

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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 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.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 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.

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. **(New Revised Standard Version)**

In the history of St.A's we have enjoyed times of unity, and struggled with times of division. This has been true in our 7 years together and I understand the season prior to the start of my ministry at St.A's to have been particularly tense and divided. And the first few years here I experienced fallout from that divided time. For all sorts of congregations, ours included, loss and grief, disagreement on doctrine or decisions, attachments to or struggles with particular pastors can lead to splintering. People grieve. Families leave, or simply stop coming. Transitional seasons are always challenging for churches— and St.A's did endure a long season of transition.

Some of you are probably aware that the work I do for the presbytery is the facilitation of a new Conflict Assessment and Referral/Reconciliation/Resolution Team. Fewer of you are probably aware that our team has been actively assessing conflict dynamics in the presbytery as a whole for the past several months. Some of you might even be asking "Presbytery? What's that?" And "Conflict? What conflict?" As a Presbyterian pastor I am not a member of the congregations I serve, but rather am a member of the regional council of churches known as the Presbytery, in our case the Presbytery of the Cascades, the collective of all the Presbyterian congregations in Western Oregon, southwest Washington, and the tip of Northern California. Our congregation is a member of that presbytery too. Most of the churches in the

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presbytery are in the greater Portland area, but there are churches and church members in parts far flung from here. This gives us the opportunity to live into unity with a wide range of people. And at any given moment as we attempt to serve Christ in this region in very different contexts and circumstances, conflict arises. In the past year there has been open conflict on the floor of presbytery meetings and the new Presbytery leader wants help understanding all that underlies this.

One thing that underlies the conflict is a great deal of anxiety and grief in the system. Many churches have closed or are on the brink of closing in the wake of the pandemic. Churches that are still viable are smaller than we were and all of us are lacking active participation, in larger numbers, of younger families. We are anxious about the long term viability of our ministries and we grieve what we have lost. You feel this. You look around and see empty spots and think of people we have lost— to death, to other churches, to we don't know what. There is great great grief among us. Grief over global circumstances, certainly, but also over all the people who have left St. Andrew's over the years, particularly in the not-too-distant past. It really hurts when people leave. Every time someone cuts off from our community, it ends our opportunity to grow in relationship— every relationship, and particularly every difficult relationship, is an opportunity for growth. And I know how awkward it can be when you bump into someone who has left. I know how hard it is when there is negative chatter about your church in the wider community. I know how much we can miss people and how much, sometimes, we feel resentment or anger towards those who have walked away. A mixed swirl of emotion accompanies church division. I know. Deeply I know. And churches all throughout our presbytery are living with such dynamics. We all know.

So did members and leaders of the early church. The first letter to the Corinthians captures a living moment of communication to a living church with problems. It thus often speaks fresh to living churches today... with problems of our own.

Many suggest that verse ten of this first chapter, the first verse we read today, represents the thesis, or the main argument, of this entire letter to the Corinthians. "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.” With this plea to the church in Corinth I hear the voice of a concerned parent... this is the way things SHOULD be, children, no divisions, united in the same mind and the same purpose... the use of the word “should” indicates that this is not, in fact, the way things are. If an appeal is being made, there is work that needs to be done to arrive at these goals. And this entire letter is trying to make the importance of this work and the nature of this work totally clear.

Being of the same mind and purpose, for a group of strong willed, diverse people, well, this is always a work in progress. It is for us; it was for the Corinthians.

The interesting thing, though, is that it appears that the Corinthian church didn't think they had a problem with unity. Chapter seven suggests that they wrote a letter to Paul enumerating the problems they were having for which they desired input from their founding apostle, but for the first six chapters of this letter Paul doesn't take up their presenting concerns. Instead, he beats a drum for unity. The main argument of the letter to which he returns again and again all throughout is the appeal to unity stated at the start of our passage today. They think they've got problems with sexual immorality, meat eating, etc. He thinks, on the basis of reports he's receiving about them, that their root problem is division.

