

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Third Sunday after the Epiphany • January 26, 2020

Isaiah 9:1-4 • Psalm 27:1, 4-9 • 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 • Matthew 4:12-23

The first decades of the church were a time of great exploration and innovation. Some congregations were discovering new ways to worship. Others found innovative ways to support those in need. The church in Corinth specialized in church conflict. You could even say they invented the field. Today's reading is a good example of why. Having been brought into this new community through their baptisms, having been grafted into one body, the Corinthians immediately started looking for ways to start dividing themselves up again. Sorting themselves into various factions. Ranking themselves in hierarchies.

And the multitude of teachers in their congregation who had baptized people gave them an easy way to do it. Some of them said, "I belong to Apollos." Others said, "I belong to Cephas." A few said, "I belong to Paul." People began to identify themselves not with Jesus, but with the person who baptized them. And even worse, people began to say that their baptisms were superior to other people's because of who baptized them. They would say, "Being baptized by Apollos was the best." Or, "You should have been baptized when Cephas was here." Or, "Oh, you were baptized by Paul? I'm sorry. He was just an interim."

Today's reading from 1 Corinthians feels like a situation unique to this church in Corinth. (Who brags about who baptized you?) But it's not unique to them. It's a universal predicament. Every community of faith faces this challenge at some point or another. Because it's not really about who baptized you. It's about what you put your faith in.

We make the same mistake as the Corinthians all the time. We take something incidental to our faith, in the Corinthians' case the person who baptized you, and put it at the center. We do it with worship styles. We do it with denominations. We do it with leadership. We do it with traditions. We do it with all kinds of things. To be clear, none of those things are bad. Your liturgy needs some feel somewhat coherent. You need leadership in the congregation. You need to have some way of organizing the church as a denomination. Even Fred down the street at non-denominational Cornerstone would tell you that non-denominational is sort of its own denomination now. Those things aren't bad in and of themselves.

The danger is that those incidental things, those tools we use in pursuit of our mission, became the center of our common life. The pitfall is that our traditions, our histories, our norms, and our desires can easily become the ultimate good. We can trick ourselves into thinking that they are the reason we exist. And that creates endless problems. The church in Corinth has been torn apart over stupid arguments over who is the best person to be baptized by.

So the goal for Paul in this reading and in his entire ministry for that matter is unity. Paul asks that they would be "united in the same mind and the same purpose." The word for "unity" here is similar to the one for "mending" or "stitching back together." Does unity assume that everyone is the exact same? Nope. Not even close. Unity just means that you have the same center, even if you're coming from vastly different directions. Unity just means our common life is centered around Jesus. That it's Jesus who holds us together.

Paul reminds us that Jesus is at the center of everything we do. How does Paul put it? "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." In other words, everything we do is normed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and everything we do seeks to manifest the grace of God in our community.

But it takes work to make sure that Jesus stays at the center. Because if you aren't clear that the center of the church is the grace of God in Jesus Christ, something else will become the center. It might be the building. It might be the pastor. It might be the hymnal. It might be the budget. It might be the programs. Something is always at the center.

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And that causes a big problem for the Corinthians and for us. While none of those incidental things are bad, they can deeply pervert our mission when we make them the primary thing. Instead of having a pastor who leads the congregation, we build cults of personality and think that the pastor is indispensable. Instead of having a building that is accessible and organized and transparent to our community, we want the building to do the work of ministry for us. And instead of pursuing programs and events that further our mission, we do the same things over and over again, not because they work, but because they're what we know how to do.

Where does that impulse to center everything else but the grace of God come from? At its heart, it stems from a lack of trust. To center the grace of God in our common life seems, to use Paul's word, foolish. Because it means giving up a sense of control. We can control a building. We can control programs. We can control a pastor. (Sometimes.) But we can't control the grace of God. We have to take it on faith. We have to trust. And that scares us.

Which is too bad. Because we live in a world that is desperately in need of what we have to give, but we so often act as if we have nothing worthwhile to offer. Because I talk to people every single day, and you know what they say? They don't say, "I would like to become a voting member of a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America built in 1965 with two worship services, a thirty something year old pastor, and a sanctuary with almost no natural light." No.

What they do say is *I want to be a part of a community where I don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not.* What they do say is *I want a church that says, "All are welcome" with no asterisk on the end.* And what they say more than anything else is *Every single day, I wake up, and I get reminded in a million little ways that I'm not enough. I'm not talented enough. I'm not smart enough. I'm not committed enough. I'm not lovable enough. And for one hour a week I need something to remind me that even if I'm never enough for the people around me, I am enough for God.*

As we go into the annual meeting today, as we review the past year and look ahead, it will be tempting to focus on the incidental things: the programs, the building, the pastor. But I want you to think about something else. Think about the needs of the people in our community who get reminded in a million little ways every day that they aren't good enough. Who are told that they aren't worthy of love or deserving of respect. Most of them won't be at our meeting today, but they should be at the forefront of our attention. Because they are counting on us. And they're not counting on us to run more efficient programs. They're not counting on us to have a prettier building. They're not counting on us to have a more charismatic pastor. They are depending on us to keep the grace of God at the center.

How would our community, our neighborhood, change if we kept Jesus at the center of our life and work? I think it would change a lot. I think it would become more equitable. I think it would be more affirming. I think it would become just a little bit more like the kingdom of God.

And how would we change? Well, probably more than we want to. For some of us, it might feel scary. For others of us, it might feel foolish. But for most of us, I think it would be freeing. I think it would lower our anxiety. I think it would quell our resentments. And I think it would give us a sense of joy. Because if all we have to offer are budgets and buildings, programs and personnel, we have nothing to offer anyone. But if we keep Jesus at the center, if the grace of God is the reason we exist and the thing that norms everything we do, then we have the most important gift anyone could ever receive.

"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." You're more powerful than you think you are.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor