

Narrative Lectionary- Church in Corinth
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We are working our way through some of the stories in the Acts of the Apostles, as Paul and his friends travel throughout the Mediterranean world sharing this good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And I want to say something about these stories from Acts. Paul is Jewish, and he usually goes to the synagogue in whatever town he visits, and argues with the Jewish people that Jesus is the Messiah they have been waiting for. And often, in these stories, the Jewish people take offense, and run Paul and his friends out of town.

My framing of this is that the Jews in these stories represent any group that feels defensive when their beliefs are challenged. And these synagogues were losing members to this upstart little Jewish sect. So please understand that the Jewish synagogues in these stories are representing any group that feels challenged. There are certainly many more stories over the centuries of the Jewish people being persecuted by people professing to be Christian.

So in today's reading, the Apostle Paul and his colleagues are in Corinth. Corinth was a very cosmopolitan center in the Roman Empire, a crossroads of trade, populated with freedmen and legionary veterans, Syrians, Egyptians, Greeks who had immigrated there from surrounding cities, a large Jewish community. The Isthmian Games were hosted by Corinth every two years. The theater held more than 15,000 spectators. Reminders of the worship of the Roman emperor were everywhere. The temple of Aphrodite was there with its cultic prostitution. Paul wanted these folks to hear the good news of the life lived in Messiah Jesus.

There were some Jewish refugees who had to flee from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla. They were tent-makers like Paul. All three of them practiced their trade together and shared the good news of Jesus, probably before, during and after work. The members of the synagogue rejected Paul's teaching, and Paul said, OK, I'm moving on to speak to the Gentiles. He moved next door to the synagogue, so he didn't go far. Paul even has a vision where God says, Don't be afraid; keep speaking, I will be with you. There are people here who will support you. And so Paul stays in Corinth for eighteen months.

When Paul arrives in Ephesus, he hears from some Christian friends that there are some divisions in the church in Corinth. So he writes this letter, and after the greeting, says, “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. For it has been reported to me that there are quarrels among, my brothers and sisters.”

What? Quarrels in the church? Dissension? Disagreements? If you have been in church life for a while, this might sound familiar. I’ve been a pastor for 35 years in three different congregations, and yes, I’ve known some quarrels, from what kind of music to sing in worship to how welcoming we are going to be to where we stand on nuclear weapons to immigration policy. Yes, Christians disagree at times.

And what were these divisions about in the Corinthian church? Paul writes, 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.” Maybe there were four groups in the Corinthian church who connected to one of their leaders more. They had favorite preachers, favorite interpreters of Scripture. We do that today- I have some favorite theologians, some favorite writers I lean on, people who have opened up Scripture to me in some new ways.

But it sounds like this identification had become divisive. Some said, I belong to Paul. This might have been Gentile Christians who were taking their freedom in Christ too far. We are baptized in Christ, claimed by God, and now we can do anything we want, because God has forgiven us. And they had forgotten about love for their neighbor. Luther stated the tension when he said, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all.” So there were people caught up in their freedoms, forgetting about what impact their decision might have on their neighbor. We’re seeing some of this in the pandemic. Yes, we have freedom as Christians, but not to the neglect of the well-being of our neighbors. How do we keep our neighbors safe? How also do we help our neighbor safely make a living?

Some Christians in Corinth were identified with Apollos. Apollos was a teacher from Alexandria, a well-known center of philosophy, who came through Corinth after Paul. His followers might have been impressed with how intellectual they

were. Maybe they were looking down on what they thought of as simpler Christians. Some were followers of Cephas, the Apostle Peter. These might have been those who were Jewish Christians, who were judging others for giving up too quickly the Jewish law. They were concerned about having too much freedom.

And Paul continues- Some of you say, I belong to Christ. What's wrong with that, you ask? Well, maybe there were some who thumbed their nose at anyone who felt they needed a teacher, or a preacher. I belong to Christ. I don't need any help from any leader.

These groups were confusing the message with the messenger, and were being judgmental of others. Paul points them back to Christ. Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? No to all three questions. He points them back to Christ. In fact, Paul mentions Christ or Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus fourteen times in the first 17 verses of this letter. He is pointing his people to Christ.

Why is Paul so concerned about unity in the church? I believe one of the reasons is because he sees the churches as outposts of mission. He sees them as alternative communities living out the reign of God in Christ, equipping Christians to be salt and light in the world. Paul knows that the church in Corinth needs to be unified enough in order to be who they need to be in this city.

Now, that doesn't mean they will agree on everything. Later in the letter, Paul writes about the strength that comes through our differences. We have different gifts, different strengths, your strength compensates for my weakness, and of those I have many. Paul says when we can agree on the basics of following Jesus, we can stand against the powers of this world, because Paul knows we cannot stand alone. Later in this letter he describes the church as the body of Christ. He does not picture the church as isolated Christians waging our own battles. This is why unity is so important for him. And there is strength in our differences. Remember, Paul is talking about unity, not uniformity. God has created incredible diversity in this creation, including among people, and then God said, This is very good!

There is a saying attributed to St. Augustine, but it really comes from a German theologian during the Thirty Years War, Rupertus Meldenius. - In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity.

We can have different perspectives on things, different understandings on how God is at work in our world, but we can agree to walk the path together, we can be charitable with each other, and in so doing we enrich each other. I need to hear your story, as I share mine with you.

When I was a pastor in Eugene back in the 1990s, the Bach Festival performed J. S. Bach's St. John's Passion. John's Gospel has been seen as anti-Semitic, in that John mentions the Jews 71 times in his Gospel, often in derogatory terms. The gospel has been used to persecute Jews down through the centuries. I was involved in campus ministry at the University of Oregon at the time, and some of us campus pastors felt the need to reach out to the Jewish community and show our solidarity.

So we offered an event with people from Jewish and Christian and other faith communities, where we expressed our affirmation of and solidarity with the Jewish community in Eugene. One of the verses quoted was from St. Paul in Romans. In speaking of the Jewish people, Paul declares, The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable, (Romans 11:29) meaning, Nobody can undo that first covenant with the Jewish people. There was healing amidst the hugs that night as we expressed unity in the midst of our diversity.

Paul ends this passage by pointing the Christians to the cross. Here is what he writes- "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power." He is not dismissing baptism here by the way. But he's writing to people who were impressed by who baptized them. So he points them to the cross- "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." The Greeks were impressed by discussions of truth and beauty, not the scandal of a cross. That's why the cross seems like foolishness. By the way, Paul's understanding of grace moves even wider- when he writes that letter to the

Romans, Paul says that through Jesus' act on the cross, righteousness and life are given *to all*. (Romans 5:18) The world is being saved.

The cross is God's startling address to the world that God will go to any length to reach out to us in love. God meets us in our suffering.

In the middle of this pandemic, as in all times, I am reminded of Paul's words in the heart of that letter to the Romans, where he says, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ- neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, no things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39) Amen.

Generous God, you have saved the world in the foolishness of a cross. You meet us in this pandemic, as you meet us in all suffering. May we know unity in our diversity, as we share your love with the world. Amen.