

**“Cultivating a Common Life”<sup>1</sup>**

**1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

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**3rd Sunday after Epiphany**

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The Corinthians were divided over who is the better Christian, who gets the better seats at the table, who is the most righteous or the most authentic Christian?

Is it people who have had the most ecstatic charismatic experiences, or those who have evidenced the most straightlaced moral piety?

Is it those who have their doctrinal i's dotted and t's crossed, or those observing the healthiest diets, the purest sexual practice? Some insisted on total freedom in Christ, eating foods sacrificed to idols and having sex with prostitutes just to prove their point - total freedom in Christ.

Others insisted on specific moral norms as prerequisites for faith in Christ.

Still others argued that the evidence of their particular spiritual gifts made it clear they were closer to God. Corinth was a diverse congregation located in a diverse port city. And like a lot of communities made up of people from different backgrounds, the Corinthians' diversity threatened to pull them apart at the seams.

Fearing a schism or perhaps hoping for a righteous one, a small group of Corinthians, loyal to Paul write to the Apostle to get him on their side and argue their position. Paul had founded this mostly Gentile congregation in the year 51 or 52. We know this with some precision based on his own writing but also on the dates of the rulers that he gives us.

He stayed there for about 18 months, long enough to develop some significant relationships. Yet appealing to Paul as an outside source, surely set off even more division. One scholar imagines at least one Corinthian saying, “Personally, I think when ministers leave they should stay gone, period, and not keep writing back.”<sup>2</sup> Another imagines those believing their own teaching superior to Paul's saying, “Since we are so gifted, who is fit to teach us? Paul???”<sup>3</sup>

These differing groups rallied around specific people - some claiming Paul, others rallying around a different apostle named Apollos, others around Cephas, and

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was influenced heavily by papers delivered by Rev. Jarrett McGlaughlin (2010) and Rev. Joe Clifford (2015), both of the Well preaching group.

<sup>2</sup> Craddock. “Preaching to Corinthians,” *Interpretation*, April 1990. (Richmond: Union Theological Seminary), 1990, p. 161, from by Jarrett McGlaughlin.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Great Courses: The Apostle Paul* (Lecture 5 – 1 Corinthians): Chantilly: The Teaching Company, 2001, referenced by Jarrett McGlaughlin.

still others claiming, pompously, a direct line to Christ. It would be sort of like a group within our congregation calling itself “the true followers of Christ.” No arrogance there!

Apparently things had deteriorated to such a point that church members were taking each other into pagan courts to settle moral disputes that they could not settle amongst themselves. And so with nearly every source of authority being called into question the church begins to unravel over what seems like a relatively basic question that the church has always had trouble answering - who belongs?<sup>4</sup> And who gets to determine who belongs?

In some ways we’ve been fighting over this basic question ever since. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians - do they belong? Transgender Christians - do they belong? Presbyterians have often fought over these issues over belonging in terms of ordination and leadership.

Women - do they belong in our leadership? Before that it was divorced Christians - are they righteous enough to belong? We’ve fought it over what Christians believe about evolution, the virgin birth, the nature of Scripture itself. Who gets to belong? In Nazi Germany it was Christians with Jewish ethnic heritage - will the church defend their belonging? Colonizers argued over non-western people - do they belong? The early church over Jews and Gentiles. We’re still fighting over it today in our ecumenical battles over infant baptism vs. believer’s baptism, the nature of the Eucharist, what counts as Sacrament. Underneath all those questions is the basic question, who gets to belong?

We Christians have argued these sorts of questions from the inside as if people are clamoring from the outside to be a part of our fellowship. As if they are waiting outside for those of us with a little bit of authority, to open wide the gates of our admission and let them in. But a lot of people I meet outside of church circles seem to have decided definitively that they don’t belong in church. “I’m not a religious person,” I’ve been told. “Church people are too judgmental and moralistic,” others have said. “I wouldn’t fit into your kind of high achiever environment,” another told me. “I don’t have the right clothes for your sort of church,” yet another person shared one time. This question of belonging is so often at the root of our problems, which means it is probably at the root of our opportunity.

Diana Butler Bass, in her book *Christianity After Religion* observes that the nature of Christian belonging has changed in recent years or needs to change. Since the Protestant Reformation, she says, churches tended to form community *first* around belief - what we believe about baptism, communion, and doctrines of faith. This believing then led to certain *behaviors* - ways of being, acting, and living together that are evident in our liturgy, our ways of governing ourselves - part of our culture. The

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Clifford summarizes the debate around this important question.

combination of these particular beliefs and the behaviors they produced, led to a sense of *belonging*. We came to the church through belief, then behavior, which led to belonging. Belief -> behavior -> belonging. This contributed to continued division of the Protestant community, she observed, because Protestants have never been able to agree on everything that we believe.<sup>5</sup>

Diana Butler Bass suggests that emerging Christianity is reversing this sequence. We begin now with belonging, then move to behaving, and finally to believing.

People don't come to church first looking for particular doctrinal beliefs. They come to get a sense of whether or not they feel as though they belong or could belong. Churches that connect with people, i.e. churches that have a future, focus first on creating a sense of belonging, rather than making sure people get their doctrines right. The doctrinal/theological/belief work happens "on the way," as it were.

This is not a dumbing down of the Gospel, she argues. It is not the church forsaking its integrity for permissive, lowest common denominator faith. It is, rather, the flow of the gospel given to us by Jesus.

