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1 Corinthians 1:10-18

MULTIPLICATION AND DIVISION

The third grade apparently thinks that math is really important. So when my son Ian started, his teacher warned us that the math homework would ramp up quite a bit. This was really bad news to the English major dad and the speech pathology mom, neither of whom have any sort of affinity (or proficiency) for math. But we have struggled through it with Ian, and we are laying plans for the future to make some math-loving friends or find an unemployed accountant who wants to do a little tutoring because we are fast reaching our math threshold.

Still, despite my shortcomings I was able to help Ian with multiplication and division recently. Now multiplication came pretty easy, but division was a hard concept. I tried to explain it like multiplication in reverse. That garnered a look from him like I was trying to trick him or something. Then I tried to break it down, like division were just a recipe for apple pie. No luck. So I gave up and read the teacher's instructions. She advised that we just memorize tables, which seemed archaic to me. Certainly in the age of I-Phones and refrigerators that produce their own grocery lists we have a better solution for understanding something than just doing it.

But what finally did the trick was the repetition...the rote action of doing division and memorizing the answers is what made it make sense to him. As he practiced the math, the bigger picture began to take shape. Somehow by *doing*, he got in touch with understanding. And that little lesson rings in my ears as we sit in this place we call a church...the same term used for dozens if not hundreds of buildings across the metro area, all of which profess to be Christian churches, but which stay separated one from the other for any number of reasons. And here, this morning, we have these words from the apostle Paul appealing to our unity over our division. I'm not sure how that plea even makes sense in our fractured and divided world, in the church and beyond.

The truth is that Paul's plea could be shouted from the rooftops today. I was having lunch with a friend recently and he shared with me that in a small town in Oklahoma – with a population of about 2300 people - there are 13 churches. I'll say that again - 2300 people and 13 churches. That's 176 persons per church if every single person available went to church AND dispersed themselves evenly.

What it more likely means is that there are 13 churches with about 10-75 people in each of them, all separated by minute doctrinal differences at best and bitter personal feuds at worst. And that's what is happening in a variety of ways around the world. We have turned the organization that is supposed to be about the delivery of the gospel – the *good news* – into a collection of camps, all separated by our different ideas about how to start a campfire or what the best marshmallows are.

And separated we are. I could talk about Baptists and Catholics, but that wouldn't be adequate for I'd be too non-specific. Am I talking about the Roman Catholics or the Coptic Catholics? How about the Russian Catholic, Maronite Catholic, Slovak Greek Catholic or Italo-Albanian Catholics? Would I be leaving out the Continental Baptists or the General six-principle Baptists or the very specific Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists? Are we kidding each other with unity? And where, pray tell, have the majority of these splits come from? We could hope critical issues that could not be mediated...but I think that we know better. I know that the generation that is just coming into its own knows better...and it's one of the reasons they don't show up.

You can almost hear Paul's frustration in his words - "...each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ'. Has Christ been chopped up into little pieces so we can each have a relic of our own? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" Are we missing the forest for the trees? Get it straight, Paul tells this community - it's a simple thing...you are baptized into the gospel, the message of what Jesus has done. What would happen if we replaced "I belong to the Baptists" or "I belong to the Episcopalians" or "I belong to the Congregationalists" with I belong to the *good news* that God is a God of love and the humbling awareness that if we gain everything and don't have love, we have nothing. Of course, owning up to that sounds like foolishness in the world in which we live. Love your neighbor as yourself? Pray for those who persecute you? Care for those in prison as if you were in prison yourself? Foolishness!

But *practice* this foolishness and you might think differently. Be a transmitter of wasteful love and compassion without strings attached...practice being a person who shows mercy and kindness instead of judgment...believe that it is more important to love than to be right and you might just see that what some would call foolishness we call good news.

