

January 26, 2020

*Dealing with Division*

Shepherd's Grace Church

10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should 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. (1Cor.1: 10-18)

For the next six weeks, we will come together. As obvious as that statement sounds, it is a profound exception to the other events going on in our world, in our nation, in our state and even in our community. We will come together. That means we will gather together here, in this place and we will bring all we have...our hopes, our desires, our needs to this place. We will also bring our differences to this place and we will gather together in those differences as well as in our similarities. We will come together.

Why? Because the magnitude of our common purpose far outweighs the differences we might have. We will come together to worship! That is our common purpose and as obvious as it also sounds, it is a profound purpose! Profound because, when done with passion and a true profession of faith this purpose overrides and outweighs every other human purpose! Yes, every other human purpose! (Those of you reading this sermon message will want to consider carefully making sure that you set aside your other Sunday morning commitments and find your way to service so you can experience the coming together that will be part of these next several weeks!) Worship, you see is the purpose for which we as humans were created.

Surely, we were not only created for worship, we were created to work...work for the continued and ongoing abundance of our environment. Work for the perfection of that which was originally created. Work for the harmony of all creation, for we alone were created in the image of our creator and we alone as humans bear the responsibility to work with God to bring about the perfection of that which was created as good.

While we go about the task of working to bring about the will of God, we go about it believing that and trusting in the will of God to guide and direct our efforts. God's will is our work and even in our efforts to fulfill it, we have to listen

and learn about it so we can trust that the work we are doing is indeed the work that is most appropriate to our mission. The way we listen is in worship. Here...in this place we gather together not to talk, but to listen! We gather together from our own very different perspectives to listen and learn how we can use the unique gifts given to each of us to come together to overcome obstacles and accomplish the awesome purpose of doing God's will in this world.

So, as it turns out, the purpose of worship outweighs every other human purpose. It is from worship that we learn to live, laugh, love and work together. God announced this even in Exodus 6 when Moses met with pharaoh for the very first time. God said, and I paraphrase here, people are not supposed to be slaves to differences and divisions. People are supposed to be free. Pharaoh, you have enslaved my people and now it is time for you to let my people go so that they can go out into the wilderness to worship Me!

We gather together because we know fundamentally that we are supposed to be free. We know that people...creatures...God's creation is not supposed to be enslaved but is supposed to be free! We gather together to acknowledge that freedom as a fundamental element in God's creative purpose and because it is, we gather together to worship God!

From the beginning of organizing God's people, God called them together. God called them away from everything else. God called them and set them apart in the wilderness...in the safety and serenity of the wilderness where there were no other distractions so that they might worship God. They came together.

Remember how they came together? Did they come willingly or eagerly? No...they came kicking and screaming, cursing God for dragging them away from the certainty of what they knew. They had to turn off their television sets. They had to put aside their sporting events. They had to delay their Sunday dinner...though in their case, it was probably Saturday dinner. They came fearful and frightened because all they had ever known was their slavery to that which was certain. They came together with great difficulty. That is how they came together.

So, when I say that for the next several weeks we will gather together, it is with a keen awareness that it will be with great difficulty. There will likely be distractions. There will be the possibility of a Super Bowl victory for the Chiefs. There will be the possibility of colds and flu. There will be the reality of springtime and warmer weather which will call us to gardens and great outdoor activities like golf or running or bicycling or other events I can not begin to imagine. We too, will come just as those first slaves came...kicking and screaming. We will kick and scream because that is all we know...that is all we have ever known...slavery to the things of this world!

Not long ago, there was a young pastor, newly appointed to a small congregation in an obscure little town. The congregation had been gathered and established as a church for more than one hundred years. They had certain ways of doing things. The customs and traditions they knew were very important to them and over the century of their existence, they trained several pastors to do things "their way."

One of the things this congregation insisted upon was the placement of the Christian flag. They liked the flag to be placed in the center of the sanctuary as service started and they liked to recite the Christian pledge of allegiance as they started worship.

The young pastor, being a diligent student of the structure of worship service had reviewed many of the church bulletins and noticed to repetition of the Christian pledge week after week. He was unfamiliar with what he regarded as a ritual and was confident that the people could easily be persuaded to give up this one piece of their past in order that he might introduce a new element of worship. The young pastor wanted to introduce a time for singing new songs and he chose to replace the pledge with this time.