As Diana Butler Bass writes: "Jesus did not begin with questions of belief. Instead Jesus' public ministry started when he formed a community ...[The church] began when Jesus called out, 'Follow me'...Christianity did not begin with a confession. It began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service." Confession and doctrine and belief are not unimportant she argues. They are just not the first move of the Gospel. They are its maturity.<sup>6</sup>

And yet we in the Christian community struggle with belonging just as surely as they struggled in Corinth nearly 2000 years ago. Who gets to belong? The ethically pure? And who gets to decide what that is? The theologically correct? And whose measuring stick do we use to determine that? The spiritually pious? By whose authority will that be decided?

To those early Christians, Paul wrote, "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" Of course not. Christ has claimed us all, he reminds them - you belong to Christ, I belong to Christ. We belong to Christ together.

This makes the church the most non-exclusive group of people ever to exist, at least that's the intention made real by the power of the cross. The cross reveals God's self-giving love for the world, love that claims us all, regardless of our affinities - our

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<sup>5</sup> Diana Butler Bass. *Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, (HarperOne: New York, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 161-162.

political parties, the neighborhoods where we live, the things that we own, the groups to which we belong. It's all rendered irrelevant when it comes to our belonging with Christ.

It is not that these choices that we make are unimportant.

It is rather that the choice that leads to our belonging is not one that we get to make.

It is God's love that is definitive, not our own faithfulness.

In this way, God shames the wisdom of the world that defines us and them, Democrat and Republican, Christian and other people of faith, Conservative and Liberal, citizen or alien, gay, straight, bi or trans or queer, of every race and ethnicity. As my friend Joe Clifford once wrote, "Human power that defines who belongs and who does not belong is made weak by the love of God revealed in the cross, the love that says you belong, they belong, I belong."<sup>7</sup>

But how can I say that in a week when our country is divided as ever? When people who know much better than I are predicting that the impeachment trial of the President was already decided before anyone ever made an opening statement. It was decided by a cynical politics that has most assuredly said that some of us think others of us are out to lunch. And the fact that there are Christians on the other side of whichever side of this debate you are on seems to counteract Paul's whole argument. There is no way we can overcome our divisions in the church.

Maybe that's true. But that's where Paul's remark about the foolishness of the cross comes in. In his little known sermon, "The Logic of the Cross," H. Richard Niebuhr argues that the basic assumption of all of humanity is that we are perishing.<sup>8</sup>

It is the ultimate assumption that most of us live by.

Most of us organize our lives to avoid death as long as possible. It is the end.

But Niebuhr argues that the cross calls this lived assumption into question. The cross does not lead us to make the opposite assumption, he says, that self-crucifixion is the first law of life. That is a perversion of the faith. The cross is rather what can lead us to state with certainty that "God's preservation of ourselves is the first law of our history." Not that we are perishing, but that we are being saved. We belong to Christ. And those who belong to Christ can never be separated from the love of God.

And that, according to Niebuhr, makes all the difference. "When we believe that we are perishing, we see ourselves in a world surrounded by foes," he writes. Sound familiar? The cross "does not make our enemies into friends. . .but it does bring us at least dimly to the realization that foes and friends in our environment are all under the

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<sup>7</sup> Joe Clifford, paper to the WELL, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> "The Logic of the Cross," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, William Stacy Johnson, editor, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1996, pp. 200-207. I first heard about this sermon from a lecture William Stacy Johnson gave to NEXT Church in 2010. The text is also noted in Joe Clifford's WELL paper.

control of the final prevailing love of God.” The wisdom of the cross, he argues, does not cause us to throw up our hands saying that, well since we’re all under the prevailing love of God, God will handle it. “On the contrary, it asks us to deal with all these active needs from the point of view of [human beings] who believe that they are being saved instead of believing that they are perishing.”<sup>9</sup>

I know it’s hard to believe. That’s why Paul calls it foolishness. It’s more reasonable to believe that the powers of death are more real than the love of God. It’s more reasonable to believe that we’re irrevocably divided in our world, not on the cusp of any coming unity. It’s more reasonable to believe that we’re headed for disaster not saving. Who knows? Maybe Paul is wrong. And maybe death is more of a motivator. I look around at our city and that’s mostly what I see - hungry, homeless people on every corner shaming a country of immense wealth. Self-serving politics at virtually every level. Children whose education we pay lip service to, but who are failing under our watch. A world on fire. The urgency in our world has never been greater. I feel it deep in my heart.

And yet sometimes I wonder if what our world needs alongside our fervent calls to action is not more fear, but rather a community that is already so aware of that visceral power of God’s love among us that they can see it in the way we walk with each other. That visceral, holy love that, I believe, is what leads to the justice that we long to see in our trauma plagued city.

One of the Six Great Ends of the Church, the purposes for which the Church was founded, according to our Presbyterian tradition is “the Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” I confess when I first learned of this Great End of the Church in Seminary it sounded ridiculous. With all of our problems, all of our hypocrisy, all of our sin we can’t begin to show the Kingdom of Heaven to the world, I thought. Yet Paul reminds us that a central way to show the Kingdom of Heaven to the world isn’t through our righteousness, our best practice, our purity of thought or action. It is through the way that we welcome each other - “brothers and sisters,” “siblings” - a Greek word Paul uses 38 times in this book. It is the grace that we extend to each other, the only way to build a common life together.

We get a chance to practice that grace in the community that is the church. To practice it not as an abstract philosophy but as a belief that reaches deep, Niebuhr says, “into our emotional and unconscious life. . . [those parts of our humanity] that lie beyond the reach of our conceptual thinking.”<sup>10</sup> To trust against the logic of survival peddled by the world, in the logic of the cross, God’s self-giving love, that ensures that because of God’s love in Christ, you belong, I belong, we belong.

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<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr, 206.

<sup>10</sup>Niebuhr, 207.