



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 26, 2020

“Safeguarding the Unity”
(1 Corinthians 1:10)
Rev. David K. Groth

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me . . . that there is quarreling among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,....sharing
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen

Corinth was a huge, important city by ancient standards, a city of about 250,000 free persons plus as many as 400,000 slaves. It was situated at a major crossroads for travelers and traders. It had two deep harbors. It was a wealthy city, made that way by all the vigorous commerce and trade. It was also a culturally diverse place. There were lots of different languages being spoken in Corinth, and diverse foods being sold in the market places. That diversity is evidenced also in the number of temples in the city. There was a Jewish synagogue, also a shrine to the Egyptian goddess Isis, and at least 12 temples dedicated to the Greek gods and goddesses. One of them, dedicated to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, fostered the liveliest prostitution industry around. It's one of the reasons Corinth became widely known for its open and unbridled immorality.

And there was also a small, struggling Christian population. You can imagine how difficult it would be for a new mission church planted in that bustling city, a church lacking in resources of wealth and numbers. The city mostly ignored these Christians and regarded their faith as foolishness. Moreover, it was a church plagued with problems, the usual problems of false teaching and immorality. But there were also divisions . . . even to the point of litigation in the pagan courts. The people of that little church, instead of holding on to one another for dear life, were choosing up sides and fighting over this and that. Imagine! Outside, the world is perishing in unbelief; inside the Christians are attacking one another, disparaging the faith of one another, doubting each other's motives or sincerity. Paul is writing a letter to them to try to straighten things out.

Sometimes God's Word feels like it was written last week. The problems that confronted the church in Corinth are still very much with us: immaturity, immorality, divisions, lawsuits. The Corinthian Christians then, like today, were long on rights and entitlements and short on duty and responsibility.

"I appeal to you" Paul writes, "by the name of our Lord

Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same [purpose].” Paul knew God had a message for the world, a message that needed to get out, a word about the justice of God having been satisfied by Jesus’ death on a cross, a Word about God’s love and grace in Christ. This message is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And get this: its steward is none other than this little group of nit-pickers, the ones who were busy quarrelling with one another. Every chance they had they were choosing up sides. “I belong to Paul,” some said. “Well, I belong to Peter” others said, and in a brilliant stroke of one-upmanship, another says, “That may be, but I belong to Jesus alone.” Translate that: he doesn’t have to answer to Paul or Peter or anyone else for that matter.

How like the church today. Just when it takes two steps forward, division and conflict forces at least one step backwards. And you know, we’ve all been guilty of it at one time or another. I know I have, by what I’ve done or said. We lobby for this and undermine that and forget when to zip it for the good of the body of Christ.

Divisions between Christians are a sin and a scandal and a major reason why people are turned off by the church. Each of us knows that by now. Therefore, each of us should be very deliberate about making contributions toward peace and unity. This means when problems are still small, we work them out together. We don’t let things fester. We get them out on the table and discuss them reasonably and rationally.

At the same time we don’t discuss them with those who are outside the church. It’s not their business, and, more importantly, if all they see is a church in conflict, they’ll want nothing to do with Christ or his bride the church. They get enough strife at work and at home; they don’t need more of it.

If you believe that Christ died for the world, and if you believe that it is our highest calling as Christians to communicate this Gospel in clear and winsome ways . . . then this matter has got to be important to you. In fact, it’s critical.

“I appeal to you, brothers” Paul writes. That is, “I beg you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and purpose.” Is Paul suggesting the community is more important than what you or I hold dear as

individuals? That's exactly what he's saying. Is Paul imploring us, for the sake of the Gospel, to hold our tongues and restrain our wills and still be supportive of the mission of the church, even when we don't get our way? Yes! In the church, we are better, stronger, more effective when we are together.

Some of you are probably wondering what's going on? What got into his craw? Well, nothing, really. We are a church that is relatively united and at peace. Thank God for that! So now is precisely the time to talk about how to disagree as Christians while also safeguarding the unity. If we wait until there's a big quarrel, then it's too late.