The first week the people came to hear the new pastor, the church was filled with curiosity seekers. Many came who had not been present in years. They came to see what all the fuss was about. They came to find out if this new guy could bring together a congregation that had been in decline for years.

When they walked into the sanctuary, immediately some of the older members noticed that something was different. The Christian flag was not where it was supposed to be. Instead of being at the center of the sanctuary, it was of to the right of the altar. Quickly, they looked at the church bulletin and almost as one body, they gasped as they realized that their beloved pledge was not part of the worship service. Murmurs of protest could be heard as they traveled under not so hushed whispers.

The people made it through the service and on the way out, most were polite to the new pastor. They commented on how different his service was from what they were used to. The new pastor took that as a compliment but most who commented were not really being complimentary.

The next week, one of the elders of the congregation came into worship prior to service start time. This elder moved the flag back to its regular and rightful place at the center of the sanctuary. He thought this action would let the new pastor know the expectation of the congregation. At the end of the week, as the pastor came into the sanctuary to practice his message for the next day, he noticed that the flag had been moved to the place where he originally found it. Thinking that perhaps a member of the cleaning crew had moved it by mistake, the pastor simply moved it back to where it had been earlier.

On Sunday morning, the people returned to the sanctuary to worship and again, there were murmurs of disapproval that the pledge was missing and the flag was misplaced but still no one said anything to the pastor. The comments were more numerous the second Sunday than they were the first. Members of the congregation telling the pastor how different his service was.

Over the next several weeks, the pattern continued. The flag was moved, the pastor moved it back and the people complained in a way that was not obvious to the pastor. One thing did change though. Attendance started to decline. At first it was gradual. The pastor noticed but knew that some who had come at first were the lookey lu's who simply came out of curiosity. He expected that they would be hard to keep and was resolved to get out and visit them soon. As the pattern of attendance continued, however, the pastor became more concerned. People told him at the end of every service how different his service was and he could not imagine that he was doing anything wrong.

Eventually, he asked one of the elders why they thought attendance was declining. The elder was very matter-of-fact. He said, "Leave the flag alone!" Perplexed, the pastor asked, "the flag? What does the flag have to do with attendance?" The elder answered, for more than 100 years, we have celebrated worship with the flag at the center of our sanctuary. We have proudly spoken the Christian pledge and that has been the way we have been called.

The pastor said, "but people have told me how different my service was than all those other services." The elder responded, "different ain't always good! Leave the flag alone!" The pastor, undeterred asked, "what is so special about starting the service with the pledge and the flag?" The elder replied, "A century ago, the president of the United States stood at the center of the sanctuary and worshiped with us. He knelt on that very spot where we keep our flag and prayed. Ever since, we have marked that spot and made the pledge to God, cause the very next day, that president had to send boys off to fight in a war and many of our boys went with them. Many did not come back. Leave the flag alone."

We do not always know the context of why we do what we do. Sometimes, it is because we have always done it that way. Sometimes it is because there was a tradition established a long time ago. Sometimes it is because it was the only way something would work in the past but is not the only way it will work in the present.

I am sure you have heard the story of the young wife who, when making a roast for her newlywed husband cut the roast in half to put it in the pan before cooking. The husband asked why she cut the roast in half. She replied, "I don't know. That is the way my mom taught me." The husband asked his mother-in-law, " why do you cut the roast in half before putting it in the pan to cook it?" The woman replied, "I don't know. That is the way my mother did it."

The husband then asked the wife's grandmother, "Why do you cut the roast in half before putting it in the oven to cook?" The grandmother replied, "because that is the only way it would fit in the pan." Sometimes reasons for doing things are outdated and can be revised but in order for that to happen, we have to talk to one another and understand why we are doing things. It is impossible to make meaningful change until we learn to talk to one another.

Worship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become cumbersome and challenging to some because we still cut the roast in half before we bake it. We still put the flag in the center of the sanctuary without anyone knowing why. We are divided because we do not talk to one another. We struggle to set aside our differences because we do not step out of our comfort and prejudice to speak to one another about the things we believe and how they have changed and how they have stayed the same.

