

We live in an era of extreme polarization. One side pitted against the other. We live in a divided country. 21st Century politics has been largely about divisions between red states and blue states. Hyper-partisanship reigns. Working with opponents across the aisle seems to be a thing of the past.

We live in the midst of the so-called culture wars between the left and the right. We are encouraged to choose up sides and to draw lines in the sand. Getting things done together is now less important than making sure that your side wins and the other side loses.

This spirit of division extends to our churches. At the turn of the century, the Episcopal Church experienced great tension and division. Now, the United Methodists are having a difficult season of division.

I don't know about you, but all of these conflicts and strains makes me long for a simpler time. A time without division. A time of peace and concord.

It's easy to get nostalgic. It's easy to think, "If only I lived in the early days of the church. The time right after Jesus' ministry. A time when the Holy Spirit was incredibly active. A time when there was common purpose and a lack of strife. A pure, uncorrupted time."

Of course, such wishful thinking doesn't match up with reality. We have to look no further than the first chapter of First Corinthians.

Last week and this week, the lectionary has had back-to-back Epistle readings from First Corinthians chapter 1.

However, last week we at St. Paul's celebrated the feast of our Patron Saint, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle. So, we didn't hear the first part of chapter 1. So, I'll cover some of what we didn't read last week and then focus on what we heard today.

Paul is writing to the Corinthian church within the first generation of the history of the church, about 25 years after the time of Jesus. And yet, even within living memory of Jesus' ministry, Paul is having to deal with dangerous divisions within the church. The verses assigned for the epistle lesson last week began,

"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."¹

That word "divisions" is not a word that means mild disagreements. It's not a word that means differences of opinion. Instead, it's a word that means rips or tears in fabric. It means forces that are threatening to tear everything apart. Total meltdown. Total disintegration. Paul's words indicate that the Corinthian church had split into at least 4 different factions: so-called followers of Paul, of Apollos, of Peter, and of Christ.² Those competing factions were threatening to tear the church apart.

¹ 1Cor 1:10

² 1Cor 1:12

In response to such divisions, Paul urges unity: "be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

Be united. Literally, be "knit together." The word was often used medically to talk about setting bones, so they grow back together. The word is also used in the gospels, when the disciples are said to be "mending their nets." After all, fishermen aren't going to catch much in nets which are ripped apart. In the same way, the Corinthian church is not going to be effective in its mission if it's being torn apart by factionalism.

So, Paul is telling them, be knit together in the same mind and purpose. Now, this isn't a matter of being in agreement over every issue. This is not a matter of everyone needing to think identically. Because Paul is not talking about "your mind" or "your purpose."

Instead, he's talking about the mind of Christ. He's talking about God's purpose.

Paul is telling them to focus on God's way of doing things, not your human way of doing things. Be united by focusing on Christ, and trying to think like Christ. Make God's way, make the mind of Christ your common ground. Stand together there on that common ground. Don't let lesser issues divide you or tear you apart. Be knit together on the common ground of God's way of doing thing.

It's a strong message Paul is giving. It's not about human divisions. It's about being united in following Jesus Christ.

Of course, we have factions and labels that we throw around, in our society, and in the Christian church. Democrat. Republican. Liberal. Conservative. Revisionist. Orthodox. Spineless left-winger. Heartless right-winger. And on, and on, and on it goes.

But Paul is telling us, don't get caught up in this polarization, this factionalization. The world may do it. But (and this is such an important but)... The world may do it, BUT our values as Christians are supposed to be different from the world's values.

In fact, at the end of last week's assigned Epistle reading, Paul holds up that value system in terms of "The message of the cross." The cross is foolish in the world's eyes. But it is the power of God for those who are being saved.³

Paul tells us that God has a different way of operating. In fact, Paul expands that argument in the next verses, the verses that are our Epistle reading this week.

It's a very tight argument. I won't try go through it point for point. But the thrust is so important.

The overall thesis is this: God has chosen to emphasize values that are opposite of the way the world does things. And in doing so, God makes worldly wisdom appear foolish.

³ 1Cor 1:18

Think about it. How do you get things done in the world? Power. Influence. Strength.

How does God accomplish his purpose? By flexing his muscles? By using his power? By sending down lightning bolts from heaven. By sending an army of angels to enforce his will?

No. God works through the cross. God's greatest victory is won by one lone man who allows himself to die in the face of the world's power. One lone, innocent man who is crucified, taking upon himself the sin of the world.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the true display of God's power and God's wisdom.

God chose the cross to show us that a value system different from the world's value system brings true freedom.

Paul says, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."⁴

Many of you have seen the movies or read the books of *The Lord of the Rings*. The plot line is no accident. The author, J.R.R. Tolkien was a devout Christian, and was trying to make a strong point. And he does it through his choice in main characters: the hobbits. The hobbits are short in stature, and unassuming. They like to live quiet lives away from the action.

And yet, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the ultimate victory does not come through the clash of mighty armies, though armies do clash. Nor does the victory come through the battles of mighty wizards, though wizards do battle. Instead, it is the actions of small, humble hobbits who make all the difference. It is the hobbits who destroy the ring and defeat the forces of evil.

It's a theme right out of 1Corinthians: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

That's a very different set of standards. Yet God calls us to operate by that very different set of values.

These are challenging times. Our culture would tell us, circle the wagons. Choose sides. Draw lines in the sand. Fight for your faction.

In First Corinthians, Paul reminds us that God works very differently. God's power is in the cross. God's power is manifested very differently from earthly power.

So, we are called to live in a different way than the rest of the world. We are called to live in the power of the cross. After all, if we can't begin to do that in the church, then what hope is there for the rest of the world?

⁴ 1Cor 1:27

Does that mean we should we be simplistic and say, "Can't we all just get along?" No. It's much tougher than that.

We can't just water down our differences. We can't just become lukewarm and wishy-washy and meet in the middle on every issue. That's too simplistic.

Meeting in the middle can work for relatively minor differences. The tough part is living with the tension of disagreements over major differences.

Paul would suggest to us that we have to find a way to live with our differences. We need to find a way to move forward together, in spite of our differences. We have to claim the cross of Christ together, and trust God to help us move forward, in spite of our differences.

Case in point is the stole I'm wearing today. In seminary I was the most conservative member in my class. Debra was the most liberal. I still call Debra my dear friend and nemesis. She still calls me Bubba.

Debra and I would often find ourselves on different sides of theological debates and discussions. And our disagreements could be sharp. But we're also good friends.

And because I would usually begin my argumentation based on scripture, Debra gave me this stole as an ordination gift. It quotes scripture, Micah 6:8 which happened to be from our Old Testament lesson today. It's one of the favorite scriptures of those who emphasize social justice:

"Act justly. Love tenderly. Walk humbly with your God."

This stole is a tangible reminder from Debra to me that we're friends in spite of our differences. It's a reminder that we're both priests together in the same church reading the same Bible and following the same Lord, even when we come at things from different perspectives.

As Episcopalians, we strive to be a big tent church, a church with lots of room for lots of differing opinions. That means we will undoubtedly have disagreements and differing views at times.

Our diversity can be a tremendous strength, as long as we're careful not to let it tear us apart. Differences are healthy, unless we let them rip and tear in the fabric of our church. Thus, we have to remember our larger purpose.

We have to claim the cross of Christ together, to seek the mind of Christ together.

May God help us be focused, together, on his purposes for us.