

A bit of background to the reading today: The New Testament of the Bible provides two letters to the Corinthians, but scholars believe there were several letters exchanged with the church in Corinth, but some of the communications have been lost and some may have been incorporated in 2 Corinthians.

Where was the church located? Yes, obviously in Corinth but if you look at the map in your insert (I thought I would provide a visual aid for the sermon this week) or you can look on the screen. Just above the white block for Corinth, you can see the Strait of Corinth which divides Greece. During Paul's time, Corinth was the capital of Achaia, a Roman province located in southern Greece – Peloponnesus. The map shows you this was a double seaport and what a great trading center this was. It was also a Roman freedman's colony – those were men who had been slaves but were freed to inhabit the colony to live and work there.

As you can imagine, the area was made up of all kinds of people – rich, poor, different ethnic groups, religions, intellectual perspectives, and moral standards with a heavy Roman influence. The citizens of Corinth were very diversified and fiercely independent, and Corinth was one of the most decadent cities in the known world. Idolatry and immorality flourished and there were more than a dozen pagan temples that employed at least a thousand religious prostitutes! Temptation was everywhere.

Paul was a tentmaker by trade, and he liked to work in large cities practicing his trade because he could meet so many people in the marketplace as well as other workers. He would talk to them about his one God and how Jesus died for our salvation. That is how he first established the church at Corinth and Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months in Ad 49-51, preaching and teaching. Remember there was no written New Testament so he had to tell them all about the life of Jesus and what he went through ultimately dying on the cross for all.

Several years later, Paul is in the city of Ephesus near the end of his 3-year missionary trip when he receives word that there is discord and rivalry in Corinth. Paul starts these churches up, stays with them to teach and support them for a time but then he must leave for his next missionary trip as he tries to spread the word of Jesus. The Christian population was made up of pagans and some Jews. When we read about the church at Corinth, we tend to think of a group all meeting together in some large house – a nice homogenous group, but that is not the case. Corinth was a large city, so the Corinth community was made up of several different Christian communities that met in different houses with different leaders. You can imagine also that different groups developed different traditions and had their favorite leaders. Beyond that, there were class differences and rivalry between the groups different world views regarding the baptism, the correct way to celebrate the Eucharist, the role of women in the church and they became very attached to their leaders, disagreeing as to whose leader was best.

Today's reading started off with verse 10, but I would like to give you a summation of the first 9 verses: Paul greets them warmly reminding them that he, Paul, was called to

be an apostle of Jesus, called by God! Paul then refers to the Corinthians as being sanctified by Jesus and tells them he gives thanks to God for them because they have been enriched, strengthened, and given gifts by Jesus in their partnership with Him.

I have read this letter many times, but two things stood out to me this time: The way Paul starts off praising them but then lets them know he has heard from a reliable source about their disputes and immoral behaviors. Today's reading dealt with their disputes but what struck me in the letter is much like the way managers are supposed to review their direct reports. First, letting them know how much you appreciate them and here is what is going great and now, here are the things that need fixing! The second thing is how relevant this dissention is in today's church. Not just the Methodist church but ALL churches, in fact why are there so many different denominations? Christianity is divided between Eastern and Western theology. In these two divisions there are **six branches**: Catholicism, Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Oriental Orthodoxy, and Assyrians. Restorationism is sometimes considered the seventh branch. Now let's talk about denominations under the Protestant branch: Anglican, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist (Southern Baptist and American Baptist), Pentecostal, Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Anabaptists, and Methodist! Different forms of baptisms – sprinkling and full immersion, different forms of the Eucharist – bread and juice, wafers, bread, and wine and who knows what else? You can see this started in the early church. The Jewish Christians still held fast to their dietary rules and circumcision while the Gentile Christians had no regard for those rules.