What he's hearing is that there are quarrels among them, in particular that they seem to be breaking up into factions claiming loyalty to different teachers and preachers. Some were in Paul's camp. Some in the camp of Apollos (likely a far more eloquent speaker than Paul.) And some in the camp of Cephas- this is probably a reference to Peter who may or may not have ever visited the community himself. But some, apparently, were claiming allegiance to Christ. This would seem to be a good thing, on the basis of everything else Paul has to say, but... if this claim was made to put some in a position of relative superiority over the others we begin to see the problem. “You belong to Paul? Well, I belong to Christ.” The Corinthian community is fragmenting; note the repeated use of the pronoun “I” and the use of the word each... each of you is saying I... I... I...

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Though their baptisms render them one in Christ Jesus, they are splitting into many. And it seems likely that some were claiming to be better than others.

Though there was officially only one congregation in Corinth at the time this letter was written, this congregation was subdivided into several house churches, mirroring the general organization of the city into distinct households. It isn't hard to imagine that a growing congregation that meets in several distinct sub-groupings on a regular basis might be ripe for quarrels and divisions. You know best the people with whom you eat on a regular basis and those with whom you fellowship and study. You trust best the people you know. And distrust of those you don't know is common.

Let's think a bit more about our current engagement with St. A's. We all have comfort zones in church. Perhaps yours is in the choir loft, or maybe it is the a particular Bible Study group, or the Friday coffee chat. Maybe it's even the board of elders or deacons, or Foundation. But how are you cultivating relationships outside your comfort zones in this congregation? How might you do this in the months ahead? With whom do you tend to talk during coffee hour? With your immediate family or oldest and dearest friends? Might you strike up a conversation with someone who has long intrigued you and see how he or she is doing? Might you reach out to someone who has bothered you in the past and express love and compassion? Might you sign on to the Friday coffee chat to see whom you can get to know? Might you ask for a church directory and send a card to three people you don't know at all, inviting them to call you or e-mail you? Might you do something kind for someone who is named in prayer even if they are not someone you know well? If division has happened before in this congregation, it can happen again. But it doesn't have to happen. The appeal of this passage, kindred, is for us.

One clear word of caution that we can take from this passage of scripture is the danger that rests in over identifying with particular human leaders. What matters, Paul insists, is not the person who is preaching, but the message that is being preached. In the appeal at the start of this passage Paul names everyone in the community as kin and speaks of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lordship of Jesus Christ is the basis for the unity of the community. No particularly charismatic leader can sustain unity. No particularly fine

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preacher can do it. Claiming allegiance to anyone other than the crucified Christ in whose name we are baptized is a source of division. And when folks over-identify with particular pastors this is what happens. Because no pastor can possibly please everyone, strong identification on the part of some members of the community with particular leaders can lead to fragmentation in the community. If you are a baptized Christian you belong to God, through belonging to Christ. If you think that you belong to the Presbyterians, or to Pastor Sarah, or to Pastor Brett, or to Pastor Chris, or to Pastor Jeremy, or Pastor Tom, or Pastor Patty, or Pastor Charlie... you have a problem. If I encourage you to think you belong to me I have an even bigger problem. Perhaps the upcoming sabbatical is a good tool for helping to de-center me!

My job as preacher is to make sure that you encounter week after week the God who loves us SO much that she took on flesh in Jesus Christ, breaking into this world, and through life, death, and resurrection opened the way to salvation for all of humankind. If you get caught up in my pretty voice or the way I put words together, I may well be failing you. Because it's not about me. It's about Jesus, the Jesus who bled and died on the cross, revealing just how broken we are, and just how much God is willing to do about it. That's what it's about. And when we remember that, when we allow ourselves to be deeply touched by God's choice to be known in this way, we get over ourselves; we humble ourselves; we are able to truly love others, all others, and to be of the same mind and purpose. Our petty quarrels can cease. Our love can increase. So the report about us out there in the community will be "Oh, how they love one another..." May it be so.