

Sibling Rivalry

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

Whitefish UMC

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- † “Those of my university students who have grown up outside the church (about half of them) have a very negative stereotypical view of Christianity. When I ask them to write a short essay on their impression of Christianity, they consistently use five adjectives: Christians are literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental, and bigoted.”
- † So writes biblical scholar Marcus Borg in his book The Heart of Christianity, which we studied here in our church a few years ago. It’s a damning indictment, and if anything, those perceptions have deepened among young people since Borg wrote these words five years ago.
- † Our hearts may sing as we hear the glorious prophecy of Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. On them light has shined.” But as we listen to the reading from Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, a nagging voice suggests that these new Christians have been remarkably busy in their attempts to put that light out.
- † As Kathleen Norris speculates, “On some days I wonder if this admittedly sour perspective doesn’t explain a good part of Christian history, as well as our present volatile and noisily divisive situation. The light came and we have been devising clever ways to extinguish it ever since.”
- † We hear talk of baptism for the third Sunday in a row. But instead of the story of Jesus and John at the Jordan River, we find Paul preaching to the

Corinthians with exasperation, asking them to consider what their own baptisms mean. Apparently they had been dividing themselves into cliques, identifying themselves as belonging not to Christ but to whoever had baptized them.

- † I suppose there is some consolation in realizing that divisiveness, even within the body of Christ, is not new. But it's also rather depressing, isn't it? The details may be different, but the questions and the arguments remain. Paul declares that our gifts, though varied, are empowered by the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God—not someone's name (I Cor. 12:4-11).
- † Just within the last six months, we've witnessed in our country several divisive arguments among believers about what it means to be Christian. The most glaring is the controversy over building an Islamic cultural center near ground zero in New York City. And because of the President's position on that issue, some called his Christianity into question.
- † In fact, some believed he was a Muslim, some believed a Christian, and many weren't sure. The controversy grew viral as talking heads from all sides weighed in on the issue. Then there was the Florida pastor who planned to burn the Koran on September 11th. Christians found themselves divided about the rightness of his plan, although it was later dropped at the request of Defense Secretary Gates (a Republican). And now Pastor Terry Jones has been banned from entering Britain because of his views.
- † And just this week, newly inaugurated Alabama governor Robert Bentley ignited more bitter controversy over his statement, uttered at the same church where Martin Luther King, Jr. used to preach, that those who are not Christians are not his brothers and sisters. Governor Bentley, a sincere and devout Christian, quickly apologized for his statement, although he was

somewhat bewildered by the firestorm over it. He genuinely professed to love everyone—Christian or not--and promised to govern all the citizens of Alabama as their public servant. And I believe him.

- † But these controversies are the kinds of things that (as Anne Lamott once observed in a different connection) would drive Jesus to drink gin from the cat's dish. As Paul asserts: "Is Christ divided? Or "does our baptism divide us?" The Corinthians created ripples in the pool of baptism by name-dropping—everybody's name but Jesus, it seems.
- † How did that happen, how could it happen? We don't really know, but we know it did happen, and happens still. And so we ask today—Is Christ divided?
- † As your pastor I have encountered situations several times in my ministry where people told me, in effect, "I don't care what Jesus says, this is what I say." But when a name or a thing or our personal view takes precedence over Jesus Christ, we don't have a church, but a personality driven club or cult of celebrity.
- † When we argue over who is authentically Christian, then ministry is neglected. When we obsess over personalities, we lose sight of why we are here and what we are here for—to love God, and to love our neighbor with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.
- † Dr. Ozzie Smith tells the story about a comedian on a cable station who spoke of being confronted by two professed literalist Christians. These Christians said, "We're Christians and we don't like what you said!"
- † The comedian responded, "Oh! Well, please forgive me!" If you are Christians, forgive me! Don't threaten me; forgive me! Don't corner me in the name of your particular brand that you brandished, forgive me! If I stand

accused, hear my cry and pray for me—tell me to sin no more. What a thought from a comedian!

- † As he states, “Yet some expressions that crusade under the banner of Christianity are at worst divisive. This happens, I believe, when we seek again to nail-down Jesus to our own anthropomorphisms.”
- † I love what Dr. Smith says: “Yet, in Christ there is no division; there is a new mind. In Christ there is deliverance. In Christ there is no wrangling over the law, but love of the Lord. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all testify that Jesus was clear, not divided, on his person and his purpose. They all confess to us that Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. Jesus knew from whence he came and where he was headed. His purpose was to show every name a more excellent way. His purpose would cause every knee to bow and every tongue to confess--his name, not name-droppings, pardon the pun.
- † Christ was not divided, but devoted to bringing good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and healing to the sick. While Pilate and Herod were divided, Jesus was deliberate in maintaining who and whose he was. He never allowed where he was to change who he was--not even on Calvary's cross! If Christ is listed among other names in our faith roster, what does this say about our Christianity? If Christ is divided, then why do we bother to call ourselves Christian? What are we doing here?”
- † Part of the problem, I think, is language that uses the terms of a family to describe our relationships. Now I don't know about your family, but mine has plenty of disagreements. On this very day my sister and her partner will sit in front of the television with their adorable baby twins. One will cheer ardently for the Packers and the other for the Bears.

- † I know that’s a silly example, but you get the point. The church uses familial language in two senses. Sometimes that language is used to express the common bond that Christians share with one another. That bond is shaped to varying degrees by a shared creed and language.
- † But that same familial language is used to describe the larger connection we have with one another as God’s creation. That is, all of us, created in God’s image, are part of the family of God—we are children of God and thus brothers and sisters.
- † As Frederick Schmidt, professor at Southern Methodist University and Perkins School of Theology in Dallas writes, “We are not favored or special, and we are certainly not more righteous than others. We did not save ourselves, transcend our humanity, or rise above others. And, while we gather to care for and support one another in our common worship, the purpose of that time together is meant to deepen our connection with and care for those around us.
- † In other words, the language of our larger familial connection is about humility and gratitude for something undeserved. That is why Jesus moved so powerfully across religious communities and dealt so directly and generously with everyone he met. In fact, his harshest words were reserved for those who indulged in self-righteous behavior that implied a preferential relationship with God.”
- † When I was in Chicago for seminary, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the Archbishop of Chicago, died. In the tributes to him upon his death, his address to the people of the city when he was installed, were repeated: “I am Joseph, your brother,” he said. **The words recalled the story of the Old Testament patriarch Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers and who**

later ascended to the right-hand of the Pharaoh of Egypt and saved his brothers from starvation.

- † Isn't it possible to recognize that past hurts need not define relations between members of a family, even if that family is broadly defined enough to include all of humanity? Jesus himself looked beyond the usual assumptions about family: "my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it," he said in Luke 8:21.
- † Once again, we come back to the essentials of the undivided Christ: love of God, neighbor, and the coming reign of God, in which we are called to serve and heal and unite around one table—where we focus on feeding one another—through the power of God's Spirit.
- † How much more would those not brought up in the church be drawn to it if we could joyfully live out our faith this way. Can we begin right here and right now? I pray that it will be so. Amen.

Sources:

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