

February 16, 2020

Dealing with Division...Sermon 4 in a 5 sermon series

Shepherd's Grace Church

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts.(1Cor. 12: 12-31a)

This is the fourth of a five week series inviting the People of Christ to re-dedicate to dealing with division. Why do we need to discuss division in the world today? Because division exists on an unprecedented scale. It exists in homes, families, churches, governments and in many cases it exists within even us, ourselves.

Now is the time for us, the People of Christ to clarify for ourselves how we communicate with each other and how we are going to communicate with people who do not yet know Jesus as their savior.

The ways we communicate as people are changing dramatically and often times altering our abilities to express opinions without those opinions seeming to divide us irreparably in other aspects of our lives and relationships with one another. People of the Church (Intentionally capitalized because we are discussing the whole church and not just one

church or denomination) should recognize these differences and work to overcome them in their attempts to communicate with the world at large! Why?

The fundamental mission of the Church, the people of Christ, is to "Go and make disciples of all the world baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!" (Matt. 28: 16 ff. Emphasis added) This directive was given to us by Jesus prior to his departure and return to heaven and is intended as the work we are called to do until His promised return.

To accomplish this work, we as Christians must be able to overcome division and difference recognizing that our differences are our greatest resources and not our most insurmountable wedge.

We must, therefore acknowledge division and even more, we must work to deal with division as we seek to share the "Good News" with all people! While we seek to communicate a life-changing message, it is imperative that we recognize that strategies of division are now built in to our communication systems.

In today's world, it is likely that you will engage in conversation with a person before you ever even meet that person. Yes...it is at least as likely that you will speak with a person prior to ever being introduced to that person or even knowing what that person looks like.

Social media dominates our communication environment. Social media is no longer the news at 10 PM and discussion the next morning around the water cooler at work. Instead, social media is immediate action and reaction to events even before they unfold. People engage in conversations before they happen, speculating on actions that will be taken by people chosen to make decisions even before those decisions have been made.

In some cases, it is fun and perhaps even somewhat productive to engage in speculation and invite people to be guided by public perception as they attempt to formulate strategies, however in many cases, social media is used as the place where lines are drawn and verbal battles are defined not just on a single issue, but on a very way of life. If you disagree with me on even one thing, the terms of discourse today suggest that you must disagree with me on everything. Notions of difference of opinion have been replaced with accusations of definition. People are defined as liberal or conservative, as affiliated with one political party or another, as reactionary to one religious teaching or another based on an opinion expressed on a single issue.

What is more, people express those opinions to others whom they have never met. Social media platforms such as facebook and twitter invite people to express ideas based on factless understanding and even more, invites others to react to those ideas as if they were somehow grounded in truth.

In today's environment, we have the opportunity to express our opinion of people's understanding without knowing the person or their circumstances. We choose sides before knowing what the sides are and we divide based not on facts or context but rather on expressions without knowledge.

Last week, I received an article on facebook entitled, "Whitehouse weighs in on Patrick Mahomes." Intrigued, I opened the article and found over 1400 comments. Out of curiosity, I opened the comments before reading the article. The first comment was one of outrage against the White House. The second was one lauding the work of the president and praising what seemed like every decision he had ever made. I did not read all the comments but it seemed as if they were about as many in favor of the president as against.

I then opened the article and found that the central message of the article was not about the White House at all. Instead, it was an advertisement from Whitehouse, TX; Patrick Mahomes hometown. The article had nothing to do with politics but rather with an advertisement from Adidas filmed in Whitehouse. 1400 people weighed in on something about which they knew nothing. The acrimony accrued in the discussion created division out of nothing.

Also last week, I posted the third sermon from this series on facebook. I posted and had over one hundred reactions. Now, reactions do not mean comments. They do not even mean that all those people read the message. It simply means that over 100 people saw my post. Probably most of those people did not do the research I did to write the post. Most did not attend seminary or receive the formal training I used to create that message.

I knew these things when I posted and still I put the message out there. Why? Because to do so offers the opportunity for others to encounter the "Word" in a way they might have otherwise missed. I knew that people would react and I suspected that not all would agree, but if even one reacted and I had an opportunity to respond, I knew that opportunity would be a chance to witness to the "Good News." Our mission is to overcome division and share the "Good News!" In every situation, we must be focused on our mission!

We must be focused on that mission even if we are talking to people who don't wish to be confused by facts or considered consequences. We must be focused even if others are not willing to learn the difference between Whitehouse, TX and the White House in Washington D.C..

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he talks specifically about division and even though his situation is more than two thousand years prior to ours, I believe it sheds some light on how we as people might "Deal with Division," in such a way as to open channels of conversation in the 21st century!

