

## Message: "Ramshackle Unity"

### Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

<sup>10</sup>Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. <sup>11</sup>For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. <sup>12</sup>What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." <sup>13</sup>Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

<sup>14</sup>I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup>so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup>(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

<sup>17</sup>For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. <sup>18</sup>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.

We get along pretty well, don't we? I mean clergy and congregation, pastor and parishioners, reverend and righteous, preacher and preachee..... we get along pretty well, right?

I mean, we've had our differences, such as those who think motorcycles are no big deal (I know, can you believe it?), or those who think an hour-long sermon might be a little too much (no worries today!), but for the most part, ours is a harmonious, agreeable journey as a community that tries to follow Jesus; wouldn't you say?

But this past week, I learned of one of those issues that may cause a rift in our communion, one that may separate our congregation into two separate, ideologically-opposed camps which may bring us to the edge of fracture. What is this breach of common understanding? You may have been here last Sunday when I said something from the pulpit that immediately caused tension in our midst - what I said was, and I quote, "If the proof is in the put-in, by all means, put-in!" If I was paying better attention, I might have noticed the rumblings that began with the choir; and after worship, our choir director Greg came up to me to let me know what the rumblings were about. He told me that the choir realized the actual phrase is "The proof is in the pudding" or, more accurately, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." You see the dilemma - how can I tell the entire choir that they are wrong? Greg mentioned that he looked it up on the internet, whereupon it affirmed in all the searches that "The proof is in the pudding" is the traditional, correct, and universally-acknowledge form of the truism. So how do I convince everyone in the world that they are wrong? I'm not sure this is reconcilable, for my version is obviously better - wouldn't you agree? You see my problem -- HOW DO I WIN THIS ARGUMENT?

Two responses hit me quickly - for one, it is an unwinnable argument, for (gulp) I was wrong. But secondly, there might be a better way forward than me trying to win an unwinnable argument.....maybe, trying to understand instead?

I thank Greg and the choir for making my error clear to me, for I need that kind of input, as do we all. It's kind of a funny thing, but I've had both phrases in my head forever, yet in a way exactly reversed; I had always thought that the phrase "the proof is in the pudding" was an offshoot of the phrase "the proof is in the put-in", namely, the proof is in what you put into something, how you invest yourself in something; I had not really thought about it the other way around, never examined the original catchphrase, never saw things spelled out - until last Sunday after worship. I am now a more educated person for the correction; let it be said that I will never eat my pudding in exactly the same way! For you see, I have learned the tremendous value of examining my understandings, my opinions, what I think is true and right and factual and real - and I think it is the case that much of the world's trouble is created by unexamined understandings. How we understand the world largely determines how we live and think and feel in the world, and all too often we only glimpse at our understandings before we move them into life -- we take shortcuts, we make assumptions, we make snap judgements, we proclaim our way is better without really examining that way not to mention seriously considering another's way. We are quick to judge and slow to understand, and find ourselves in muddles of repeated mistakes and relived pain, with someone higher up than us asking, "Won't they ever learn?" We are quick to judge and slow to understand, failing to realize how much would be solved if we simply reversed that order - that we become more determined to understand, and less willing to judge.

Paul promotes this approach to not just faith, but life, pointing out that we gain so much more by trying to understand each other than trying to be right in opposition to each other. In our passage today, Paul is dealing with a new congregation who is struggling with disagreements in their fellowship; as he states in verse eleven, "it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters." And then Paul goes on to lay out the differences of opinion, one claiming authority through Paul, another through Appollos, another through Cephas....you can sense the tug-of-wars going on, you can almost feel the egos fighting it out, vying for power and influence over the church; these tensions are reinforced throughout Paul's letter. It's what makes us human in a very real sense, that we are always tempted to impose our will upon

others; it is also one of our most destructive tendencies if you consider the myriad ways we abuse, neglect, disrespect, oppress, injure, destroy, and otherwise ignore the innate worth of each other. We compete, we strive against, we fight, we kill, all in the name of some sense of righteousness we desire to be known for, some sense of authority over others that we claim for ourselves - but when we attempt to do so, we don't realize we are exceeding our job description as human beings, for none of us is qualified to judge the value of another life, nor able to devalue any life God has deemed sacred.

A story I read this past week fits here. A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse.

Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So tell me," he pleaded, "was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Ah," responded the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Well," the young rabbi responded, "what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the old man, "*that was the tradition.*" (as retold by Barbara Lemmel co-pastors with her husband, Mitchell Hay, in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State)

Doesn't it seem that half of our country is shouting and screaming at the other half, who shout back in return? That we've taken leave of our senses regarding what our country should be about, what life should look like in this world we help to create? Doesn't it feel that we are more interested in screaming at each other than figuring out what's really at stake, regarding what works for all of us, the principles and values most of us have learned to trust which are being so casually tossed aside by those in power?

