

## More than Agreeing to Disagree

This text from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is appropriate for this time of year when congregations are having their annual meetings. At these meetings, members will be discussing the futures of their congregations, what they want to do in the next year and perhaps the foreseeable future, where they see their congregation heading and what they would like their congregation to 'look like'. However, many times, these visions of our churches become skewed by the group that is putting their ideas forward. It is somewhat natural to push for your own ideas, thinking that is the direction the church should go. Too often, groups will dig in their heels when presented with an alternative vision and barriers get built which separates the different groups within the church. This is something of what happened in the church that Paul started in Corinth. Quarrels were popping up and people were taking sides based on who baptized them. In the text that we heard for today, Paul is calling for a unity within the church based on the Gospel of Jesus. There is a word of caution, however, being united does not necessarily mean that we are all the same. Later in this letter, by using the analogy of the human body, Paul stresses that we are different, yet when we work together, as one, then the whole body of the church benefits.

In his letters, Paul can sometimes be quite wordy, writing long sentences that can become difficult to follow. Sometimes, it seems that Paul introduces a new thought within a sentence so that the result is that there can be two lines of thought going on at the same time. I have often wondered how Paul's letters would be if he had a word processor and a good editor looking over his letters before he sent them. While more than likely definitely being shorter, would they have the same impact on Christian thought as they had? If we were to explore what Paul's letters would look

like if he had a word processor, we would have to be careful not to overly edit and water-down the points that he was making by taking out some of the repetitive nature in the letters. While this would be an interesting exercise to do, it is way beyond the scope of this sermon, so there is no need to say anything further on this.

On the other hand, sometimes it is necessary to have this repetitive, wordy text in order to make the point more emphatically. The text from first Corinthians for today would be a good example to show that the message would be lost if we edited it too much. However, we could speculate on how Paul might write this part of his letter today. He might say that some Christians would say, "I'm Catholic, or I'm Baptist, or I'm Lutheran, or even I don't need church, following Jesus is enough for me." Regardless of how it is written, Paul's point is still the same: that it is the cross of Jesus that unites us and gives all of us what we are seeking. What unites us is stronger than any disagreement that we may have. Any designation that we make only separates us into groups. These designations result in creating a barrier between us. These barriers point out our differences, creating an air of superiority over others. These are the kind of barriers that Jesus strove to break during His earthly ministry. The other effect that happens when we define ourselves by our differences is that the cross of Jesus gets pushed aside, it gets put in the background instead of being our focus.

In Christianity today, we see the effects of making designations between people. The Lutheran church and the United Methodist church are but two examples where a single issue has been used to separate people and make designations. People from each side of the issue have dug in their heels and taken the position that their view is the only 'right view' and then one's position on the issue becomes the determining factor of whether the person is a 'real Christian' or not, if they deserve to belong to the group. If they do not belong to the group, then they can go anywhere

else. These different opinions on an issue have built barriers between the two sides such that they will not associate with anyone who is considered 'one of them.' Paul is stressing to us that it is the power of the cross of Jesus that rises above any conflict that we may have. The power of the cross is sufficient to break down any barrier that people have created to separate ourselves from each other. In actuality, whenever we make a particular issue the determining factor of one's Christianity and belief instead of belief in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for us, then we are making an idol out of the issue and pushing the love of God into the background, a clear breaking of the First Commandment. While Paul does not explicitly state this to the Gentile-Christian church in Corinth, he does say that what unites all believers is stronger, is more important than any difference we may have between us.

So, if we are united in Christ, what do we do when we disagree? Paul isn't saying that we should just go off and build another church when we disagree, only associating with those with whom we agree. He isn't even saying that we should agree that we can disagree. What he is saying is that we must focus on the positive, that is, the empty cross and not on the negative, the disagreements. We are to use our strengths, the gifts that God has given us to build up the body of Christ; support one another in their gifts; not being jealous of their gifts nor feeling that our gifts are more important than others' gifts. Starting with the cross of Jesus, we are to find common ground that is rooted in Jesus' ministry and working out from there, we will accomplish what God has set out before us. We may even find that common ground where whatever issue divides believers becomes resolved and we can get on with the business of living out our calling from God. When we look at the Book of Acts, we see this happening over and over again. When a problem arose, the believers started with their belief in Jesus, found common ground and a solution to the problem and it is noted that the church grew out of that struggle over the problem. There was not an effort to expel

those with a different opinion from the church, but to find that place rooted in Christ where a solution could be agreed upon. Everyone probably did not totally agree with the solution, but the power of the cross was kept at the center of the group and the group remained as one.

These words from Paul are not only for churches and congregations who may currently be in conflict, but are also a reminder for all of God's church to remember that it is the cross of Jesus and ultimately, God's love for us that is the most important thing. I am not implying that anyone listening to this sermon is embroiled in controversy or a disagreement within the congregation, but I am echoing Paul's point that we need to always keep the cross of Jesus at the center of our faith. When we do this, we may also be able to avoid unnecessary conflicts. Even if the conflicts cannot be avoided, then the Bible shows us that remarkable things can happen when the Cross of Christ remains at the center of our lives.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/JC-7UxQLEwg>

Service: <https://youtu.be/lsNAbBUsyWg>