As Christians, we are one in Christ, Paul says. Period. But that isn't the dominant idea in Corinth, nor is it for us today. And being Christian, Paul says, means that we are united in the same mind and purpose. That word "united" in Greek is the same word that is used in the gospels of Matthew and Mark to describe fishing nets that have been mended. It means to be fixed or restored. We are restored by being similarly oriented. We are restored, Paul will go on to argue in this letter, by emulating the power of the cross – what is foolishness to the rest of the world. We are restored by giving up even our claims of power and privilege the way that Jesus did when he said "love above all" and then lived it out even when it took him to his execution.

But the church in Corinth seems much more occupied with being in the right camp. Status was as important then as it is today. In first century Corinth, everything depended on who you were with. It was a culture of status. It mattered whose family you were part of, since your family's wealth, power, and influence (all of which ran through the father in this patriarchal society) determined your

wealth, power, and influence. It mattered which city you belonged to, since each city had its own laws and privileges. It mattered if you were a Roman citizen, if you belonged to a conquered nation within the empire, or to the "barbarian" tribes beyond the empire's control. It mattered if you were with Cephas, or Apollos, or Paul.

And now it matters whether you are Republican or Democrat, a fan of this university or of that one, a Presbyterian or a Methodist, a Baptist or a member of the United Church of Christ...heck it is even a mark of distinction to say that you are non-denominational...that's practically its own denomination these days. So we bicker over cultural, social or, worse yet, theological ideas while the world hungers and thirsts for justice and compassion. If you want to know what's keeping people out of the church it isn't that they haven't found the right denomination, it's that we've lost sight of what really matters.

Where in the midst of all of this division and bickering is a heart for what really matters? I'm not talking about our system of governance or the worship style...I'm not focusing on whether you are sprinkled, dunked or dipped...I'm talking about the essential problems – the ones that threaten lives, our planet or our future together Why is that not the central aspect of the Christian life?

Instead of us wondering about what Jesus means for our eternal lives or for our own individual prosperity, why can we not see the overwhelming overall theme of the gospel stories – that Jesus comes to set us free from the trap of our own narrow self-absorption and to a world that is not filled with either capitalism or socialism, but what John Dominic Crossan calls “enoughism”? If that were our primary concern, then the rest of the details would just have to wait until we solved that particular issue. In other words, once no one is hungry we can fuss over the right way to do baptism.

Ironically, the ritual of baptism is designed to usher us into a new life, not so we can get trapped in that ritual – making *it* the point – but so that we can ritually acknowledge what is supposed to be happening spiritually...we are dying to one life and taking on a new one. We are resurrected into Christ...at least that's what Paul says. And if we are resurrected in Christ, then we are one as Christ is one. Jew or Gentile? No difference. Slave or free? Who cares? Man or woman? Doesn't matter...and neither does dunked or sprinkled. But be careful, Paul will say, this doesn't mean you are some amalgamation of humanity – your diversity makes up the Body of Christ – head and ears, hands and feet, eyes and mouth...all individual parts, part of a whole. Being in Christ sets our differences in a new context...it is not a statement of uniformity, but a claim of belonging. Being united means that none of our differences lie outside of the realm of Christ - so to say that you are male or female, Republican or Democrat, Church of Christ or Catholic, gay, straight, bi, queer, trans, undecided...none of these things fall outside the capacity of Christ.

Paul is declaring something radical here - that whatever the gospel is, it isn't found in our baptism...it is found in what we do, in where we place our thought and our purpose. It's the big problem with us reading Paul, he builds a whole lot of his ministry on this Greek word *pistis*, which we translate as faith. The problem is that this is an active verb in Greek, which means that Paul tells us to be faithing, something we can't do in English, but that we can do in life. Pistis is something that we do, not something that we claim to believe and then carry on with whatever we were doing.

