

Michael J. Mathey
Epiphany IV
February 1, 2026
Text: I Corinthians 1:18 – 31
Title: Called Out of Conflict

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. If there's one thing that we humans are good at, it's finding reasons to engage in conflict with one another. It can get started by something as simple as one person looking at someone else the wrong way. Or it can begin because that person who was your friend didn't say anything to you when you waved to them or walked by you and didn't acknowledge you. The way that the conflict unfolds can be fairly minor, like not speaking to one another for a while, or it can escalate to the point where the two parties find themselves throwing punches. Sometimes it involves just two people, and sometimes it can be a conflict between large groups of people, like we've seen in Minnesota over the past several weeks. And, here's something that might shock you, sometimes the conflict can happen among God's people! Incredible, right? People in a church experiencing conflict with one another! Who has ever heard of such a thing!

But of course, it does happen. The church is full of sinners, and as sinners we can expect the same things to happen within the church that happen outside of it. More's the pity. But that is the truth of it, and it's important to remember as we're reading through today's Epistle lesson from I Corinthians that Paul is addressing a congregation that is experiencing conflict of its own. In last week's reading, the apostle states it plainly in verse 11 that he has had reports "...that there is quarreling among you." One of the main reasons that Paul is writing this particular epistle is to address the divisive spirit of factionalism that has taken root in the Corinthian congregation. He calls out the factions clearly in last week's reading, and in this week's section he takes aim at the obvious cause of the quarreling that has taken hold of them, sinful pride.

Now today's reading ends with Paul talking about boasting, in fact he seems to encourage it from his readers, and doesn't boasting come from pride? Isn't someone who boasts about what they are doing displaying pride in themselves? Not necessarily. Remember, Paul is writing to people almost 2000 years ago, and it's important to consider the way that boasting was viewed back then before we think about what boasting is to us today. It seems that people from more ancient times used the term *boasting* differently than we do. While most people today have probably been discouraged from boasting, Roman society approached this differently. The ancient writing of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* is a blatant display of a Roman politician's fondness for boasting. It's a lesson that today's politicians have learned from all too well it seems, especially our current presidential administration!

Now there's no doubt that Paul's use of boasting language sounds very strange to us since he seems to encourage it, but for the Romans of his day boasting was a little like listing out your accomplishments on a résumé or a job application. Boasting without cause was frowned upon in that day to be sure, but honestly boasting about what you have actually done was not only socially acceptable, it was encouraged. It allowed others to know what you had done and what you could do in a day before journalists were around to report it to others and there was no social media to spread it far and wide.

On the other hand, pride is just being dishonest with ourselves. History tells us that Martin Luther's last written words were found on a scrap of paper on the table in the room below the bedroom where he died. On that little piece of paper he wrote four final words, "We are all beggars!" Luther seemed to have learned his lesson when it came to pride, and for a man who accomplished everything that the great Reformer did it must have been a difficult lesson to learn. Imagine how proud he could have become!

Pride often takes the form of a false humility like the redeemed and forgiven man who constantly insists that he's a worm to everyone who will listen. He may in fact be falling victim to another form of pride. To insist on one's own miserable unworthiness after you've been forgiven with absolution is not true piety, but it's a prideful means of denying what the pastor and the Lord Jesus have said about what God has done. Luther instructed us to rise from confessing our sins, confident and joyful in what Christ has done in us, eagerly expecting him to continue that good and sanctifying work (1 Cor 1:28–31) in our lives. He encouraged us to avoid pride because in the end there is nothing that we do on our own. We are all beggars! And when we lose sight of that fact, that is when pride begins to rear its ugly head, and when pride is influencing people, conflict is almost a certainty.

And that brings us back to today's sermon text in the first chapter of I Corinthians, and what God wants to tell us through it. He wants us to see that Christ has called us out of conflict to be what we could never be on our own. Conflict arises when we think that we are something on our own apart from Christ. It's certainly nothing new, conflict is as old as sinful human pride, they go hand in hand. It was his wounded pride that persuaded Cain to kill his brother Abel. In last week's epistle reading, we saw that the Corinthian congregation was boasting in pride about which leader and teacher was the best. The apostle wrote to them, "...each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.'" Paul, Apollos, and Cephas had all worked among the Corinthians to spread and teach the Gospel, and so the people were becoming divided about which man was the greatest to be a follower of, and they even ended up elevating each one over and above Christ!

And not only were they claiming that Paul or Apollos or Cephas was something great on his own apart from Christ, each person was using his or her mentor to claim that they were more

important than a fellow member of the congregation. The ones who said that they followed Paul were believing that they were better than the ones who followed Apollos or Cephas, and the followers of Apollos or Cephas were believing the same thing about their own perceived place in the fellowship. They were missing the entire point of what each man had taught them, that they all had the same Christ, and that they were all equal in importance because of it. By thinking that “I’m more important than you because of who I claim as my teacher,” each person was arguing that “I’m something on my own apart from Christ.” In their pride, they had no idea that they were claiming to be something more than they really were in Christ.

Our conflicts today aren’t anything different. Lurking in the deep, dark, basement of every argument and fight is a stubborn human pride that wants to put me, myself and I first and foremost in everything. It’s a stubborn human pride that wants to get special attention, and to have special love and blessings come to you and you alone. It’s that stubborn human pride that wants to be right in everything!

But conflict withers when we can finally admit that on our own, we are really nothing. We have nothing to be proud of when we know who we really are. Let’s face it, this isn’t the greatest congregation around, and there is really no such thing as a “great congregation.” I am not the world’s greatest pastor or dad or husband, and you are not the world’s greatest parishioners because we are all sinners. God shoots us down pretty hard in verses 19 – 20 of our text, “For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” We shouldn’t have to think very hard about the number of times that our own wisdom, discernment, and clever arguments have been proven to be flat out wrong.

But that realization frees us in the end from the need to judge, to compare, to measure up. I can own my failures, and not be surprised at the failures of anyone else. I've been in the ditch, and so have you. I know that I am nothing on my own, and neither are you. And this can't be a surprise to us. We know that Jesus was attacked because He called sinners and nothings to be with Him, and He hasn't changed. Jesus is still calling sinners and nothings. He is calling you. "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Christ calls us who were nothing, and He transforms us by the power of His cross. It is the cross of Christ that makes us what we could never be on our own. The cross makes us realize how foolish we are as we see how brilliant God's plan is. We could never have thought up a rescue that meant that the very God we offend would willingly take our punishment on Himself. We could never know how weak we are until we see Christ hanging helpless on a cross, taking all of the sins of the world onto Himself, giving up His very life yet remaining powerful enough to save the whole world.

That cross makes us something. It transforms us with the gifts that flow from it. Verse 30 reads, "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption." We are given real wisdom to see the cross as salvation, and to see that our sins are the ones that He died for. We know that it is His righteousness given to us in Baptism that allows us to endure His judgment. We know that we are made holy in Baptism, and that His Redemption has freed us from slavery to sin and empowered us to be God's children right now.

At the heart of all of our conflicts lies a terrible lie, which Satan would have us believe. He wants to feed that ravenous pride within all of us that sees us as the center of our universe. Christ smashed into Paul's little universe and took that place on the road to Damascus. Paul was smashing the little universes of the Corinthians long ago with the reality of Christ, and Christ is still doing the same thing to us today. Jesus has called foolish, sinful, and stubbornly proud people like us. But having drowned us all in Baptism, He has raised us up new to live in His wisdom, His righteousness, His holiness, and in His redemption! Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.