper importance and will not be the cause of a fracture.

(Credit to Richard B. Hayes, *First Corinthians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [John Knox Press, 1997], pp. 15-30.)

The presidential inauguration has of course already happened now. And the Women's March on Washington in which hundreds of thousands of women demonstrated in Washington DC, and many in other places in the country demonstrated their opposition to some of the key positions that President Trump had espoused during his campaign. Sister marches were held in many capital cities, including Lansing yesterday. It is important that people stand up and speak up for the rights of the disenfranchised in particular – the poor, the immigrant, the disabled. Christ would have us protect and give deference to the marginalized of our society. Those who have difficulty finding a voice, those who have difficulty making an impact on the decision makers.

However, we also need to remember that we are **one** country. And for Christians especially, we need to remember that we are all – ALL beloved children of God our father. We need to temper

our voices, our language, our expressions of feeling and concern, not to shush it down to a low whisper so that no one hears, but rather, we must speak in the language of love, of concern, of unity, of remembering what this country was about from the very beginning. We need to honor one another – listening closely for God’s voice in any dispute.

One of the finest aspects of scripture, and one that often amazes and surprises us is its relevance and truth across time. Out text from 1 Corinthians, contains words written thousands of years ago by the apostle Paul in which he speaks to a fractured group of people who have been swayed by allegiances to a variety of charismatic leaders. Paul calls them back to unity in the one who is the ground and source of their faith and salvation. Paul reminds Christ-followers in Corinth that their unity is in the proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

People swayed by allegiances to a variety of leaders. Charismatic leaders. Unity that supersedes fractiousness. How many incidents across history can be described with these very words? Here we are today, reading these words. We must acknowledge that as a nation, we are a fractured people too. Today, Paul’s words again offer a timely message. Whether your political leanings align with Mitch McConnell, John Lewis, John McCain, or Elizabeth Warren, **for the Christian** there is unity in allegiance to Christ.

However, we know that today Christians in the United States are far from united -- at least in our varied political allegiances. Christians find ourselves dividing along deep lines which are often traced to faithful yet varied understandings and interpretations of scripture. To call oneself a Christ-follower does not mean one necessarily supports marriage equality or actively seeks to defund Planned Parenthood. One finds verses in scripture which speak for and against these specific issues.

So we ask the question whether unity may be found among people who view such divisive issues differently?

In 1 Corinthians 1:11-18, Paul says “Yes.”

Beth Herrinton-Hodge writes:

Paul is saying more than “Just Do It.” Yet “doing it” is the response that is called for among Christians in these times (perhaps in all times). “Doing it” means more than invoking words. It means searching our souls to discern **where our loyalty lies**; and beyond this, **returning** our loyalty **to the God who created and calls us**. “Doing it” means proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ: “if necessary, use words.” It means acting for peace, for love, for wholeness, for health, for dignity, for unity, for justice to prevail across God’s world. It means reaching across the aisle, crossing or bridging the gap.

In his blog post titled “[Election Reflections: Bridging the Gap](#),” Yancey offered this

image: “In the London subway system, as a train pulls up you hear the recorded announcement, ‘Mind the gap!’ In other words, pay attention to the gap between the platform and the train lest you fall.... We need to mind the huge gap that risks making our nation divisible.”

Yancey continues, “Because of our dual loyalty, Christians have an important role to play in bringing reconciliation and healing... taking guidance not from a party platform but from the life Jesus modeled for us. Sometimes that means crossing the gap, rather than widening it.”

We are called to unity in Christ Jesus. We are called to love one another, to consider, to speak on behalf of those who are not able to speak for themselves. We are called to seek unity with justice. Remember the words from Micah: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

May we follow those words so that we may be part of the healing of America, the healing of the Church, as we face the difficult issues of our day.

Amen.