I appeal to you! Paul, the apostle wrote these words after a lengthy salutation to the people of Corinth. I appeal. The better translation of the Greek is “I beg.” Paul was intentionally painting the picture for this people as he penned the letter that he was getting on his knees, begging, hoping beyond hope, one step away from tears imploring the people. “I beg you,” he said, “my brothers and sisters!” These were people Paul knew. They were people he had shared a meal with, preached to, spent time with. He was writing a letter to them because he had heard that they were quarreling! He knew that they were pointing fingers and placing blame because of the differences they had. They were friends, neighbors, members of the same church and even more than that, they were believers in the same Lord and Savior.

Paul said, “I beg you my brothers and sisters, in the name of Jesus Christ!” Paul invoked the name of Jesus who is Messiah. He did not just use the term, Messiah. He did not just use the term Jesus. People of Paul’s day believed names spoke to the character of the person. When they heard the letter read to them and they heard Jesus, they heard, “The one who saves us from our sin.” Paul’s plea to them was in the name of something that was even greater than the reality of their church, something greater than the reality of their baptism, something even greater than their own acceptance of Jesus. It was a plea for them to remember the one who made that plea possible.

His plea did not stop with the reality of Jesus’ mission. It extended to the one who sent him on that mission. The word Messiah or Christ extends Jesus’ reality to the one who was sent by God! Jesus, savior sent by God is invoked by Paul in order to speak a central truth to the people of the church who had forgotten the purpose of worship in order to put their own purposes ahead of it.

Sometimes, even in the world we live in, arguments and disagreements can be kept internally. The reality of division can be debated and discussed inside the organization. Rarely is this strategy successful. There are often leaks and conversations outside the organization that cause disagreements to become known and outside influences to permeate the inner workings of the original organization.

This is exactly what happened in the world Paul was speaking to. Chloe’s people sent a letter to Paul. In the letter, they reported that there were quarrels in the church at Corinth. Without doing our homework, we might assume that Chloe’s

people were members of the congregation in Corinth and were simply expressing a concern regarding the church and its future. The reality is much more damning! Corinth was a very diverse population center. There were Greeks and Romans, citizens of many different places living in Corinth. These people brought their customs and traditions with them as Corinth was a city with two large sea ports.

There were, to be sure many Jews in Corinth, but there were also many heathens and gentiles. Some of the Jews heard the gospel preached by Paul and others and became believers. Some resisted and when they did, Paul turned to the Greeks, the gentiles, and the heathens. These diverse peoples, infant believers that they were, were left to raise up a church in the midst of many other religions and cultural traditions. They were faced daily with the challenge of temples to many foreign gods and goddesses. They were constantly forced to choose Christ over the easier way that was so present before them.

Chloe's people were not part of the church Paul founded in Corinth. Chloe is the Greek name of the goddess Dimitri. When Paul said that he had heard from Chloe's people, he was saying that people outside the faith had written to him, commenting on the divisions existing within Paul's church. Paul was saying that the people outside the church had heard the quarreling and bickering and that it was a source of dishonor to the church. It was an embarrassment! The divisions had become public and were a part of conversation outside the church community.

Paul's letter to the church at Corinth was not intended to say that people cannot have differences of opinion. It was intended instead to say that those differences should not be over the main elements of their faith. In response to the message he had received from Chloe's people, Paul immediately set out to correct the misunderstandings among the people of the church in Corinth.

Some of you, Paul said, "are claiming that you belong to Paul." "Some are claiming that you belong to Apollos, some to Cephas and some to Christ." What are you thinking, he asked. Did I teach you that you belong to whoever caused you to become a believer? Has the one in whom we believe somehow been divided? Has Christ set aside his sacrifice so that others might claim the glory of your salvation? Have you forgotten that it is in Him alone that your salvation has been assured?

Were any of you baptized in my name? Were any of you converted by a gospel other than the gospel of Jesus Christ, the one sent by God to save you from your sins? How dare you! How dare you pervert the gospel in this way; somehow believing that the sins which should have sentenced you to death could have been forgiven and taken away by any mere mortal. You were saved by Christ and by Christ alone! He alone has the power and that power is born witness to by his willingness to take on all your sins so that you may one day be able to stand in the presence of God and stand upright in his presence!

