

For those who have been keeping up and keeping track, we are continuing to travel with the Apostle Paul in our Scripture lessons this morning. Last Sunday, in Acts 17, Paul was in Thessalonica, proclaiming Christ as the Messiah and starting a fledgling congregation in *that* Hellenistic city in the Roman province of Macedonia. Just a chapter later within the book of Acts this morning, we learn that Paul has in the meantime been to Athens, in Greece, and is now in Corinth, also in Greece. Here, he will again start a congregation, drawn from both Jewish and Greek community members. We get a rather endearing insight into Paul's personal life in these 4 verses from Acts 18, about how he occupied his time beyond proclamation and where he stayed as he traveled from place to place. It seems he came upon an Italian Jewish couple in Corinth, and just hearing the phrase, "an Italian Jewish couple" brings to my mind two folks who could be running a deli in NYC in the present day, but not so. This couple, who also helpfully featured rhyming names--Priscillia and Aquilla—had lived in Italy, but were forced out of that nation when the Emperor of Rome forbid Jews to live there anymore. They took refuge in Corinth, became a part of the Jewish community there that centered around a local synagogue, and practiced their trade of tentmaking. Paul goes to that synagogue in Corinth to state his case for Christ, meets up with the Italian couple, discovers that they practice the trade he also practices—tent-making-- and ends up staying with them while he is in Corinth. This seems to reveal a colorful and human side to Paul and his travels. But, it's also another reminder of the eclectic and multicultural nature of the earliest Christian churches, a characteristic I think we often easily overlook from 2000 years later and across the world. It's somehow easy to envision the early church as being very homogenous and ideally harmonious, and neither was true. Including Gentiles and Jews, a variety of nationalities, as well as both men and women, the early church was diverse. It was also, just like the present church, contentious. If we imagine everyone back then getting along just swell, we're mistaken. There were heated conflicts from the very start. One way we know this is through the letters of Paul. Along with our lesson from Acts, we have a section of Paul's first letter to the congregation he founds in Corinth while *staying* with Priscilla and Aquilla. After planting this new congregation there, Paul moves on to other places. But he hears word of conflicts brewing back in Corinth and

so writes a letter to be read to the congregation in which he addresses these conflicts. That congregation has barely begun, and *already* there is division and polarization, and he's disappointed. Whereas we, if we became aware of a concerning situation elsewhere, might pick up a phone to make a call, or even more likely, send a text or email, Paul does not have those options. Letter writing is the only form of long-distance communication possible, and as it happens, Paul is a prodigious and eloquent letter writer. Which is fortunate for us, as his letters make up the bulk of our New Testament.

In the letter we are reading this morning, Paul begins rather poignantly, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of Jesus, 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." As he continues to write, we realize that this congregation was experiencing division in the way they related to their leaders---some saw themselves as *belonging* to Paul, others to Cephas, and others to Apollos, another Christian leader. Part of this confusion appeared to be about which leader might have baptized them into the Christian community. Paul, Apollos, and Cephas all represented different theological strains within the early faith, and all had performed baptisms. Paul is pointing out to these Corinthians that they don't *belong* to any of these leaders, but rather to God through Christ. The individual who did the baptizing is beside the point. We have the joy of witnessing a Holy Baptism this morning, as we did two Sundays ago also. *I* will perform the rite of Holy Baptism for Earl, but he certainly isn't being baptized in my name or into my particular set of beliefs or eccentricities (thank God for that, right?); like all the baptized, he will be baptized *into Christ*. Paul wants to be *very* clear on this; our unity centers on Christ on the cross and nothing else. He is grieved by the divisiveness that has arisen and appeals to these fledgling Christians to see their larger unity, a unity that will allow them to serve God and their neighbor.

So, from the very beginning, there were threats to the unity of those who followed after Jesus. There still are, of course. You might argue that we as Church are simply a reflection and microcosm of a divided, fractured *nation and world*, and that is certainly true. The polarization of our present national political realm is beyond deplorable. There are many things to dislike about our present political climate, but for me, one of the most disagreeable is that regardless of what the issue is, it seems to be a foregone conclusion that our leaders

will inevitably divide over the issue along partisan, party lines. One might wonder, is there no such thing as individual conscience anymore? Are objective standards of justice and fairness completely overwhelmed by red and blue allegiances? The upcoming election in November fills me with dread as it's not hard to imagine what is likely to come: overblown rhetoric, demonizing one's opponent, and the intentional appeal by both and all political parties to those qualities that are least admirable within our human nature: our fear, our rage, and our greed.

