January 26, 2014

“THE UNITED WAY”

Psalm 27:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

As I have mentioned before, after living on the east side of the big river for more than two decades we returned home to our native state in 1993. I had accepted the call of the First Baptist Church in Trumann, about fifteen or so miles southeast of Jonesboro. It was only forty-five minutes from my hometown of Paragould. But still, after being gone so many years, it felt strange to be back in the land of our roots.

We had lived, for the most part of those twenty-two years, in urban areas: Louisville, Kentucky; Nashville, Tennessee; Baltimore, Maryland; Tampa Bay, Florida; Atlanta, Georgia. So, once again living in a small town brought back memories, but it definitely felt different. Living back home was taking some getting used to.

I quickly rediscovered the locals’ love affair with pickup trucks. I’ve never owned one myself because a truck just doesn’t fit my lifestyle. And I’ve noted something else as well. If you have a pickup, everybody either wants to borrow it or they want you to help them haul furniture. Just ask Paul Bruns or Chuck Gardner. So, I’ve stayed away from pickup trucks. But most of the men in my church in Trumann drove them.

Shortly after going to Trumann, a contingent of youth and adults from our church drove up to the Hardy area to the Spring River for a canoe trip. I had done it
before with other church groups, and considered canoeing to be work and not recreation, but we went anyway if for no other reason than it gave us the opportunity to get to know our new friends and fellow church members.

They loaded us up, along with some other folk who were not in our group, in a large van that would hold twenty-or-so people, and we headed upriver to the drop-off area. Along the way, a man from the other group spoke to the driver. “How do you like your Ford truck?” He was referring to the large vehicle that was transporting us. “I love it,” said the driver, who was obviously the owner of the canoe service. “It serves our purposes very reliably, and we’re quite happy with it.”

Trying to be friendly, I responded, “One thing I’ve noticed since coming back to Arkansas. When it comes to trucks, you’re either a Ford man or a Chevy man. It seems to me that you’re either one or the other, and would never cross the line. When it comes to driving a truck around here, loyalty to the brand is the name of the game.” Whereupon, Gaylon Henley from our church said, “Well I’ll tell you one thing right now. I wouldn’t have a Ford truck if you paid me. As far as I’m concerned, a Chevy is the only kind to have.”

Uh oh. The man who had asked the question turned to Gaylon and said with somewhat clinched teeth, “I sell Ford trucks.”

Okay, Gaylon, what are you going to do now? Without batting an eye, he said to the truck salesman, “You know why I wouldn’t buy a Ford truck? Why, you just can’t wear one of them ‘thangs,’ out and I like to trade trucks every two to three years. That’s why I drive a Chevy!”

After the laughter died down he turned to me and whispered, “Got out of that one, didn’t I?”

It doesn’t take much to find one’s self in a disagreement, does it? There were certainly disagreements in the church at Corinth, and they weren’t so easy to get out of as was the one Gaylon Henley started that day near the Spring River. In fact, the situation had gotten so bad that one of the members, a woman named Chloe, dispatched her messengers, her “people,” to go to Ephesus and tell Paul about it. The quarrels were tearing the church apart, and evidently Chloe thought Paul might
be able to address the problems, help them re-focus their energy and purpose, and bring them back together again.

Could Chloe’s messengers convince Paul to come back to Corinth personally and work with the different divisions within the congregation, to persuade them to reconcile their differences? That might have been their motive. Of course, Paul might have been in jail. That was the case much of the time, so it would have been impossible for him to return. He had been promising to come back and visit his Corinthian friends. Would he do it now?

Some of the dissension in the church surrounded Paul, not that he didn’t deserve at least some of it. A small clue is found in the passage we read earlier. He is quick to refer to himself with his Christian name Paul, the one given to him, according to his testimony, by Christ himself during his conversion on the road to Damascus. But when he speaks of Peter, who was given that name by Jesus, he uses his Hebrew name Cephas. What Paul accords himself he refuses to do for Peter.

So, for this reason and others, I’m sure, Paul had his detractors. There were those who accused him of not keeping his word. If he refused to come back, or was unable to do so, it was just fuel for the fire of those who said he didn’t keep his promises and this was just another example of it. If he really loved the church he would come back and help them figure this out.

If he couldn’t come back, would he at least write them a letter? Paul is quite well-known for his letters. They’re already beginning to circulate all over the Mediterranean. They might not have about them the eloquence that was so present when Apollos had preached to the church, but when a church is in conflict eloquence isn’t what is called for. They need forthrightness. They need insight and wisdom. They need someone, preferably Paul, to tell them to shape up and how and when to do it.

That’s evidently why Chloe sends her “people” to visit with Paul. He had started the church, and as far as she’s concerned he’s the only one who can help them through their difficulties. Otherwise, she doesn’t know what they’re going to do. The church is being torn apart by their squabbling and fighting, and things don’t look good. They don’t look good at all.
The people in the church have divided into camps. Some say they belong to Paul, others Apollos, still others Peter. And there is a group that haughtily claims allegiance to Jesus. They are bickering with one another, with some thinking they are spiritually superior to the others. Toss in bad table manners and some immorality, not to mention flirtations with paganism, and you’ve got the church at Corinth.

It is not a pretty sight. That which had been meant to be holy has become an unholy mess.

