

GLUE

1 Corinthians 1:10-18
A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
First Presbyterian Church
New York, New York
August 12, 2018

Most preachers who wrestle with biblical texts know that there is often a profound distance between any given text and the congregation she or he is addressing on any particular Sunday. The culture and communities of the biblical world were just so different from their counterparts today. Fred Craddock once said, “There is no question about it: It is a long way from Capernaum to Cleveland, from Galatia to Galveston, from Patmos to Paducah.”¹ That is to say, the biblical context is rarely in any way the same as the current, local context, and so part of the challenge of preaching, if done rightly, is to find ways to bridge that distance by narrative and metaphor in order to help folks find some current meaning in an ancient text.

Yet, when one reads Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth, this very distance seems to collapse. When in 2018 one reads Paul’s words about the problems facing the church in Corinth, he or she is likely to get what Yogi Berra once famously described as “*déjà vu* all over again.” It strikes most readers that they have been in this church before, even if they’ve never been to the Mediterranean. Many people believe they grew up in this church... or they attended this church during their college years... or they left this church to come to move here. The Church in Corinth, you see, has characteristics that remind us of a lot of churches.

Unfortunately, what makes the Corinthians so recognizable is not their generosity... not their sense of mission or their compassion for those among them who were in need. The hallmark distinctiveness of the Corinthian congregation is rather... well... their discord and dissension. They were breaking apart into armed camps... armed, at least, with angry words. Paul wrote the whole First Letter to the Corinthians as a pastoral letter to remind them of their unity and to call them away from the factions that were tearing the church apart. “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” (1:10).

Paul has heard through the grapevine, from Chloe’s people, that there have been quarrels. (There’s a Chloe in every congregation, you know... and their reports always start with “people are saying...”) But Chloe’s people have let Paul know that the congregation has divided up into vocal factions tossing barbs at one another, losing sight of what it is exactly that binds them together. Some of them say that they are followers of Paul, others claim to follow Cephas... and still others, a bit more arrogant than some,

¹ Fred B. Craddock, “Preaching to Corinthians,” *Interpretation*, April 1990, 158. The discussion of “distance” at the outset of this sermon draws upon his work.

say that they “belong to Christ,” which, of course, is what all Christians should say, except that in this case, “I belong to Christ,” implies that the others in Corinth do not.²

Many Christians have encountered that congregation somewhere at some time. And in most cases, the same old tendencies have been behind the dissension. Someone takes a stand on something as major as the mission of the church or as minor as a line item in the budget, which is all well and good, but then takes the treacherous next step of attaching the “unfaithful” label to those who think differently. Someone argues in behalf of a particular proposal and, when it is not adopted, uncharitably calls the decision “unchristian.” The congregation puts up a sign out front that says, “All Welcome,” but when some folks accept the invitation and come, well, you know... people start grumbling, “But we didn’t mean *them*.” Faithful people gather for study of Scripture and come to differences in the way they interpret the texts, and instead of continuing the conversation and struggling to be faithful together, one group leaves, saying, “We belong to Christ,” all the while implying that the others, who read the text differently, do not. We may have been part of a church like that somewhere along our way. Some of us have carried the scars from the experience for a long time. Denominationally speaking, we lived in that church for decades.

We’d like to say that such divisions are not in *this* congregation’s DNA. And, compared to Corinth and to many congregations, my sense is that First Church does have fewer conflicts. But there have been moments of struggle and hurt feelings and indignation even here in recent years. We live in a fractured and fragmented culture, and many of the divisive issues out there are issues of importance to those of us in here. And internally, as the Mission Review process made clear, there have been sometimes painful disagreements and separations.

If we do not treat one another with care, such matters can test our unity, can strain our sense of community. It’s true that some issues beg for a faithful response, even if we risk disagreement or error. To remain silent in the face of injustice and oppressive behavior is, without a doubt, to be unfaithful to the God of justice and compassion. But on many things faithful Christians may disagree about the best and most faithful course of action. My hope for you – for us – is the same hope that Paul expressed for the Corinthians...that we will commit to be faithful to one another even as we seek to be faithful to Christ in these demanding days. Acknowledging our differences, our prayer is that we will yet find the essential glue that binds us together and celebrate the unity that is possible for us in Jesus Christ.

