

January 26, 2020
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General Assembly

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

"I Thank God that I Baptized None of You!"

It is a pleasure to be with you for worship today. As Moderator of the 2019 General Assembly, I bring you greetings from the Presbyterian Church in Canada. And as a congregational pastor in Regina, I bring you greetings from First Presbyterian Church where I have been serving for the last 2 ½ years.

Victor and I agreed that we would stick with the assigned Scripture readings for this Sunday from the Revised Common Lectionary, rather than have me preach about one of the topics or texts that I've been sharing in numerous congregations during my year as Moderator.

But I was not unhappy about that at all, because one of the New Testament readings for today was from Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians – my absolute favourite letter in the Bible, and a book that has been guiding much of my preaching and teaching this year already.

Can you imagine your church receiving a letter like that from one of your past leaders? A letter like the one that the Apostle Paul sent to the church at Corinth?

Can you imagine the Rev. Tony Plomp (if he was still alive) or Rev. Frances Seville writing to you at Richmond Presbyterian Church with that kind of message?

"I've heard that the church is full of conflict and cliques these days. The rumours about this trouble have made it all the way back to me, and I'm really disappointed. I hear that some of you are even associating yourselves with different leaders, both present ones and past. And I was absolutely shocked to hear that some of you are suggesting that I come back to Richmond because you like my way of doing things best.

"Well, I'm sorry, but that's just not going to happen! And I thank God that I baptized none of you... Well, I did baptize a few of you and your children, but I can hardly remember which ones. And it really doesn't matter who I baptized, or who I prepared for membership, or who I worked with on Session or church committees, because it's not about me, or any other particular leaders. I want to say this in no uncertain terms: Do not claim allegiance to me or any other leader. I just won't have it!"

In my own words, that's pretty much the gist of what Paul was telling the Corinthian Christians. Quarrels had been reported to him, with some saying, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Peter," or "I belong to Christ." And instead of claiming their unity in Christ and doing their best to work out their differences and disagreements, the Corinthians seem content to disagree and divide. Paul is not impressed.

Sometimes we have a tendency to think that back at the beginning of the Church Christians got along with each other and were unified. The Book of Acts describes the earliest Christian community as one in which everyone was together in one place and had everything in common. They shared all their possessions, took care of those in need, and lived, worshipped, and served together in peace and harmony.

But that idyllic picture of the church (if it was ever real) didn't last very long. Churches like the one in Corinth were already experiencing conflict and division, and it was a problem that would only increase and intensify over the following centuries.

Around the year 1000, there was the great schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, then the Reformation divides of the 16th century, followed by more and more divisions between varieties of Protestant Churches based on different doctrines, different practices, different cultures and experiences.

The comedian Emo Philips told a story over twenty years ago, which bears repeating today. He was walking across a bridge, and he tells the story like this.

I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it! Don't do it!" He said, "Why not? Nobody loves me."

I said, "Well, God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "I do, too. ...Are you a Christian or a Jew?"

He said, "I'm a Christian." I said, "Me, too! ...Protestant; or Catholic?"

He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! ...What franchise?"

He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! ...Northern Baptist; or Southern Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! ...Northern Conservative Baptist, or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! ...Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region; or Northern Conservative Baptist, Eastern Region?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too! ...Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879; or Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912."

I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

I remember noticing something similar over 10 years ago when I was preparing to preach for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in Saskatoon. The country that had prepared the resources for the week that year was Korea, and so I was using the internet to find out more about the Christian Churches of Korea.

I already knew that there were a lot of Presbyterians in Korea, and that there was more than one denomination of Presbyterians in that country. Instead of having one grouping of Presbyterians like "The Presbyterian Church in Canada," Korean Presbyterians had divided a number of times over questions of doctrine or church practice, and I found when I looked it up online that there were literally hundreds of types of Presbyterians.

I found a list of them, and most were called things like, "The Presbyterian Church in Korea," or "The Korean Presbyterian Church," but others had names like "The Conservative Presbyterian Church," or "The Fundamentalist Presbyterian Church," "The Pure Presbyterian Church," or "The Women Pastors Presbyterian Church."

Without knowing all the details, we can imagine the disagreements and debates that led to the formation of some of these churches. And forever after, there are groups of Christians that do not primarily identify themselves as Christians, or even as Presbyterians, but as "the Presbyterians who think we should have women pastors," or even worse, as "the Presbyterians who think women pastors are just wrong"!

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, appeals to them to be in agreement, that there be no divisions among them, and that they be united in the same mind and the same purpose. And, I know, that's a lot more easily said than done. Sometimes, no matter how much we talk to each other, and no matter how much we listen and try to understand, sometimes we just can't seem to find agreement. And what do we do then?

Paul doesn't really answer that question in this passage, but he does later on in the letter. He says that there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are a variety of services, but the same Lord; there are a variety of activities, but it is the same Spirit which activates each of them in everyone.