It happens. I know it happens. I’ve seen it myself; unfortunately have been in the middle of it myself. And if you have much experience with church at all, you’ve no doubt seen it as well.

Excuse me for telling you something I think I shared fairly recently. The story is told of the man who was deserted on an island. Eventually, he is rescued. His rescuers ask about the three small huts he has constructed on the island. “The first one,” he tells them, “is my home. That’s where I live. The other one is my church. That’s where I worship and pray.” “How about the third one,” they ask. “Oh,” he responds, “that’s where I used to go to church.”

There may be some of you who are just now coming back to church because you were run off by such behavior in a previous situation. It happens, and we need to be aware of it for at least one reason: we need to be ever-vigilant, constantly on guard, that it doesn’t happen here as it is happening in so many churches today, and as it happened in Corinth.

“The church doesn’t even begin to resemble the church you once knew,” Chloe’s people tell Paul. “Chloe thought you would want to know what is going on.”

And Paul did want to know. He listens to the painful account of what is happening in Corinth. After all, he has a personal stake in the church. Paul has a personal and spiritual investment in every church in that part of the world. From his own testimony, he felt he had been commissioned by Christ himself to take the gospel to the Gentiles in a way that was true of no other person. So it is natural for
Paul to feel some ownership of what is happening in the churches, especially the churches he has started himself.

One minister, I think it was Halford Luccock, has said that he once saw the bloody tracks of a wounded hare in a freshly-fallen snow, and it instantly reminded him of the missionary journeys of Paul. Paul had put his flesh and blood, not to mention his soul, into the church at Corinth. Of course he wants to know about this. The question is, can he do anything about it?

Perhaps he can if he can convince them of one thing. As much as he cares for the church at Corinth, Paul cares even more about Christ. He recognizes immediately that this kind of behavior not only harms the church, it pulls Christ apart and when it happens, in essence, this kind of behavior crucifies him all over again. Differences of opinion are one thing. But there is no glory in dissension, there is no grace in conflict, especially when it takes peoples’ eyes off the cross and the One who gave his life on the cross expressly for them.

For whatever reason – either he was indeed in prison or simply so busy in Ephesus that he couldn’t get away – Paul cannot accompany them back to Corinth. So, he does the next best thing: he writes them a letter. It may not have been the best thing for the Corinthian church, but it is for us because his letter, or at least a portion of it, has been preserved and we now, after all these years, can read it for ourselves and draw some worthy conclusions from it.

Without mincing any words, or making any attempt to skate carefully around the perimeter of the issue for fear of offending anyone, Paul tells them that what they are doing is moronic. Yes, that’s the very word he uses. The translation we read earlier says “foolishness,” but it comes from the Greek word for moron. Kind of puts a biting edge on it, doesn’t it?

Do you remember that scene in the movie My Big Fat Greek Wedding where the father of the bride claims that every word – every word – in the English language comes originally from the Greek? Well, believe it or not, that’s not too much of an exaggeration, and Paul proves it right here. The behavior of the people in the church at Corinth is moronic. It’s like they’ve taken the body of Christ, which is what the church is, and dismembered it, cut it up, and parcelled it out. Even the group that claimed allegiance to Christ did so in such a way that it was
proving to be divisive. And if their behavior was divisive, they could claim allegiance to Christ all they wanted but they wouldn’t be portraying the Spirit of Christ. They are trading on Christ’s name while betraying who Christ is and what Christ has done for them.

And Paul doesn’t want a group in the church to attach themselves to his name. The same goes for Peter or for Apollos. He’s not jealous of them and their influence on the church. Paul is jealous for Christ and Christ alone. Christ is to be the only object of their devotion, the crucified Christ, the one who cannot be divided except at great, great personal loss.

It seems to be such a hard lesson to learn, for the Corinthians, for other churches today, and for you and me. We can thank God there is little if any conflict in our church today. But we must be ever-vigilant to make sure this continues to be so.

How do we do it?

The answer is really quite simple and at the same time quite hard. We must keep our focus, our purpose, our reason for existence, on Christ. It is Christ, and Christ alone, who holds us together in a common purpose of worship and ministry.

Paul refers to it, in his letter to the Corinthians, as our common baptism. We who are baptized in Christ have a bond that nothing can break. When disagreements come, and they always do, if we will keep our eyes on Christ and love one another in his name, our arguments will dissipate, will literally fall apart, in the light of his presence.

Paul had his detractors. Some accused him of being naive, naive to think that such unity was possible in such a diverse world. But Paul wasn’t advocating that they all agree at every point. His message was that they were to be bound together in their common love for Christ and by Christ, so that even when they did not agree they still maintained their common course of faith. Being united is to keep our eyes, our focus, on the only thing that truly and ultimately matters. Actually, I should say on the only One who ultimately matters.
So let us mark it and mark it well: we are bound together by our devotion to Christ. Nothing else – *nothing* else – matters. The light of Jesus’ presence illuminates our deeds and encourages us to unite in him, even when we disagree. It is the only way to be church. It is the only way to be followers of the One who gave his life for us. It is the only way to live out the promise of our baptism, to be united in Christ.

*Unite us, O Lord, in you and give us the strength and courage not to let anything or anyone else keep us from doing that. Walk with us as a congregation of believers, that we might be found faithful to you and you alone. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*