

Scriptures: Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Glimpses of the Kingdom

We've been talking about seeing glimpses of God's kingdom the last few weeks, and I have to say, when God's people live into His will – doing what His word demands that we do – it's a beautiful thing! The other night there was a group down at the Alpha Center for a meal and a message. I know they were fed physically, and I hope they were fed spiritually. Those who helped with that, thank you. They got a bit of a preview Tuesday night about what we'll talk about today, and on Wednesday evening I gave a bit of a preview to those of you who were here for WOW.

Before we turn to our Epistle reading for this morning, found in 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, I also want to point out that we are half-way through the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity today. I hadn't heard of it until this past Thursday, when I got around to listening to Bishop Palmer's weekly praise and prayer time on Facebook. It's an ecumenical, international observance in the Church calendar that begins on January 18 and ends on January 25 – eight days – that's coordinated each year by the World Council of Churches. Every denomination in the world participates, even the Roman Catholic Church. This year's theme comes from Isaiah 1:17, "Do good, seek justice."¹ If you're interested in finding out more about the specific topics for prayer for each of the eight days, when you get your email later this afternoon, you'll find an embedded link to them in a footnote I've included in the sermon. If you don't get emails from the church office, and from me – I usually send out prayer requests – and Janice sends stuff out from the church office, let us know so we can get you signed up on both of those email lists. Now let's take a look at what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. **Read 1 Cor. 1:10-18.**

Last week we heard the first part of this chapter, with Paul telling the church that they had been enriched in every way – and we have. We've been given the privilege of being children of God through the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ. What we read today is an appeal by Paul for what we would call Christian unity. He writes, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought," (1 Cor. 1:10). The divisions which we see in the Church today – and we so frequently lament – are nothing new. That's not an excuse for it, but that's the reality of our situation. We're broken people.

¹ World Council of Churches, *Resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*, located at <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/resources-for-the-week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity-2023>.

Birds of a Feather

You're probably familiar with the old saying, "birds of a feather flock together." People gravitate towards people who are like them. Now we could talk about all the ways that that looks – race, ethnicity, age, gender, social class, economic status, marital status, and so on – in a nutshell, it boils down to tribalism. We're very tribal. We tend to stick to our own kind. We don't like being pulled out of our comfort zones. When we're called by God – and others – to get out of our preferred way of doing things, oftentimes we have to be dragged into the new, kicking and screaming.

Since we're each unique individuals, we will not see eye-to-eye on everything. In disagreeing about things, we're able to extend grace towards others who aren't like us. We should be doing our very best to love them and see things from their points-of-view. Wednesday night at the end of WOW, we took a ball of yarn and passed it back and forth, creating a web of connections. It really is a great visual for what the Church should look like – despite being different people and in different places, it's all tied together, connected in Christ. Instead of being like-minded, loving people as Jesus loves them, we're quick to ditch the dialog, end the conversation, and move on to what we perceive to be greener pastures. This is precisely the issue happening in the church at Corinth, and what's been happening of late within the United Methodist Church. "My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 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,'" (verses 11-12).

In making this statement, Paul's dropping some names of folks with whom the people in the Corinthian church would have been very familiar. He names Chloe, who some Bible commentaries suggest may have owned a business and who sent her servants to Paul while he was in Ephesus, prompting him to write the letter. Paul names himself, of course, because he had introduced the Gospel to the people who became the church at Corinth. Next he lists Apollos, a guy who had followed him there, and who was a great apologist for the Christian faith. Then Cephas, who we know better as Simon Peter. Jewish converts to Christianity living in Corinth would have probably felt a close connection with Peter.

Following Christ

Of course, the last name is one with which we should all be familiar – and that's Christ. It seems at first glance that this should be the answer anyone would readily give in any church – that they follow Christ. But, there's a backstory as to why Paul includes the statement in the letter. It turns out to not be as innocent as it appears on the surface. There was a faction in the church at Corinth who believed they had an inside track on following Christ – based on how they felt, and what they thought. They believed they were the most spiritual element in the local church, and that their brand of spiritual elitism made them better than the others. According to Dr. Thomas

Constable of Dallas Theological Seminary, “This party in the church using ‘Christ’ as their name, in a sense ‘cut’ Him ‘off’ from the other members of the church. Such an idea was unthinkable, and by stating it, Paul showed its absurdity.”²

To all this, and even into our divisiveness today, Paul speaks. “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name,” (verses 13-15). It’s apparent that Paul’s disappointed with the divisions in the church at Corinth. I’m certain that our self-centered desires to keep things our way, to do things our way, also cause great disappointment to our Savior. In a nutshell, that’s what the divisions in the Church, in general, are all about. People wanting things done a certain way, and when that doesn’t happen, they split. It boils down to selfishness.

Now I’m not saying the Church, generally speaking, or the United Methodist Church, specifically, is a perfect institution – it’s not! The Church is a people, prone to wander, in need of a loving Shepherd to herd it and guide it into the bride He wants it to be. That’s something that we all agree to do when we make our baptismal vows – to guide and shepherd others in God’s family, the church, and to be guided and shepherded by others in His family. You’ll have the opportunity to renew those vows again this morning when we confirm Kaydance and Brooklyn. In the Scripture this morning, Paul admits that he has baptized some of the members of the Corinthian church. He says, “Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else,” (verse 16).

In other words, Paul remembers baptizing some, though not all, of the people in the Corinthian church. Maybe he forgot who all he baptized. In those days, they didn’t have Excel spreadsheets to keep tables of data on. They didn’t have notebooks or ledgers to write records in. Things that were put down on parchment were of the greatest importance – like the Scriptures and this letter to Corinth. Perhaps royal or imperial decrees. Most people, if they kept track of records probably did things pretty old-school. Maybe writing on a piece of slate with a bit of soft chalk, or imprinting records into clay tablets with a piece of wood.

