

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 22, 2017

Prayer of the Day: Almighty God, you sent your Son to proclaim your kingdom and to teach with authority. Anoint us with the power of your Spirit that we, too, may bring good news to the afflicted, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captive; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching, preaching, and healing every disease. Alleluia! (Matthew 4:23)

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Well, now it's done. This past Friday the president-elect took the oath of office. It brings all the ballot recounting, all the appeals to the Electoral College, and all other challenges of the results to a close. So that means you have a new 45th President of the United States of America. Now we get to unite together as one country, right?... Well... maybe.

Back in November 2016 the media labeled this election as one of the nastiest campaign cycles in recent history. Maybe you agree. It seems like you learned more about Twitter and e-mails than you did foreign policy. You heard tape-recordings and Russian hacking more than you did about an economic plan. You watched name-calling and accusations instead of efforts to unite various people under one common vision. The election was not "nasty" because of stances on the issues. It was "nasty" because attacks became personal.

You had two people running for the same office in the same nation! And yet, so much effort was poured into degrading personal character and eroding trust and questioning personal morals. When personal opinions fly, people take sides. Words are said that cannot be taken back. Feelings are hurt and become raw. The focus no longer centers on real issues; attention turns towards humbling an opponent.

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers, 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"; still another, "I follow Christ."

¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so no one can say that you were baptized into 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 words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

That's why Paul writes these words for us. No, he is not entering political realm in America. He warns that the same division can drive you, a believer, away from each other and split the focus off from the one true God! So, he stresses: **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON UNITY.** *See Christ crucified for you. See Christ crucified for others.*

Last week you heard about that one thing that unites all of you together as one. The very most important feature of your "church" is Jesus. You gather here and the Word of God is read. That Word pours God's love into your heart. You see the baptismal font—front and center. Here, God says: *"I put my Name on you; you are still mine"* ([Isaiah 43:1](#); [Matthew 28:19](#)). Your Jesus meets you at the Communion rail. *"Here is my body, given for you. Here is my blood, shed for you— for your forgiveness, to guarantee heaven is your home. You are at peace with God."* You, individually, have this horizontal connection with God!

It doesn't stop there. If you are in God's family and I am in God's family, then that means you share something in common with me. We share Jesus. That's why Paul can call you and me "brothers" and "sisters." Of course, we have different biological parents, but by faith in Jesus as Savior, we share the same heavenly home. We call the same God: "Father." It means you and I are united to each other in this vertical relationship.

The horizontal relationship with God is the reason the Corinthians had a vertical relationship with each other. Just think about the kinds of people who must have gathered there! Everyone came from a different background. Some followed Jesus from birth; others were adult converts from paganism. Some were educated; others were not. Some held jobs; others lived retired. Some were wealthy; others managed to get by. Some had families; others empty-nesters. People with such different upbringings shared a common faith in Jesus.

When I say "common" I mean they agreed in all Bible teachings. They recognized that baptism sealed them in faith. They treated the Bible as it truly is: the very inspired-word-for-word of God. They received in the Lord's Supper, the true body and true blood of Jesus. Nowhere does Paul chastise them for wandering from the Word. Nowhere does he applaud them for allowing disagreements in Bible teaching.

You see in this congregation a common belief in all things Scripture teaches, which makes it so shocking to hear arguments like: **"I follow Paul!"**... **"I follow Apollos!"**... **"I follow Cephas!"** This is not some friendly preference for one preacher over another. This morphed into an all-out debate— kind of like what you witnessed at the presidential debates last fall. Emotionally-charged members shout why one group is wrong and why their group is factually correct. One group believes Paul the missionary does more work—and that makes him the most valuable. Another group supports the fiery and exciting Pastor Apollos! Some other group exalts Cephas (you know him as Peter) because he is the second disciple of Jesus. Then, some other group tries to win the argument by barking out: **"Well, I follow Christ."** Saying: "I follow Christ" sounds good, but in this setting, it was another way to call everyone else "wrong."

Can you just imagine entering here, sitting on one side of the church with your little group, and calling each other names? Probably not... but then again, maybe your personal frustrations haven't reached that point yet.

Paul pleads: **"I appeal to you, brothers [and sisters], in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought."** Paul is not looking at the person sitting next to you; he looks at you. His words penetrate the deep recesses of your heart and speaks to its very thoughts and intentions. Paul knows what beats in his own chest: a heart, one that is by nature sinful. A heart that still beats with pride.

