

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany
Community in Christ: Reaching Out
1 Corinthians 1:10-18 and Matthew 4:12-23
1/26/14

There is one thing, more than anything else that brings me joy as a pastor.
That's when the church, you and I together, serve and reach out with the Good News of Jesus.

Like I was sharing with our boys and girls this morning
...when we hear Jesus calling us to follow him
...when we invite our friends and neighbors and relatives to "Come and See"
...to experience Jesus here... and receive the life He gives, nothing else brings me more joy.

That's one reason when the Wallin's asked me what Bible verse I'd like to have printed on our church calling cards, I chose 2nd Corinthians 5:17

"In Christ we are a new creation... the past is forgotten, behold everything is new!"

When we experience the love of Christ, our lives are changed:

- He takes our brokenness and brings us healing
- He forgives our sin and gives us a fresh start... each day
- and He even takes the things that would otherwise divide us and gives us a unity that we can only find in Him.

Just think about that for a moment.

Think about all the ways people in the church are different.

Where else in our society do you find people who come from such a diversity of ages, and life experiences?

We come from different parts of the country, different educational backgrounds and economic backgrounds, for goodness sakes, we even have Republicans and Democrats sitting together and breaking bread together.

The whole point of being a Christian is not to gather an exclusive group and then build a wall to keep others out. Being a follower of Christ is to be someone who reaches out like Jesus did.

Which is why the Apostle Paul was so upset with the Christians in Corinth.

Did you catch that in our 2nd Reading this morning?

In our 2nd Reading, Paul confronts the Christians in Corinth, because they are spending their time fighting against each other, instead of sharing the Gospel.

As I read that passage this week, I couldn't help but think of a few congregations I've known, congregations that went from being healthy, mission-minded congregations,

to places torn apart by conflict and disunity.

Sometimes congregational conflict is internal like it was in Corinth.
personalities clashing or people dividing their loyalty between staff members.

Sometime congregations fight over money or the budget.
Sometimes it's styles of worship or music.
Sometimes it's just a simple misunderstanding that gets blown out of proportion.

When a congregation is unified it grows.
When there is harmony in a congregation when there is a unity of spirit and purpose
people want to bring their friends.

It's like when you get invited to a good Christmas party. You look forward to it and you want to go. But if someone invites you to a party where you know people are going to be fighting
Who wants to go to a party like that?

When a congregation is divided by pettiness, or pride, the first thing that gets sidetracked is
mission and evangelism.

Maybe that's how Paul felt when he discovered that the Corinthians
had been quarreling and taking sides,
some saying, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos,"¹

As we hear in today's Second Reading,
Paul challenges them by saying, "Has Christ been divided?"²
Are we not all brothers and sisters in the one body of Christ?

One summer while we were living in Minnesota, Marin and I spent a week of continuing
education studying the book of Ephesians with Dr. Marva Dawn.

As she took us through Ephesians, her overall theme dealt with the question:
"How are we called to be the Church?"

In her teaching she gave us many examples from Scripture,
showing how the Church is called to stand out from the society around us.
The phrase she gave us to remember, is that the Church, is called to live as an "alternative
society."

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:12

² 1 Corinthians 1:13a

Now let's take that term "alternative society" and apply it to the situation of conflict in the church. And here I'm talking about conflict as something natural and expected. In any group of people, in any situation of stress or change, sooner or later, there will be conflict, it's inevitable.

That's one of the messages I give couples in pre-marital counseling. Conflict is a natural part of marriage. The question, is: how do you handle conflict?

In the Church, we could ask the same question. Do we handle conflict well? Are we more like the today's society or an alternative society?

Do we stubbornly hold to our own opinions, or do we listen to each and remain open to a new perspective?

Do we put others down when they don't agree with us or do we respect each others differences?

Do we try to win for our side, regardless of the division we create, or do we work together to resolve our differences?

If the Church looked just like society, what's attractive about that? "Why would anyone want to go to a church that fights like the Hatfields and McCoys?"

But what if, even in the midst of conflict, those who are not yet part of a church can look at us and say, "there's something remarkably different about those people." "See how they love each other."

That's the kind of unity that will win others for Christ.

Marva Dawn tells the story about the time she was in high school, and an epidemic of measles swept through her town, and her school. Marva ended up getting the measles like many others, but unlike the others, she didn't get over them as quickly.

She became weak and lost weight.

Even after the measles were gone, she had lost so much strength, that one day in gym class she broke a bone in her back doing sit-ups. Something was terribly wrong.

She became incredibly thirsty and no matter how much she ate, she couldn't gain weight. Her skin was dry, and pale.

By this time her doctors discovered something was dreadfully wrong. They put all the symptoms together and found that the measles virus had incapacitated her pancreas.

As soon as she was put on insulin injections, she began to regain her health.

This experience taught her how profoundly every part of the body belongs to all the others. If one function is not being performed, the rest of the body suffers.

At the end of telling this story, Marva Dawn said these words,

“How how often does the Church truly understand that we belong to one another!”³

Hear these words again, from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians,

“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”⁴

In this letter, Paul is calling us to remember that we are all part of the One Body, the body of Christ.

Being of the same mind and purpose, doesn’t come easily,
it doesn’t come naturally,
and it doesn’t come through human effort, alone.

Unity comes when we approach any disagreement or conflict,
not by asking that our will be done, but, rather, that God’s will be done.

Unity, pure and simple, is a gift from God.

So let us seek God’s will in all our decisions as a congregation,
and together let us bear the fruit of unity

...for the sake of evangelism

...for the sake of our witness to the community around us. Amen.

³ Marva Dawn *The Hilarity of Community* p. 84-85.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:10