

Is it I or Us?
1 Corinthians 1:10-18

It seems obvious from the first verse of our Scripture lesson this morning that the church in Corinth was experiencing some problems. I can almost picture St. Paul with a tear in one eye and a glare in the other as he writes this letter to a group of believers in Southern Greece. In order to understand what was happening there, it will be helpful for us to have some background information about Corinth and the early church body there.

Like many modern day cities, Corinth was a busy place of commerce and trade. Greece is made up of 2 large masses of land, connected by a small stretch of land in the center. You might imagine 2 balloons tied together. Corinth was strategically located right in the middle of that small stretch of land connecting the northern and southern sections of the country. Ships would use that piece of land where Corinth is located as a shortcut, and would be loaded on skids or rollers and transported through the outskirts of the city. Today there is a canal that allows maritime traffic through. It was a city filled with corruption and immorality.

Corinth is like the Mahoning Valley in a way, as we are strategically located halfway between Cleveland and Pittsburgh, and Chicago and New York, and we also have a less than favorable reputation. Perhaps that is why Paul chose to start a church there. He stayed there almost 2 years, and he left for Ephesus with his close friends Aquilla and Priscilla soon after he was found innocent of trumped up charges from the Jewish leaders of the day.

It is from Ephesus that he received a troubling report from one of his converts in Corinth, a person named Chloe. Verse 11 clearly reveals the issue Paul was dealing with: "there are contentions among you". The word refers to rivalry and disagreement. In any organization, it is nearly inevitable that contentions will arise from time to time. Personalities can clash, opinions will differ, and personal preferences and egos can lead to disagreements and sometimes even division.

In this specific instance, it appears they are groups of people who have lost sight of their mission. They have gotten sidetracked rather than following Jesus Christ. Verse 12 reveals the extent of the problem. Even more telling is Paul's angry response in verse 13. **His question is one that the church might want to consider again today. Is Christ divided?** Can we compare the divisions in that early Corinthian church with the denominational differences in the modern Church and conclude that they are contrary to Scriptural teaching?

Though it is tempting to do that, a careful comparison is in order. We are the most mobile generations of people in the history of the world. We can quickly travel for a few pennies clear across town and pass by at least 20 different churches and denominations in the process. The choices we have today are also unparalleled in the history of the world. In the Wesleyan tradition alone we have United Methodist, Free Methodist, Primitive Methodist and African Methodist churches. Is that the same as having the contentions that Paul spoke of?

Paul's letter might be helpful in answering that question, but the context of this first chapter suggests a larger concern. Even though all Christians have roots in the Jewish faith, God has created each one of us as a unique individual, with different traditions, cultures and backgrounds. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth and to us to remind us that the cross of Jesus Christ must bind us together despite our differences. **God's people will become united only when the cross is the center of our message and our mission.**

Is Christ divided? It might look that way, but I suggest to you that the real problem is that many churches and denominations have lost sight of the cross, and the powerful message it contains. It pains me to say that many UM churches today fall into that category as well. As I alluded to last week, the mission of the universal church is clearly stated in Mathew's Gospel- "go and make disciples". Churches that don't make that their mission have gotten sidetracked, just like those early Christians in Corinth. It is plain to see from the large numbers of early Methodists that John Wesley believed in discipleship.

Nearly every small town in America had a Methodist church at one time. Many of those have closed their doors for lack of disciples. Somewhere along the way we Methodists have lost our passion for disciple making, and as a result the number of people in the pews has declined as a result. If our denomination and this congregation is to survive the cultural divide, the cross must again become the center of our attention. Should we neglect the poor and stop fighting for social justice? Of course we should not. But those two things can not continue to take priority over our main mission- making disciples for Jesus Christ.

I find both great comfort and great inspiration in verse 17. Baptism is certainly an important part of our faith journey. It is a visible and outward sign of God's grace. However, unless the gospel is preached and sinners are reached, there will be no one to baptize. The simple yet powerful message is that Jesus Christ died on the cross in our place for our sins. It is the heart of the Gospel, and perhaps it is not being heard often enough. Sin is an ugly word, but we dare not remove it from our vocabulary.

On any given Sunday in America, sermons are preached on nearly every topic but that. It seems that most people would much rather hear how we can make our lives better now, rather than learn how we can have a perfect life later in eternity. We want to know how we can suffer less now, when the reality is that the scripture tells us that God requires suffering for the sake of the Gospel in order to be glorified with Christ (Rom 8:17). While a great number of people are searching for a better life now, without the cross they are perishing without even realizing it.

The last verse we will look at this morning is perhaps the most important. The message that Paul preached to the church at Corinth is one that must still be heard today- the message of the cross. **Paul describes the power of God as the message of the cross.** The message is the same for Catholic and Protestant, Reformed or Orthodox, Methodist or Lutheran. There is power in the message of the cross, and too often we are either too embarrassed or too uninformed to use it for the glory of God.

How might our valley be changed if we would take our responsibility to share the message of the Gospel more seriously? How might our world be changed? If every person professing to be a Christian would be obedient to that command, that power would transform lives, homes, cities and nations.

John Wesley believed and taught that social holiness can only come through personal holiness, and it begins with each one of us here in this place. The problems facing this community, this state, this nation and this world are too great for mankind to solve alone. **Bigger jails and bigger armies are no match for bigger Christians yielding the power of the cross.** The problem is sin, and without the message of the cross we will be powerless to do anything about it. I ask you this morning to make a new to reclaim the power of the cross for the glory of God.

Lord, we ask you anew to help us to focus on the cross. We pray for receptive minds and hearts to hear our message- the message of the cross. May all that interferes with that mission be removed from our path. Join us together in the same mind and the same judgment for the sake of the kingdom. Amen