Tragically, horrendously, there's another present-day example that shows this human tendency to devalue life all too well. Another person was shot and killed by ICE agents in Minneapolis yesterday. His name was Alex Pretti; he was an ICU nurse who worked at a Veterans Hospital; he was 37 years old; he was an American citizen. I saw the video of the shooting; perhaps you did, too; it was

sickening. In the midst of my revulsion and outrage is the thing I and more and more people have been saying over and over and over again this last year, and the volume is increasing. THINGS SHOULD NOT BE LIKE THIS; THINGS DO NOT HAVE TO BE LIKE THIS; THINGS NEED TO CHANGE. The volume is increasing; the volume needs to keep on increasing; it needs to reach a fever pitch and continue to refuse to accept things as they are; that fever pitch must remain in place so long as the politics of violence continue to destroy lives.

But we must keep in mind that fever pitches, if left to themselves, almost always kill the host. There needs to be attention given to the fever; you've heard the old saying (and I hope I get this right!) - "feed a cold, starve a fever?" Or is it "feed a fever, starve a cold?" The point is TO TREAT THE FEVER; do something to keep the fever from getting out of control; take the proper medicine, get lots of rest, drink plenty of fluids, watch "Gilligan's Island" reruns, read a favorite book, channel the illness back to health. The same council applies to the societal illnesses we face today. We are feverish with anger and fear and frustration; we are exhausted by bad news, we are mournful over how much suffering has been happening, we are sick of the directions our country and our world are choosing as of late. It is absolutely right that we should feel outraged by the wrongness of such things, that we feel the horror and offense of the cruelty imposed intentionally upon so many - but effective treatment understands what makes us sicker, namely, matching the mannerisms of those causing the harm. We need to retain our outrage but never let it devolve into violence and hatred which fuels the present decline of our country; we need to channel our outrage into determination, and resolve, and moral steadiness, and faithful centeredness that continues to speak, act, and otherwise address the wrongness of these days. A catchphrase from the African-American civil rights movement helps us here -- "Keep your eyes on the prize." "Keep your eyes on the prize" says Paul to the Corinthian church dealing with power struggles in their midst; "Keep your eyes on the prize" says God to us today in the face of our nation's moral collapse; that prize being God's vision for humanity, not our own.

I heard this message in what may seem to be an unlikely place, namely the speech made by Mark Carney, the Prime Minister of Canada at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland this past week. It was a much-needed voice of sanity speaking into the chaos. Did you get to hear the speech? Parts of it read like a sermon; I highly recommend that you seek out a video of that speech, or download the text of his words. Here, in the midst of

shouting egos and belligerent threats was someone who was able to say many things that desperately need to be heard. For one, he said that we are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition, acknowledging that things have changed irreversibly; I think many agree with him, including myself. He mentioned that the power of the less powerful starts with honesty - in other words, facing the world as it is, troubling though it may be; I find this to be very true as well. But one thing he said resonated strongly with the point Paul is trying to make - at one point, Mark Carney said that the direction of future hope for the world or any country therein must lie in value-based realism - he said, and I quote, "[we] must aim to be both principled and pragmatic - principled in our commitment to fundamental values, sovereignty, territorial integrity, the prohibition of the use of force, except when consistent with the UN Charter, and respect for human rights; and pragmatic in our recognition that progress is often incremental, that interests diverge, and that not every partner will share all our values."

"Keep your eyes on the prize" is what he is saying, "but make sure it's the right prize to keep in view." Debunk the prizes of unbridled power and self-righteousness; watch out for the prizes of excesses and exclusion; separate yourself from the prizes of anything that harms another; seek the prize of respect of differences, mutual uplift, peaceful collaboration, and the common virtues civilization cannot afford to ignore. Can you hear Paul saying the same thing to the Corinthians? Can you hear Jesus saying the same thing to us?

As our present national situation continues to morally erode, do not lose sight of what God says is right and true and life-giving. As you are tempted to enter into the fray of proving who is right and who is wrong, shift focus to God's priorities for our interactions - seek common ground, avoid righteousness competitions, pursue understanding instead of superiority. As you move from thought to action; protest, but do not hate; demonstrate, but do not destroy; resist, but do not harm. As you are disheartened by the horrendous cruelty those in power inflict upon others, give your heart to the victims, that they may be comforted, strengthened and healed; but also give your prayers to the perpetrators, that their hearts may be changed, and that they come to understand what they are doing by harming others is making them less and less human. As we move into the uncertain future, let us continue to build what we claim to believe in, to build it together in the Body of Christ, and to build knowing God will equip us for the work ahead.