

“Whose Side Are You On?”
I Corinthians 1:10-18; Psalm 27:1-6

When I was twelve years old, my parents taught me a very important lesson. They would not remember or even realize they passed on this knowledge, mainly because it was a lesson taught not by words, but by actions, or in this case, a lack of action.

What I recall most vividly about this period was confirmation class, two hours every Saturday morning with the most boring man on God’s green earth. I’m sure he was a good person, well intended, maybe he even loved us. But all I remember is that I was twelve and he must have been at least 150. He rambled all over the place. Most of the time I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. Thankfully, we had a book. Today, I cannot even picture the man in my mind. I remember all of our other ministers, so maybe I repressed his image. But I vividly recall that confirmation class almost killed me.

And I wasn’t alone. Worship services contained the same atmosphere. The minister constantly forgot people’s names, announcements, and hymn numbers. Every Sunday was an adventure. The sermons were devices of torture, the services dragged on and on.

As Methodists, our pastors were sent to us. And it only took a few Sundays before the truth became evident and widely known: this pastor had been assigned to us to retire. With a few years before retirement, we were the ones to shoulder the burden. It was also quickly discerned that this man was struggling mentally. Before anyone knew the word “Alzheimer’s,” we whispered about senility, or just old age. Whatever it was, his lack of memory made a mess of the worship services and everything else.

And here’s the lesson my parents taught me, branded into my mind to this very day. In the midst of this mess, they did nothing. They didn’t get disgruntled parishioners together. They didn’t whine that their son wasn’t getting his due because confirmation class was so bad. They didn’t let me opt out of confirmation class. They didn’t go see the bishop. They didn’t complain in front of their children or friends about the man’s faults. Our family didn’t leave the church. Rather, they loved this man and tried to help him. They worked with him and for him until the day he retired. And of all the Sunday School lessons and sermons and youth retreats in which I participated over the years, the most powerful proclamation of the gospel came from words unspoken when my church took in and loved a struggling pastor. And I learned the church is not about the pastor, or what I want, or everything being just right, but about the proclamation of the gospel and the love it generates between us.

“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.”

The Apostle Paul was residing in Ephesus, working in the church. When he left Corinth, the church he founded there was prospering. He had been followed by Apollos, and possibly Peter, each of whom spent a period of time being a pastor to that community of faith. But then he receives word through Chloe's people, likely her slaves on business for her in Ephesus, that there is dissension in the Corinthian Church. Members are claiming to be followers of Apollos, or Peter, or Paul, or Christ, likely claiming the latter made them right and all the others wrong. In this letter, Paul writes to remind the Corinthians that the Church is not based on differing personalities or procedures, but on Christ. In verse thirteen he says: "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" And he uses verse ten as a synopsis of his theme: "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."

Let's look at this admonition that the Church be united in the same mind and same purpose. What does it mean to be united in the same mind?

It is interesting that the problem in Corinth was not over deep theological themes. They were not divided over the divinity of Christ, or the relevancy of baptism, or any of the great doctrinal issues confronting the Church in this period. Rather, verse eleven notes: "...there are quarrels among you..." Now, the Greek word translated as "quarrels" does not mean divisions, but rather quarrelsomeness. The Corinthians were whining and bickering between one another. Often this word designates people believing their view is right and detesting all other opinions. And as a method for doing this, they were using the names of past preachers and teachers. "I belong to Apollos. I belong to Peter. I belong to Paul." Paul replies, "None of us who are preachers or teachers are essential, or even have anything to do with the Gospel. Christ alone is the center, core, and reason for our belief."

Paul strongly deemphasized the cult of personality. The only person to whom we show allegiance is Christ. We all belong to Christ. He is the source of our wisdom and understanding. Our loyalty is not to people, or buildings, or programs, but to Jesus. Paul wanted the Corinthians to see and understand what was important. In Corinth, the disagreements were not about ideas, but personalities.

Now, this principle is not only important in the Church, but also our personal lives. If you think back over disputes at home or work, how often were they about issues? They may have been couched in terms of an idea, but usually at their heart they concern personalities — personal slights, people with whom we do not mesh, individuals who rub us the wrong way. The Christian lets these go. The Christian focuses on Jesus, seeks to have the mind of Christ, remembers we all belong to Christ. To have the same mind is to keep our eyes on the big picture, to not get bogged down by personal differences, to remember that we are the Body of Jesus Christ here on earth.

One night, about 11:30 p.m., an older African-American woman was standing on the side of an Alabama highway trying to endure a lashing rain storm. Her car had broken down and she desperately needed a ride. Soaking wet, she decided to flag down the next car. A young white man stopped to help her — generally unheard of in those conflict-filled 1960's. The man took her to safety, helped her get assistance and put her into a taxi cab. She seemed to be in a big hurry! She wrote down his address, thanked him and drove away.

Seven days went by and a knock came on the man's door. To his surprise, a giant combination console color TV and stereo record player were delivered to his home. A special note was attached. The note read: "Dear Mr. James: Thank you so much for assisting me on the highway the other night. The rain drenched not only my clothes but my spirits. Then you came along. Because of you, I was able to make it to my dying husband's bedside just before he passed away. God bless you for helping me and unselfishly serving others. Sincerely, Mrs. Nat King Cole."

There are many things in life that will attempt to divide us — race, fear, theology, conflicting personalities, what color to paint a Sunday School room. Paul reminds us that all these are superseded by the faith and love we share in Jesus Christ.

"I appeal to you...that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

If we have the same mind, a desire to ignore personal differences in seeking to be like Christ, then we can obtain the same purpose. For Paul, the purpose of the Church's existence is to proclaim the cross of Christ. When we are divided, we lose our ability to influence others toward the Gospel. Think of any church you have known rent by dissension, were they able to speak of Christ's love to you? Think of any person you know in any church, who speaks for contention, or is quarrelsome, did you see him or her as an ambassador for Christ? Divisions among us jeopardize our ability to proclaim the love and unity of the faith. Christian people do not seek unity and fellowship just because it is a nice thing to do. Rather, disunity harms the Church's evangelism. When we are quarrelsome, it proclaims that Christ is not strong enough to unify us.

Sadly, through the centuries, the Church has often been a locus for cruelty, ugliness, and a lack of forgiveness. In the name of holiness or correct theology or upholding the word of God, we have treated one another mercilessly. Each time we react in this way, we tell the world Christ's love is not strong enough to lift us above such things. And not only as a Church, but personally, we must ask ourselves if our actions and attitudes proclaim to others the love of Jesus Christ. When people look for Jesus, they first see His Church, you and me.

In a children's Sunday school class the teacher was talking about the love of God and asked the children, "Do you love God?" and "Why do you love God?"

They all said yes to the first, but were silent to the second question until one little boy answered proudly, “I think it runs in my family.”

When people look at our church, at you and me, will they be able to see that the love of God runs in the Westminster family?

“Whose Side Are You On?”

In Corinth, they were choosing up sides. Paul reminded them that in this game, there is only one side, Jesus Christ. That declaration is as important and necessary today as it was almost 2000 years ago. Our loyalty resides in only one place. And if we can keep our focus on Christ, it will make all other minor irritations seem petty, small, and of little consequence.

This morning, let each of us dedicate ourselves to seeking the mind of Christ, committing ourselves to a unity of purpose in both our sacred and secular lives. For when we stand together as individuals and a church, we proclaim to the world, to Greenville, that the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ can heal every wound and solve every disagreement.

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