Today, in the world we live in, there are divisions that have become public. In the United States, some claim to be democrats. Some claim to be republicans. The two parties have always been a part of our nation's history. It has not always been the same two parties, but for the large majority of our nation's history, we have had a two party system of determining who should be elected and responsible for determining our nation's direction.

For most of history, the two parties have recognized the single minded purpose of our nation. We were to be a government of the people, by the people and for the people. In recent years, however, our interests have become much more partisan and divided. We no longer make room for compromise or even debate. If you are republican, you must always vote republican and any deviation is regarded as disloyalty. The same thought is true for democrats. No longer is the higher purpose of the people considered. You are right or you are wrong depending upon who you are speaking with.

Has our nation been divided? Has our purpose changed? I do not believe this is so. I believe we have changed the ways in which we make decisions and our interests have driven our decisions in such a way as to put individual welfares above the welfare of the whole.

Neither side has a claim to absolute truth. Neither side can claim absolute right but in this day and age, neither side is operating with the willingness to speak with the same mind. This nation, under God has set aside God's direction for how we are to be one and as a result, quarrels have broken out and they have become obvious to other nations who now know they can take advantage of our weakness and lack of resolve.

Unfortunately, the Church (note capital letter) has been a victim of cultural influence in today's society. The Church has adopted positions of right and wrong with regards to several moral positions being discussed in our world today. Most common of those issues is sexual identity. LGBTQ and gender identification dominate Church conversations today with people adopting positions of right and wrong that they believe are absolute lines in the sand.

We, the Church have forgotten that it is not our job to judge! It is not our job to punish! It is not our job to look at absolutes and determine which side of those absolutes the Church can, should or must come down upon. We want to make sexual orientation the main thing in our worship and it is NOT!!! Read your bible Church! How much of the message in the bible is in regards to sexual orientation. How much is in regard to gender identification? The answer of course is very little, but we are willing to divide over this small part of the way our faith should be lived out.

The reality, I believe is that some want to label issues of orientation as sin. Even if we accept that this is so, should we not allow this issue to be addressed as a part of all sin? Should we not all acknowledge that in our congregations some are adulterers? Some are coveters? Some have taken the name of the Lord in vain? Some have dishonored fathers and mothers? Hopefully none have committed murder but some, somewhere may have? My point is this: Sin is not the main thing that guides us in worship. Paul says in the book of Romans, "All have sinned, (All, All, All!) and fallen short of the glory of God. If all have sinned then all have fallen short and there can be nothing any can do to achieve salvation short of the main thing.

What then is the main thing then for us sinners? According to God through Paul, the main thing is the power of the cross...THE SAVING, LIFE GIVING POWER OF THE CROSS! This power, not preached by baptism or by judgment of sin or by eloquent phrases but by living a life of gratitude for the sacrifice made by One for all is the main thing that ought to guide our Church.

This power is foolishness to the world which is perishing. It is foolishness because the world cannot imagine how death can bring life, how condemnation can bring honor, how love can overcome hatred. The world cannot understand or accept that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us! (Rom. 5: 6) The power of the cross is folly to those who do not live by faith.

To those of us who do live by faith, it is the very power of God. We believe that God so loved the world that God gave God's only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. (John 3: 16) We believe that the cross represents for us the place where all sins for all people are taken away. Please re-read that last sentence. The cross represents for us the place where all sins for all people are taken away!

The sins of all people, those who believe differently from us, those who believe the same as us, the sins of all people have been forgiven and we, those of us who believe in God through Jesus Christ accept this salvation as an invitation to think with one mind and act with one purpose. That purpose is love. That purpose is to love one another even as God has loved us. Our unity comes in the way in which we love one another and in the way that love is expressed!

Dealing with division requires, not that we all think alike on every matter but that we listen to each other in love. As we listen to the differences of others in the Love of Jesus Christ, then we can begin to imagine other alternatives and other solutions, alternatives and solutions that set aside our divisions and start to set together our similarity in Christ. Amen!