In the first message of this series, we looked at Paul's introduction to this topic. It seems he had been made aware that there were divisions among the people and that these divisions had been noticed by others outside the church. His concern was two-fold. First, was that others outside the church had become aware that there were internal arguments. Paul knew the people who did not know Jesus as savior could not know the context in which these opinions might be expressed. Paul wanted the people of Corinth to remember that others were watching and they had a responsibility to the "Word."

Second, Paul was concerned with the division itself. He was surprised to learn that people in the Church were quarreling over those who first brought them as individuals to conversion to Christ. Some claimed they belonged to Paul, others to Appolos, others to Cephas. In getting to the bottom of the issue, Paul resolves both issues of division among the people of Corinth.

Paul suggests that the preacher sharing the message makes no difference in the content of the message. Some might respond to one and some to another. What is important is that the people respond, that they receive the message as it is passed on...that they understand the "Main Thing" and that the main thing is Christ and Christ Crucified!"

Division exists in churches when we forget the one whom we serve. Paul's challenge to the people of Corinth is the same as our challenge today. We do not serve preachers or buildings or even denominations. We can have differences of opinion on non-essential issues but we must remain constant on the "Main Thing." Christ and Christ crucified are the essentials. All else is secondary. We should not divide over secondary issues.

We are not the judges of the world and the church is not perfect. The only judge is God and the church is a home for sinners seeking God's grace in judgement because of Christ and Christ crucified. When people outside the Church see the Church dividing and arguing about non-essential issues, the mission of the church is in jeopardy.

In the second week, we moved on to chapter 11 of Paul's message. In this message, Paul introduces a secondary issue as a means to help us deal with division in the primary issue.

Paul introduces the issue of differences between men and women. Men, Paul seems to say should not cover their heads when teaching or prophesying God's word. Women, on the other hand, should.

Christ is the head of all men, Paul says. Men are the head of their spouse. God is the head of Christ. In laying out the argument, what is assumed, is that Paul is establishing a hierarchy with women at the bottom of the chain. In reality, Paul is stating a certainty.

To understand this, we have to do the research into the original Greek Paul used. In Greek, "Head" means source. Christ is the source. Man is the source of women. Woman is taken from man in Genesis 2. From that point on, man is the source of woman. The reality is that woman needs man and man needs woman! They are all equal and as Paul makes known, they, as all things come from God!

Head coverings are a cultural issue. They have no bearing on the message. They do, however make it easier to hear. Sometimes, Paul suggests that obeying cultural traditions and customs make it easier to hear the message. There is no command inside the church to obey these traditions or customs but again, to accomplish the mission, we must keep our focus on the main thing; Christ and Christ crucified!

We do things within the context of society that make it easier to hear the message. Some offer praise bands. Some offer traditional music. Some do not use instruments.

Some use every instrument imaginable. Some use technology. Some do not. The focus here is not on division regarding how the message is conveyed but on the message itself.

Paul's concern was not about men or women. Both were already prophesying and teaching. Paul's concern was for making sure the message was being taught. That main message was in the Lord's Supper. The meal was to be shared just as it was on that first night. It was to be for all but some were going away empty. The "Main Thing" is not male or female, Jew or Greek, Slave or Free. The main thing is Christ for all! Salvation for all! The Church must work for this message, for this mission!

Last week, we talked about division in and about spiritual gifts. Paul reminded the people of Corinth that they were all converts. In their past, they lived as pagans. They lived among the people of the community with temples on every corner and praying to every false idol they came past. They were led astray, Paul says. They were enticed and as a result, the truth when presented to them was hard to believe.

Today, we live in a similar world. We are enticed and often led astray by the allure of greed, power, lust or other treachery. We find it hard to put our trust in "The One True God." We want to believe we have the power to control our own lives and as a result, the power to be better than the person next to us!

Paul wanted the Corinthians, wants us to know that there is only one God, One Spirit, One Lord and they are all the same, all working intimately and in complete tandem. Their decisions are not made independent of one another but rather in unity and without division of any kind.

In the Church and in the world there are a variety of gifts, services and activities but all are activated by the "One and Same God!" These are activated according to the will of God's Spirit (in Hebrew Ruach; Wind, Breath, Spirit) uniquely given to humans. We alone have God's breath breathed into us to give us life. We alone possess the full measure of God for we alone are created in God's image and likeness. God gives us individual gifts not to be used for individual gain but for the common good.

When these gifts are divided, they are diminished. It is only when they come together that they are maximized. It is essential that we come together so these gifts can be used as God intends. It is essential that we learn to deal with division so that we can recognize there are differences of opinion but only one main thing and that is Christ and Christ crucified.