You and I own that same heart. At the beginning of our worship service, we say together: *"I confess that I am by nature sinful."* The very moment you are conceived, you are conceived in sin ([Psalm 51:5](#)). That sin, the Bible teaches, marks you as a vicious enemy of God ([Romans 8:7](#)). You do not want to live by his Word, nor can do so. That means even the cutest little baby lives to serve itself. (You know that to be true if you ever put two babies in the same crib with just one toy). That means the nicest littlest elderly lady can fire off the most hurtful of words. That means you too can act and behave in ways that serve only selfish needs.

Yes, even after we come to faith, we still battle a sinful nature that makes sure we get our way first. That feisty nature will stare down parents of crying children if it must. That stubborn nature will find every reason to accuse others of not supporting this ministry with their offerings. That prideful nature will say the meanest, the rudest of words just to silence someone who upsets you. Yes, that sinful nature will even argue over who the "best" preacher is— if it feels its opinions must be heard. That sinful nature will not see the Jesus who unites us together. Rather, it will focus on making sure you get your way. ...even if your words hurt someone and drive them out of worship. ...even if your glare shows how little you care for another. ... even if your actions make it clear that someone else is not welcome here. That sinful nature will do all it can to make your word more important than people coming to hear the Word of God!

Dear friends, made brothers and sisters because of Jesus: **Is Christ divided?** Did Jesus die only for you and then descend from heaven a second to die for another and then was born some other Christmas Day to die for another? No! He left heaven one time for all people for all time!

Was Paul crucified for you? Of course, not! Jesus died for you! From eternity you are always in the mind and heart of God. So, he put his wants aside, leaves his throne in heaven, and lives so that you can have the pardon you so dearly need. For the times our selfish motives show how little we care for others, God has every right to show how little he cares for us. Instead he hides his face from a crucified Jesus. He cuts Jesus off from the land of the living so that you can be forever attached to your Father in heaven.

When you sit and you wonder how you [individually] fit into the life of this entire congregation, start by *seeing Christ crucified for you*. You are that important to God—that Jesus would be driven away from God so that you can call heaven your home! You were

not **baptized into the name of Paul[.]** You were baptized into the name of the Triune God. You wear the title “Child of God” as a badge on your chest!

REMAIN FOCUSED... ON THE UNITY you have with God. Only by pondering the love God has for you are you able to **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON UNITY** *Christ crucified has for others.*

Do you see how Paul calms the arguments in Corinth? He places the focus right back to Christ. **For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel...** and it's true. Paul planted churches; other Pastors— like Apollos and Peter— baptized and communed members and shepherded the flock. Paul is not any more important than they. Rather, Paul's used his gifts in another field.

God has not made you clones of each other. Each of you have different backgrounds with different childhoods and different work ethics and parenting styles. Some of you are young; others older. Some of you are in school; others retired. Some work in the office; others out on the road. Yet you still share one thing in common: Christ crucified.

So, how do you foster agreement in all things? You are different—with different principles and expectations. Remember who you are in Christ: United to him! Maybe you feel a whimpering child must leave the sanctuary immediately. Yet, look at this little child; see how they are here to grow in the knowledge of your Jesus. You are connected to them. Rejoice they are here listening to the Word! Rejoice that you get to encourage them with loving words and actions to continue listening to the Word!

Maybe you wish people dressed more like you or behaved more like you in worship. Yet, remember, the Bible's dress-code is “dress modestly” (dressing in ways that do not incite feelings of lust or shame). Instead, rejoice that more people are drawn to the light of Jesus. Help each other to walk in the light of God's commands and the behavior God calls “wicked” behind.

Maybe you feel that you have little to contribute to this ministry. You don't see yourself as someone inviting your friends or bringing up Jesus at holiday dinners. You don't feel your offerings support much of anything here. Yet, see the precious gospel you hold in your hands. See what God has given you to support this good news. Most of all see Jesus and your ability to share him with the world.

The list could really go on. There is no shortage of opinions among a group of people. Remember, where God has neither commanded something nor forbidden an act, you are free to work together to reach decisions. You reach decisions by putting Christ first.

When personal opinions fly, people take sides. Words are said that cannot be taken back. Feelings are hurt and become raw. The focus no longer centers on real issues; attention turns towards humbling an opponent.

That's why Paul writes these words for us. With these words you [individually] stand united in Christ. Because you stand united in him and I stand united in him, we are united together. United for what? To do what Paul and Apollos and Peter do: to share the precious, life-saving Word of God. **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON UNITY.** *See Christ crucified for you. See Christ crucified for others.*