

Pastor Letter: Internal Conflict (1/22/23)

As I studied our epistle lesson for this week, I was reminded of my own family's internal conflict and just how easy it is to utter hurtful words in anger, erect dividing walls, establish enemy camps, and demonstrate hate instead of love.

My paternal grandfather married and had two children, a boy and a girl. When his first wife died, he remarried. This marriage produced three boys. These children grew up in a loving family setting in rural Clarion County. These offspring married and began to raise their own children.

Early in my childhood, the boy and girl from my grandfather's first marriage moved to western Pennsylvania to take advantage of the booming steel industry in Youngstown, Ohio and raise their respective families in that area. The three boys from my grandfather's second marriage remained in Clarion County and raised their families in that area. When I was 9 years old my family moved to Atlanta, Georgia for 7 years.

At the death of my grandmother, our family moved back to Pennsylvania to help care for my grandfather. At first, family life appeared to resemble those early times before my grandmother's death. We had Sunday afternoon picnics at my grandfather's farm, family hunting escapades during Thanksgiving holidays, fall butchering days, and birthday celebrations. As I grew older, I became aware of the growing tensions within the various family groups. The family unity appeared to die with my grandmother.

This separation escalated when my grandfather had 3 different hip surgeries at Hamot hospital in Erie, PA. It was becoming vividly apparent that my grandfather could no longer live alone because he had a heart attack on the operating table during his last hip surgery. This is when the family disintegrated into two separate camps.

During a family meeting to determine my grandfather's care, one of my aunts made a hurtful statement that resulted in the fractionation of our family. My grandfather's five children formed two opposing sides that never reconciled their differences. Sad to say these irreconcilable differences were over money, land, inheritances, and power.

By this time I was commuting to college, and would stop in to check on my grandfather who was living in his own home. My aunt and uncle moved into his house, installed an indoor bathroom and a gas furnace, and attempted to provide care for him. The problem was they worked shiftwork and was able to provide only limited care for my ailing grandfather. He was alone 12-16 hours a day.

Since I refused to take part in these petty family squabbles, my grandfather used me as a way of venting his pain, frustration, anger, and grief. Still mourning for his beloved wife and now he was grieving over the death of his family. One afternoon my forlorn grandfather made the statement, "I wish I had died on that operating table during my heart attack." What does an 18-year-old do with a statement like this? I lovingly listened to his grief-stricken comments and never told the rest of his family how he felt. Not long after this conversation, my grandfather suffered a debilitating stroke and a few weeks after that he got his wish with a fatal heart attack. The man died with a broken heart. Even during and after the funeral, the family refused to make amends.

The memory of this family dispute was initiated by our New Testament epistle lesson from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. Paul has heard about the separating petty disputes that have arisen in their community of faith, "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. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters," (1 Cor. 1:10-11).

The church at this time did not consist of one large community of faith that met together in one large church building but was organized by small house churches that met in the homes of rich benefactors. It was easy to form different theological opinions that was propagated by separate groups which had strong charismatic leadership. Growing in isolation, these individual groups could stray from Paul's initial orthodox Christian teachings and adopt heretical religious doctrines.

Paul is writing this letter in order to correct the fallacy of their misguided individual doctrines. He writes, "What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name," (vv. 12-15).

Paul is suggesting that the various factions should keep their focus on Jesus Christ and his teachings and not on the respective charismatic leadership. Their unity is found in the Lord and not found in the misguided dogmas of the various house churches.

If we look around our community today, we see the fractionation of the United Methodist Church and how the various congregations are being divided by the doctrines established by various camps within the denomination. Not long ago the Episcopal and Presbyterian Denominations suffered from the same doctrinal issues and the separation of congregations because of the similar Biblical issues.

We should all take stock in the words of the apostle Paul for our personal and corporate stances on these divisive issues, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God," (vv. 17-18).

The evil one's mission is to steal, kill, and destroy within this earthly world, our individual families, and especially our respective churches. Listening to the evil one's influence, leads to the highlighting of our own personal prideful opinions instead of focusing on the Living Word of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

One sure way of resisting the evil one and avoiding internal conflicts is to put on the armor of God each day in prayer and daily incorporate my three Christian directives for your personal journey of faith, "Keep your nose in the Bible, your knees on the floor and your eyes on the Lord."

Blessing and Peace in Christ,

Pastor Larry