He tells the Corinthians that as members of the one Body of Christ, each of them is valuable, and no one can say, "I have no need of you" to another. And with all our diversity and difference, the greatest gift we have from God is the ability to love one another. Even when we don't agree about everything... even when we can't understand each other's perspectives or preferences, Paul reminds us that we need to stay together and keep on loving.

I don't imagine that Paul expected the Corinthians to agree with each other easily or automatically. He knew that living in unity would take some commitment and some work, but it just wasn't acceptable for the Christians to divide up into followers of Paul, Apollos, Peter, and Christ.

In 2003, a little book was published called, *In One Body through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*. Rather than being the publication of any particular denomination or church, it was written by a group of ecumenical leaders from around the world who got together as individuals who cared about the unity of the church and wanted to propose a way forward towards unity.

Writing about today's passage from 1 Corinthians, the Princeton Proposal says, "The New Testament is as clear about the dangers of division as it is about the imperative of unity. In 1 Corinthians 1, St. Paul denounces the divisions among the Corinthian Christians because they obscure the one Christ into whom all were baptized... When Christians are divided among themselves, each group must distinguish itself from the others by claiming its own special 'strengths' and 'insights.'

“Precisely so, they are committed to knowing something *other* than ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’... Alongside the preaching of Christ there is inevitably now ‘boasting’ in the special virtues of the group, and the cross of Christ is ‘emptied of its power.’”

We invite people to come to our church or to join our community because we have a focus on biblical preaching, or the right understanding of sacraments, because we are the church that values friendliness, or evangelism, or social justice.

As the proposal puts it, “the distinct identities of our churches tempt us to relish the special marks that distinguish our communities from others, and not to glory in the confession of the crucified Lord we share in common... We are Roman Catholics or Lutherans or Methodists, or a ‘family-oriented’ congregation or an ‘inclusive’ or ‘traditional’ congregation first, and Christians only second.”

“I thank God that I baptized none of you,” Paul tells the Corinthians, because when you associate yourselves with me (or with any other particular leader, or doctrine, or position on some issue) you lose sight of the fact that you belong to Christ (all of you!).

Back in 2012, when I was living in Saskatoon and involved in the ministry of the Prairie Centre for Ecumenism, I received an invitation to be involved in preparing the resources that would be used around the world for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2014. I well remember the first brainstorming session that our little ecumenical group held in the library of our church to consider what scripture passage should be the basis for our prayer for unity that year.

We were surprised to discover that 1 Corinthians 1 had never been chosen before because it includes such a clear and challenging message for our divided Churches today. And as we explored the text together with a team of Christians from across the country, we found that it was full of wisdom for the ecumenical movement and inspiration for our prayer for Christian unity.

But I think that Paul’s letter can also give us direction for our relationships within our presbyteries, congregations, the committees and groups of which we are a part, and even our families.

Because wherever we live and work with others, wherever we make decisions together, make plans and choose directions, we have the challenge of finding agreement, avoiding divisions, and being united in the same mind and the same purpose.

The reality is that we won't always agree with each other right away. In fact, our Presbyterian form of church government assumes that we won't all agree with each other. It puts us together in groups of lay people and clergy together – committees, sessions, presbyteries, and general assemblies – to study, discuss, debate, and decide together. What is God calling us to do? Where is God calling us to go?

If you've ever been to a General Assembly of our national church, you know that conflict can be a significant part of what happens when we get together to decide things related to faith and church life. But diversity of opinion, differing perspectives, and arguments for and against any particular recommendation do not necessarily mean division in the church.

These discussions are actually a very important part of making the best decisions we can make for the church... decisions that are well thought-out, duly considered, and often amended by the group as we work them out together. That's how our Presbyterian system works at its best... when we all work together, asking the Holy Spirit to guide us, and to help us to find the way forward together.

It goes wrong, I think, when we start taking positions, choosing sides, labelling ourselves as conservative, or liberal, or progressive, or evangelical (or labelling others that we see as different or wrong). It goes wrong, I think, when we start worrying about winning or losing, when getting our own way becomes so important that we plan to leave or push others out if they don't agree with us.

I think that one of the gifts of The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a tradition that has taught us to live together in Christian community that includes a wide diversity of backgrounds, cultures, experiences, and theological perspectives. Through committees, sessions, presbyteries, and general assemblies, many voices and perspectives participate together in discerning God's will for the Church. And for the most part, we stay together and love one another in the midst of our diversity and difference.

And so, as this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity draws to a close, my prayers are for the unity of your congregation as you continue to worship and to serve in this community together; for the unity of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, that we may maintain and strengthen it in the years ahead, rather than give up and divide up over issues that we cannot seem to resolve; and for the growing unity of the whole church throughout the world, that the disagreements and divisions of our history will be overcome through dialogue and determination... and most of all, through love.

Preached at
Richmond Presbyterian
Church