That brings us to today.

Today, as we remember that the "main thing is the main thing is the main thing!" Indeed, Paul invites us to know, "there are many members in the body but there is still one body. We know just by looking at ourselves in the mirror that there are many parts to our body but the body is inseparable. Therefore, while there are many parts, there is still only one of each of us.

Paul wants the Corinthians and by extension, us to know that this same illustration is true in Christ. Christ, the creator of the universe is one and that one, the same one who is creator became flesh and walked among us, filled with Grace upon Grace as the Father's only Son. (John 1: 14ff) We, those who are willing to know Him and have relationship with him are joined to Him as "Children of God!" (John 1: 10ff) This joining, Paul reminds, takes place in our baptism.

The 21st century Church wants us to think of baptism as a sort of initiation. Some churches say our initiation into Christ is not recognized unless it is done in their church. Look back now at the message of the first week of our series. "Some say they belong to Paul, some to Peter, some to Appolos." The mentality of division by baptism that Paul exposes as ludicrous in the 1st century is exposed in the same way today.

Has Christ been divided? Is Christ any more divided today than two thousand years ago? The answer of course, is no! Christ is not divided and yet the church would have us divide over Him! How can we resist? How can we proclaim? How can we invite others to know that we are "One in the Spirit, One in the Lord?" The answer of course is at the end of the song. That answer comes next week though. For now, we must wrestle with our division. We must first understand it. Then we can understand how to deal with it.

The first part of understanding the division is to recover the meaning of Baptism. It is not an initiation. Neither is it a means of repentance. By that, of course I mean that Baptism is not something we do over and over again. It is instead, a once and forever acceptance of God's Grace poured out for us. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and Spiritual grace! (Words of John Calvin)

This outward expression is more than metaphor. It is a literal expression of "death to old self and new life as we emerge from that death." It is the beginning of our eternal existence and we do not begin over and over and over again. Instead, we are baptized once and for all time and we are, as Paul says, made to drink from one cup by the same Spirit!

Many are baptized, all are joined...not as an initiation into a club but as members, each possessing gifts that are to be used for the good of the body. Division occurs when we believe baptism is about us as individuals. It is not! Instead, it is a joining of the many into one...one life together. One purpose together. One mission together! That mission is to invite others so that all gifts will be present in order that the Kingdom might become complete!

There are varieties of gifts but all of them are given by one spirit! What would the body of Christ be if all were an eye? If all were a hand? If all were ears? The body would be a dysfunctional mess. Some who look at the Body of Christ today actually describe us in exactly that way. We all want to be the one gift that is perceived as best. We all want to be the eye because the eye is best...or the hand...or the foot. As a result, we step, fumble and fall because we are not all working together.

Division occurs when we are not all working together. Purpose grows when we realize that we all need one another. Suppose, as Paul does, that the eye might say to the ear,

I no longer need you. Could the ear be cast out from the body? Of course not, but that does not keep the feelings of the ear from being hurt. Division occurs when those who possess some gifts begin to believe that they have no need of those who possess others. As a result, some move away, some fall away, some withdraw because they believe they are not necessary.

There are varieties of gifts and each one is necessary. Some of the least honorable gifts, "the guts" of the church if you will are not visible because we do not like to look at that stuff. What is the solution? To put fine covering on it so that that which appears less appealing might be made more appealing. In this way, the many gifts may be used by the one body.

That Body, Christ in the Church, can then begin to make a difference in the world. Working together, the Church all baptized into the one body once an for all time can be a source of unity in the world.

This unity can occur when we set aside our preferences for individual gifts and begin to realize that we need all gifts. That unity can occur when we realize that no one church, no one denomination, no one pastor or council of elders has all the right answers. All people are needed in the Body and all people are given work to do by the one same Spirit who determines the gifts.

We must overcome the temptations we have as individuals to believe we are the authors of the gifts we possess. God gives the gifts through the discernment and good pleasure of God's Holy Spirit. These gifts are to be used for the good of all and not as an instrument of power exercised by the strong over the weak.

In the past several weeks, we have discovered that there is no division in Christ. There are many preachers but only one message. There are many workers; slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female but there is only one platform for proclaiming God's message and that is the Church and the Church united!

Our unity comes from our understanding that the "main thing is the main thing is the main thing...and that main thing is Christ and Christ Crucified." Fore we are all one body, one in Christ, thought the Church, and we are all saints in that Church, those who recognize that the work and ministry belongs to God! We are one and we realize that God is faithful in the many gifts...but there is more than just the gifts. Be sure to attend next Sunday as we all seek together a still more excellent way. Amen!