Allow me for a moment to take a bit of a sideroad here to consider the place of *our church* within these coming months. The last thing we would want to do is simply be a mirror and microcosm of the likely craziness to come, easy though it is to fall into such a trap. But Paul asks us specifically to find our *unity*, our unity in Christ and Christ's cross, *not* to mimic every angry division of our society. That means that while we may certainly hold differing opinions politically, that reality does not overwhelm our unity in Christ. So, away from the Church we may argue our point of view as vigorously as we like, but within the church we will refrain from doing so. Not only because our tax-exempt status is based on being politically non-partisan, but because that's how we exercise unity in Christ, in contrast to our polarized society. *Outside* of these walls, we may mimic these erring Corinthians and identify ourselves by saying, "I belong to the Democrats" or "I belong to the Republicans", or this or that candidate is my guy or gal, but *within these walls*, we will say, "*I belong to Christ*". We will gather at the communion rail, not as members of a political party or cause, but as brothers and sisters in Christ, all looking to receive grace, forgiveness, healing, and fresh starts. It's good to be clear on that in advance of all that will be coming our way. It's not that our faith shaped values shouldn't influence our political viewpoints; they should. But it's self-evident that we can share a faith and *still* come to different political viewpoints, and that's legitimate. Paul appeals for unity, *not* uniformity. Let's think about that crucial difference for a moment. Uniformity might imply identical actions and viewpoints, from how we vote to what we eat to who we love and so on. That's *uniformity*. We are not asked within Scripture to seek *uniformity*, but rather *unity*---a common bond in the love of Christ that supersedes those other differences. A unity based on the message of the cross. He ends this lesson by writing, "Christ sent me to proclaim the gospel, and not with

eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.” The cross of Christ is symbolic of God’s own humble willingness to take on human flesh, of God’s own sacrificial willingness to suffer for the sake of love; that cross speaks of the reality of forgiveness, mercy, and second chances, without which, none of us can stand. This morning, I will dip my finger in the baptismal water and trace the cross of Christ on the forehead of Earl Nelson; this happened for all of us at the time of our baptism. I will declare, “Earl, child of God, you have been *marked with the cross of Christ* and sealed by the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.” This is the most moving part of the baptismal service for me. Because that cross of Christ remains with us throughout our lives, and through our death into resurrected life. It is emblazoned on our foreheads at the time of our baptism. It is again traced on our foreheads in oil during services of healing or in ashes on Ash Wednesday or over our graves at the time of our death. That cross, that symbol of our unity, is “the power of God”, according to St. Paul. That cross is a radical symbol and Paul’s statement is a radical statement, but we might forget just how radical both are. Because we may not realize how the cross was viewed in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. and what the primary symbol of the early Christians actually *was*--because it *wasn't initially* the cross.

We know what the primary symbol of the Christian faith was for the first 300 years of the church from looking at art in the catacombs, where we find virtually no images of crosses, but rather of peacocks, doves, the Good Shepherd, and the most popular ancient Christian symbol: fish. The fish was the primary symbol of the earliest Christian church. There were several reasons for this: many of the early disciples were fisherman. Jesus multiplied loaves and fishes in his miracles. After the resurrection, Jesus shared a meal of charcoal grilled fish on the lake shore with his disciples. And, most significantly, the greek letters in the word for fish, *ichthys*, are an anagram for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. Which was like a little credal statement of Christian belief wrapped up in a symbol for these earliest church members. Maybe as people who also live on an inland seashore where fishing matters, we can understand that. I mean, *fish* are a symbol of life, water, movement. The *cross* is a symbol of *death*. Of execution. Present equivalents could be a noose or an electric chair---would we casually wear miniaturized versions of *those* on a chain around our neck? I doubt it. But,

that's exactly how the average 1<sup>st</sup> C. person would certainly have viewed the cross. So for Paul to hold up the cross in this way was a bold move.

Yet, from the 4<sup>th</sup> C. on to this day, the cross *has become* our primary Christian symbol. Precisely because, as Paul points out, what looks foolish and like a dead-end in the eyes of the world, is actually where the wisdom and redemptive power of God are on full display. A transformation that happens because of the profound love and self-sacrifice Christ displays in his death on the cross and the resurrection which follows.

It's so fortunate that this morning, as we think about our unity in Christ, we celebrate both of the sacraments of our church, which give concrete expression to that unity in Christ and the cross. When Earl is baptized, we are welcoming him into a diverse family of faith that relies on the grace of God to bind us together in love. Baptism exists not to *exclude* people from God's grace, as if we were Club Church and our baptismal certificate was our proof of belonging. Baptism is all about welcome and forgiveness. Just like Holy Communion, the other sacrament we celebrate this morning. No human distinctions or divisions matter when we gather at the Table of God where all are welcome and all are forgiven.

In honesty, we know that we fail to live out that unity in Christ and need second chances; certainly, our nation and world are tragically divided and contentious. But we are asked, as people of faith, to seek a higher road. To again quote St. Paul: "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 us, in the Church, that same mind is the mind of Christ on the cross, and that same purpose is glorifying God and serving our neighbor. Amen.