The church has become so enamored with faith as belief that it has forgotten faith as practice. We're trying to restore our lives with elaborate theological doctrines or interesting intellectual discussions instead of engaging the life we live daily as if it were in every moment a chance to practice being hospitable, loving, compassionate and generous. It is the *practice* of these attributes that leads us to understanding. We seem to try to get the understanding first, and then maybe we'll be loving or kind or gracious. But what people are searching for won't be found in any one denomination. It will be found in church communities, and communities that won't even call themselves church, that are willing to reach for something authentic, to risk the diverse and ever changing face of faith as a practice...where the music is sometimes different, the liturgy changes and our comfort isn't found in the familiar but in the experience of the wide-range of God's touch...where liturgy is something more than just recitation, it is an enactment of our lives as people of faith, it sets before us words and actions and images that remind us to reach for the things we cannot yet see.

Yet we live in an age in which many think that the church is dying. Congregations are smaller. Participation is waning. People no longer consider it a given that you will go to church at all. While I believe that we are undergoing some dramatic change, the reports of the church's demise are, in my opinion, greatly exaggerated. But this I will confess - the church...*this church*...will look very different in 30 years. There is a movement afoot that is being called the emerging church. I don't know what that term means, it's kind of like being called a post-liberal or a Republican-in-name-only. But it is a way to talk about the vast number of people who are leaving the confines of the traditional church and are moving on. Tired of feeling like they have to keep up the claim, "I belong to this group" or "I belong to that group" they are reaching out for something more authentic.

This movement is made up of people from all kinds of backgrounds, but what is surprising are the number of evangelicals and fundamentalists it encompasses who are walking away from the traditional models because what they read in the Bible, experience in the world and feel in their prayer lives doesn't mesh with the dogma. What is strange is that they are expressing a desire to have their faith be influenced by both heart and head, to be centered on justice and peace and to be relevant as a daily practice. Now I don't know about you, but that sounds like progressive Christianity. In their book [Toward a Hopeful Future: Why the Emergent Church is Good News for Mainline Congregations](#), authors Phil Snider and Emily Bowen - both ministers at Brentwood Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Springfield, Missouri - call for nothing short of a revolution for mainline Protestant congregations. They call for the mainline church to see these people leaving the evangelical and fundamentalist tradition and to reach out to them not as a way to multiply their church, but as an act of hospitality and inclusion. For if we do it that way, our compassion will be authentic and our attempts to be the church genuine. We will have heard Paul from so long ago beckoning us to a faith that is not based on an equation, as if God were a vending machine that we could simply transact a blessing from.

We are a refugee church, have been for a long time. So as refugees we should be used to packing up our tents and moving...being constantly on the lookout for new horizons, being true to our calling to not simply get lost in our eloquent wisdom, but to proclaim and practice the gospel. Maybe that means for us, as our own version of church, that as we reach out to our brothers and sisters who need a little more head to balance their heart, that we might look for some balance too. We might know

that the evangelical path has things to teach us also. We might see that our practice of Christianity always means that we are not just welcoming people into the fold, we are constantly changing the fold.

I am sincere when I say look for some changes in this service, and for the opportunities to do 'worship' here at Mayflower in the next year. For if we say that we belong to "liberalism" or to "this worship style or that one"...if we say that we belong to "tradition" or to the "right kinds of music" then we haven't seen the forest for the trees. We'd still be using division to try and multiply...and even a guy with my math skills can tell you that doesn't work. For we were not sent to practice worship the right way or to be the protectors of a tradition...we were sent to proclaim the gospel, and maybe not just with eloquent words, but with our practice. Robin and I have long held that while we appreciate the kind words about our sermons, it is what you do that makes the gospel alive. 363 feeding the homeless and the whiz kids tutoring children, an amazing witness to compassion in Nicaragua, Mobile Meals and the new ideas and experiences our youth engage in...these speak the gospel better than we ever can.

But these things have happened because you all were willing to pitch your tents in a new place...to reach out and practice your faith even when it seemed foolish to do so. We are at our best when we know that we don't belong to a leader or a sermon, to a worship style or the way we've always done things, to this building or even to this church...but when we know that we are proclaiming the gospel. For when we do God shows up. And, as usual, you just might be surprised about when, where and how God shows up. We always have been...traditionally speaking, of course.



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