“I Have Rights!”

What is worth mentioning here, is that Paul indicates he baptized the household of Stephanas. Stephanas was the first guy to hear and believe the gospel in that region, and Paul baptized him. He was Roman or Greek, so when he was baptized – like some other Gentiles who were baptized in the early church found in Acts 10 and 16 – his whole family was also baptized. That’s how things operated in those days. If Stephanas had a wife, which he likely did, she would have also been baptized, kids

² Thomas Constable, *Thomas Constable’s Notes on the Bible*, (2017), retrieved from www.sermonary.co, 6/9/2021.

would have been baptized, babies, slaves – anyone connected to Stephanas, even colleagues or people who worked for him, if he was their boss – they all would have been baptized.

You know, we hear a lot today about people’s rights. “I have a right to this, or that,” you’ve probably heard someone say. And when those rights get trampled on, they really throw a big fit! If you’re around young people – teenagers and children – you may hear them complain that they don’t have rights. Legitimately, there are people in our country who have less rights than the rest of us. Illegal immigrants, children, people with disabilities – these are all folks who our society views as “less than” the rest of us, and because of that, their rights are frequently diminished by institutions.

I feel for people who feel like they aren’t heard. My position on this shouldn’t surprise any of you. Most of you know I’ve made it my life’s work to attempt to seek equity and justice for children with disabilities, as an Intervention Specialist working in the public school system of Ohio. Believe it or not, many schools in Ohio are still very much entrenched in thinking that their students with disabilities are a hindrance and a burden, rather than viewing them through the lens of being part of a shared human family.

That being said, even the most marginalized of people here in America, have more rights than the ordinary woman did in the days of the Roman Empire. In that time and place, whatever your husband said, went. If you didn’t like it, you went along with it, because you didn’t have a choice. Women didn’t have another option. The only way out of your marriage was for your husband to end it – or for you to end it by somehow managing to kill off your husband. So when Stephanas made the decision to follow Jesus, that was a decision he made on behalf of his entire family.

Different Giftings, Same Giver

Paul has potentially forgotten some of those from Corinth he’s baptized, which seems like a bad thing for a pastor to do. But notice what he says, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power,” (verse 17). He’s not saying that the Sacrament of Baptism is unimportant – it is very important, because it’s our public profession and witness to the inward grace being given to us by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit – he’s saying that the primary role which God has called him to do was to preach the Good News. I know for a fact that many times the Church, generally speaking, looks to its leaders and thinks, “Gee, our old pastor did things this way,” or “Bishop Whoever, who we had thirty-five years ago would have never done _____.”

I started attending church in Sidney around age five, after a friend on the bus started talking to me about Jesus, and I went home asking questions. Mom and Dad decided it was a good time for us to start going with my grandparents to the church Dad had grown up in. The first pastor I remember, Rev. Joe, and his wife Elaine, were dress suit, classy people – very well-spoken. They were friendly, and always treated me and my family kindly. He performed my baptism when I was twelve, and was there for us when Grandpa Berryman died. I still run into him around town, and we talk. He was great with shut-in visitations. He left after a little over a decade, and went elsewhere to pastor.

After him, we had an interim pastor, Pastor Daryl, who was a retired Presbyterian minister. He was also nice, but very old. He and his wife Irene, were both very frail. He only showed up to preach sermons on Sunday mornings. Then we had Rev. Ron and his wife, Angie. Ron had been in the Navy, had tattoos on his arms, and was a blue jeans and sweatshirt type of guy. Ron smoked like a freight train. He was down-to-earth, occasionally cussed, even from the pulpit, and was great with younger people.

People in the church complained to Ron. “You aren’t like Rev. Joe.” I distinctly remember one Sunday morning, when he said during a sermon, “I’m not Joe. He’s gone. I’m Ron, and I’m here now.” It was a hard message for that church to hear – but it was a message that they needed. Each of these guys were called by God to lead the church, but their callings were different. One focused on shut-ins, one was focused on transitioning pastoral leadership from one to another, and one focused on youth and young people. Different people, different giftings, but the same Giver of the gifts used to further His kingdom at that specific time. Sometimes we get so caught up in the comparisons – between how things used to be, and how things now are and between this person and that person – that we don’t really allow ourselves to be led by those who God has called and equipped to lead us during the season in which we find ourselves. That’s a shame, because it causes us to waste a lot of time and energy.

If we get ourselves out of the way, and allow the Holy Spirit to move and act through us, then we’re better able to form strategic partnerships. And friends, this goes for us here, within the walls at New Hope, but also out beyond the walls, even with other churches in Shelby County, and the wider world. We may not see eye-to-eye on every issue – but we’ll be like-minded on the essentials. Then, all those who say they believe Jesus Christ is Lord will be able to more effectively share the Good News. “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,” (verse 18).

God’s chariot in the world today, the Church, has a lot of mud weighing down its wheels, but it’s still His vehicle of choice in making the best news ever heard, known throughout the world. He’s in the business, and is doing the heavy lifting, of saving us

through His own shed blood on the cross. And He does it despite our divisiveness – because of His great love for us.

Prayer: Redeeming God, Thank You for making us a part of the diverse body of Christ that transcends nations, ethnicity, gender, and even time. Give us eyes to see others within the body of Christ who are in need, and how we, as the body of Christ, might extend Your care and love to them, and those who are not yet a part of Your family. Amen.