There is a story told about John Wesley and a dream. Wesley had a dream one night that he was standing at the Gates of Hell. He asked the gatekeeper, "Are there any Catholics in there, yes was the answer. Are there any Presbyterians in there, yes was the answer. Are there any Congregationalists in there, yes was the answer. He hesitated a moment and asked, are there any Methodists in there, yes was the answer." Then Wesley was transported to the Gates of Heaven. He asked the gatekeeper, "Are there any Catholics in there, no was the answer. Are there any Presbyterians in there, no was the answer. Are there any Congregationalists in there, no was the answer. He hesitated again and asked, are there any Methodists in there, no was the answer. Well, then who is in there?? **Christians** was the answer."

In our reading Paul is appealing to the Corinthians (referring to them as brothers and sisters to remind them of their bond), in the name of Jesus, that they not be divided. He tells them he knows they are saying, "I belong to Paul, or I belong to Apollos, or I belong to Cephas (Peter), or I belong to Christ." They had their favorites, but can you imagine saying, "I belong to Pastor Joe or I belong to Susan Scott or I belong to Ann Burnham?" No! Well except for Ted, he does belong to Ann ☐. Our identity comes from Jesus, and being part of His family, "knit together" with the same purpose; to spread the Word of God and how Jesus died for our salvation. Simple, isn't it? Over the last 2,000 years there have been so many divisions over human differences, yet by

the grace of God, we are still here but we must be careful not to become irrelevant. How do we do that?

In his book, *Until Unity* by Francis Chan, he says, "Love Is the Answer. Is it possible to value theology, hate sin, and fight for unity? If so, we have very few examples of this. The people who want unity often have a "can't we all just get along" attitude that downplays the seriousness of good theology and a holy lifestyle. Since God commands all three, there must be a way to grow in our theology, holiness, and unity simultaneously. It might sound oversimplified and cheesy, but love is the answer. Our divisions usually aren't caused by a difference in theology but a lack of relationship. Our problem is not our difference of opinion or interpretation; it's the shallowness of our "love." Our love, if we can even call it that, is not born from rich theology that reminds us of the spiritual reality that we are one Body. Most would affirm this truth, but we've never taken the time to meditate on it and internalize it. When you're deeply in love, division is unfathomable. It's also quite apparent to those around when that love isn't there and a relationship is obligatory. My point is that we really aren't fooling anyone with our forced greeting times at church or our sermons and songs about Christian love. When love is lacking, it almost makes it worse that we keep talking about it because we shouldn't need to. I doubt Jesus went around telling everyone how much He loved His disciples. Everyone knew. It was obvious. Instead of improving our speech and nuancing, we need to beg for a change of heart. Despite our words, our lack of true love is clear to the rest of the world. Our theological pride has created divisions that run deep. The only ones who can't see this are the ones who don't want to. Our annoyance over each other's sin is equally obvious. We can try to mask it as grief and concern, but the world sees it for what it most often is: self-righteousness and eagerness to judge. It's very difficult nowadays to find anyone outside the church who *actually* admires the church. The best a non-Christian will give us is, "I'm glad you found something that works for you." We are light-years from the love that shows the world we have been disciplined by Jesus."

That is the love we must show, that is where our strength will come from, that is how we lift one another. I mean no disrespect to those who watch our service but if you are physically able, come here and worship **with us**. Feel the presence of our Lord and Savior when we sing together, and when we pray together. Come and fellowship with us as we sit together encouraging each other, comforting each other, laughing together as we share each other's joys. I have said it before and I will say it again, this is our church – not our building – but our family for who we have ἀγάπη (agápē) love. *Agape* love is the steady intention of the will to another's highest good, a deep – a sacrificial love that binds. This is a word well familiar to me but as I was looking in my Greek-American dictionary, I noticed the word right below "agapezo", which means I reconcile. This is what is necessary – a true reconciliation. Christians are being divided and dismissed today. We can only change that when we show each other that agape love – in our congregation, in our denomination and with all other Christians as one

Body. We need to be sure when a stranger looks at us, whether it is someone who just walks in the door, or who attends the Strawberry Festival, or the Christmas Bazaar, they see that. If they do, they will want that, they will want to learn more about Jesus.

Look at the person to your left and to your right. Tell them you will pray for them. Tell them you love them and say, "May the peace of Christ be with you today and always".

It is in our gathering that we gain strength and that is when we flourish. Amen