

Following the Footsteps of Paul: Part I

I Corinthians 1:10-18

August 8, 2021

For the next three weeks, Katie and I will share with you parts of our trip to Greece. (If you look at the picture on the front of your bulletin, I am standing under an archway in a church. This is beautiful artwork is mosaic pieces .

We went to places where much of the New Testament in the Bible was written...mostly by the Apostle Paul. We are not going to share details of our trip on these Sunday mornings; you can get those details when we have a class on our trip that begins mid-September.

What we are sharing with you on these next three Sundays is what we learned spiritually and how God spoke to us during this trip. We each were touched in different ways, so next week Katie will share hers.

One of the cities we visited was Corinth, which is in the southern part of Greece. What Paul would do when he entered a city was go to the Synagogue and start talking about Jesus. Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth, and started a church there. Once a church was established, Paul would leave that city and go to the next one telling people about Jesus.

Paul kept up with his churches through word of mouth – he would send people to visit them, who reported back to Paul how the church was doing. Paul also kept in contact through letters. Paul began to hear disturbing stories about the church in Corinth. So he wrote several letters to them. We know them as I and 2 Corinthians in the New Testament.

Our scripture passage today comes from the first letter to the Corinthians. Before I read to see what Paul is going to say to this church, let us pray: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A monk was asked about diversity in his small monastery. He said that there were monks who can meditate all day and others who can't sit still for five minutes; monks who are scholars and those who are semiliterate; chatterboxes and those who barely say a word.

"But," he said, "our biggest problem is that each man here had a mother who fried potatoes in a different way."

Diversity comes in all forms.

I mentioned that the church in Corinth had problems. To get an idea of the problems in the church in Corinth, just take a Bible and page through I Corinthians. There are headlines in the letter. They go like this: divisions, sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers, marriage problems, idols, problems with communion and worship.

That's a lot of problems this church is dealing with. Why is this happening?

In Paul's time, Corinth was a big, vibrant, wealthy city. It had two harbors, one led to Asia and the other to Italy. It was easy to exchange merchandise from these countries, and therefore, there was a large mixture of people and cultures and religions. It sounds like our cruise ship in Greece!

Many of our cities are like that today. If you watched the Olympics, especially women's gymnastics, you heard about the large population of Hmong in the Twin Cities. The Hmong are people from Laos who came into the United States after the Viet Nam War. They have learned to live in our culture and have made a great impact on the culture of the Twin Cities.

There were lots of different kinds of people in the Corinth church. All of these new Christians brought their religious past and their cultural influences. One culture ate meat offered to idols. Another allowed promiscuity. Another prostitution.

Another problem Paul is facing that came up in our scripture passage today is that people are claiming to follow different leaders in the church: some followed Paul, some followed Apollos, some followed Peter. All of this was causing arguments and division.

Here at Valley, we don't have different races, but we are diverse in many other ways. We have liberal and conservative members, and everybody in between. We have a traditional worship service, but there are those of you who wish we had contemporary. We have gun control people and gun rights people. We have pro-life people and pro-choice people. We have Republicans and Democrats and Independent. We have those who think we should wear masks and those who say it's up to each individual. And I am sure the list could go on.

It would be easy for us to divide over these issues, but here you all are, sitting together, extending the peace of Christ to one another, worshipping together. It was Ben Franklin who said, "We must indeed all hang together or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

So, Paul writes to his church and says, "I appeal to you," actually he is saying "Please," let there be no divisions, please don't take sides, please be united. When we do divide, Paul says, we divide Christ, and it threatens our ability to be witnesses for Christ. He asks this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our commonality. It is Jesus' name that makes us one. It is Jesus' name that unites us because we are God's adopted sons and daughters. We are called to live into that identity.

What was happening in the Corinth church is that instead of living up to their identity in Christ, they were claiming other people as their identity.

So what Paul does is he brings them back to the story that defines us Christians: the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the cross. Paul doesn't want anything to distract the Christians from the cross, which is the power of God. The name of Jesus and the cross of Christ is what unites us.

Now this doesn't mean that Christians are to have identical views and perspectives on things. This doesn't mean that we are to live out our Christian faith in exactly the same way as everyone else. What it does mean that we are to be united in our determination to follow Jesus.

This does not mean that churches are to give up their distinctions. Churches are not to give up their diversity. We have diverse churches in our Presbytery. (Our Presbytery is all the Presbyterian churches in southern Arizona and a bit into New Mexico.) For example, Southside is known for its activism. St Mark's is known for its creativity and artistic abilities in worship. St Andrews is known for its love of Jesus and the showers they provide for the homeless.

What I love about our church is that in all our diversity, with all our different viewpoints on how to live out our faith, we stay together. We learn to love the person who disagrees with us. And that was certainly tested at this last election.

Our Presbytery was tested when the Presbyterian denomination took a stance on a certain issue 5 -6 years ago. It could have split our Presbytery wide open but this is what happened:

The pastors of our Presbytery had been meeting together on a monthly basis to study together, pray together, worship together, and eat together. As a result, we learned to love one another in all our differences and theological viewpoints as pastors. We learned to love each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

So when our denomination took a stance, it would have been easy for our Presbytery to split but instead it remained together. United. Because the liberal pastors loved the conservative pastors. The conservative pastors loved their liberal brothers and sisters. They wanted to remain together because they loved each other.

The trick is to remember that it's about the message. It is about Jesus who died on the cross so that we can know the love of God and speak that love to our neighbors.

What a witness to the world when we remain together in all our differences. What a witness this can be to our country that is so divided. I love it that our Presbytery decided to stay together even though churches still remained on opposite side of issues. I love it that our church remains together even though we stand differently on so many issues. We are standing on our commonality in the name of Jesus Christ and the cross. This is our identity.

At the end of the day may we all proclaim, "I belong to Christ." May we live a cross-shaped life. We're in this together as we follow Jesus. Amen.

Children's Message

Talk about the Olympics. Each country sends their best athletes to compete in sports. There are individual sports and team sports.

Have kids name individual sports: running a race, tennis, wrestling,

Name team sports: baseball, soccer, water polo, basketball

No matter if the athlete was competing alone or with a team, they all had one goal: to win a medal for themselves or their team. But something happened at the Olympics this year: acts of kindness.

During a running race, two people from different countries ran into each other and fell down. They got up, put their arms around each other and ran together over the finish line...in last place. United.

In pole jumping, 2 men from different countries tied for first place. The judges called for a jump off, in other words continuing to compete with each other until someone comes out top. Instead, the two athletes wanted a tie. When that was granted, they jumped into each others arms. United.

In a swimming race, a woman from another country one and set a new record. Two American girls came over and hugged her and congratulated her, and shared in her win. United.

People from different backgrounds and cultures and differences coming together and helping each other be the best they can be.

Here in the church, we have the same goal: we belong to Christ and we work for Christ. No matter how different we are, we help each other to be the best Christian we can. We root for each other when we have fears or doubts. We continue to walk by each other's side no matter if we like each other or not. That's what it means to be the Body of Christ together. And I am glad you are a part of it.