I do see some potential for conflict in the months ahead. For example, we are entering into Phase 2 of the Sanctuary Project, and there will be some decisions to be made that could turn contentious if we let them. I'm thinking, for example, the flooring in here needs to be replaced. Do we replace with carpet or do we go with some kind of hard surface to improve acoustics? Another decision is whether to install retractable screens in the sanctuary. Some have already expressed to me how nice it would be to sing the hymns straight from the screen, for instance, for a mom holding a baby or an elderly person struggling with the small print of the hymnal or a visitor who isn't familiar with liturgy. Others don't care for how the screens would appear and how they might be used and prefer the weight and permanence of the hymnal.

If we want to, anyone of us can turn any number of things into a quarrel. In a fit of self-indulgence, any one of us could decide I've got to have it this way! "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united." That is, we are the custodians of the Gospel. We've been entrusted with the message of salvation. There are lots of people right here in Watertown who don't know their right hands from their left in terms of the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. If we start quarreling over small things, we'll become just like those nitpickers in Corinth. Outside, the world is perishing in its unbelief while inside our energy is consumed by the small and inconsequential. God forbid it! I'm far less concerned about carpet or screens or who gets to use this storage shelf or that wall space than I am about safeguarding the unity.

Every now and then there are issues that arise in the church that could become divisive if we allow them. Paul wrote, “Fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Tim. 6:12). But not everything is a good fight. Many decisions are those in which well-informed, well-intentioned Christians can in good conscience disagree. Therefore, it’s good to remind yourself that just because you don’t like it does not mean it’s wrong. And just because someone may have stepped on your toes doesn’t mean they were aiming to do so, or that they were disrespecting you, or for some reason don’t appreciate your work around here.

Remember, the church, the idea of gathering together as Christians for Word and Sacrament, this is God’s idea, not ours. And it’s a good idea. We need one another, more than we know. In the church, we are better together. Stronger. Wiser.

God never intended the Christian to be a lone ranger, and in fact, that might well be impossible. Rather, the Bible teaches that just as the body has many members (the eyes, arms, legs) which are very different, so also does the body of Christ, the people of God’s church. We complement one another not in spite of our differences but precisely because of them. God rejoices in those differences. But he also desires that we work together and move together as one church, one body, following him. And when we are united, when Christians with a diverse set of gifts and skills are all together, of one mind and with one spirit, then our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is compelling.

That’s our job. That’s our calling. Not to make a fuss when we don’t get what we want . . . but to show the world another way . . . to be another way, to be a new creation. And through his Son Jesus Christ, that’s what he gives us as a gift. He gives us unity, *koinonia*, a fellowship of those cleansed by the blood of Christ.

He gives it first in Holy Baptism where he baptizes us into the Body of Christ and puts on each of us the same clothing: the cloak of Christ’s righteousness.

He gives it also in the Lord’s Supper. In fact, that’s what he had in mind the night before he was crucified: the unity of his followers. Just when his closest disciples were more than tempted to start picking at each other, and to choose up sides and decide who was responsible for things going so wrong, just then he gave them . . . and us . . . a great gift. He said that in, with and under the bread and wine, there would be his body and his blood

for our forgiveness. But more than that; in eating and drinking that together he brings us into a holy communion and gives us a unity in him that we could never achieve ourselves. Again, to that church in Corinth, Paul wrote, “Because there is one bread, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (10:17).

And so when you’re at the rail and take a peak at the faces there with you, you can actually see a little of what God has in mind for his people, a family before him, men and women who belong to one another because we belong first to Him. Men and women who are brothers and sisters because God is our Father.

In the end, we don’t create fellowship or unity. It’s not something that happens downstairs in the Fellowship Hall. It’s first and foremost a gift he gives us at that font and at this altar. That unity in Christ is a gift worth celebrating and a gift worth safeguarding, for the sake of the Gospel, because we are better together. Amen.