Later in this first letter to the Corinthians, Paul will propose the human body as a metaphor for the church and will say that while each part of the body has a different function, all parts are necessary for the growth and health of the body (cf. chapter 12). I smile at what Barbara Brown Taylor says about that metaphor:

The problem begins when you put me in community with a bunch of other people who look, smell, think, talk, and act differently from me. One is perfectly

² Cf. Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation commentary, Louisville, John Knox Press, 1997, 23.

cheerful, but she can talk for thirty minutes straight without stopping to breathe, while another has been so beaten up by life that everything he says comes out as a sneer. One speaks so intimately of God that everyone around her feels like a spiritual slouch, and another is a complete imposter, who prays big hot air balloons on Sunday morning and then goes home to knock his family around. “Now you are the body of Christ,” Paul says, “and individually members of it.”

I like it better when we were talking about [hands and feet, she said.] I do not handle the infinite variety outside of me nearly as well as I handle the infinite variety inside of me. Because other people challenge my established routines.... Do you know what I mean? You join a community looking for – what? – closeness, support, some measure of safety – and nine times out of ten what you get instead is this holy struggle to live and work with people who are just as angular as you are. The brains want everybody to act like brains and the hearts want everyone to act like hearts, and there is always a hangnail who brings out the hangnail in everyone else.³

Parker Palmer once defined “community” as “that place where the person you least want to live with always lives.”⁴ Folks keep trying to fashion their own communities out of people just like themselves, people who will support their own well-honed convictions and never challenge them. But God seems always to call us into real communities of endless variety. That’s the way God seems to like it.

My late pastor-friend K.C. Ptomey, whom many of you knew from his interim stint here at First Church, used to liken the church in Corinth and the church in many other places to the paintings of the nineteenth century French neo-impressionist painter, Georges Seurat. Seurat, you may remember, made his mark by making marks... dots, to be exact, in a style known as Pointillism. He created his paintings not with brush strokes, but with thousands and thousands of dots of paint on the canvas. Each dot is absolutely individual and separate from the next. And yet, if one stands back from one of his paintings – say, *A Sunday Afternoon at the Ile de la Grande Jatte* – what one sees is a view of an afternoon at the shore, a remarkable cohesion of color and expression. K.C. argued that the church was like that, and further that Paul was asking the Corinthians and us to take a few steps back – to back up from our close encounters with one another with our seemingly deep and significant differences and divided loyalties – far enough to consider the whole. “What we will discover,” he said, if we will but do so, “is that all those individual, unique dots that seemingly have no relationship to one another are, in fact, by the grace of God, a beautiful, subtle, masterpiece....”⁵

I’m drawn to that metaphor, as I am to Paul’s metaphor of the body. Or how about another? Have you ever watched skilled stone masons at work? I have, and they are amazing. If you ever have a chance, spend an hour watching the construction of a

³ Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, Cambridge/Boston, Cowley Publications, 1997, 86-87..

⁴ Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, as cited by Taylor (cf. note 3).

⁵ K.C. Ptomey, unpublished paper on this text, presented to the January 2005 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Austin, Texas.

stone wall. The masons gather stones of varying dimensions... pick up different ones as if testing for shape or size... then place them in some stacking order... rearranging them for more stability. Even so, the stacks look a bit precarious. But then one of the masons will go to a trough, where, with a hoe, he or she will mix some mortar, and then, with a trowel wielded like a brush in the hands of an artist, seal the wall stones into place... precarious no longer, soon sturdy and secure.

Kathleen Norris once wrote of a story a Trappist abbot told her about a psychologist who had conducted a weeklong retreat for his monastery, during which monks of all ages had met with the visitor to talk about their lives. After a few days the psychologist came to the abbot and said: "I thought the age of miracles was past! How in the world can these people stand to live together for one day, let alone for years?" The abbot responded, "I don't know. I've never been able to figure it out. And I'm afraid to ask." Says Norris:

I respect that abbot's humility, the good sense he has to leave a mystery alone and accept it with gratitude. For him the age of miracles is not past because Christ is still present with his community, and in the church. In the Gospel of John, when the disciple Thomas mistakes Jesus for the way *to* an abstract and certain truth, Jesus quickly sets him straight, saying "I am the way, the truth and the life." ... Jesus offers us the truth not as a thing but as a way, an opening on the path between the spirit and the letter of the law. [A way] between pushing for precision and exactitude in matters of faith and practice and knowing when to leave well enough alone.... A way of forbearance, following the command that Paul gives [us], to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."⁶

What, do you suppose, is our mortar? What is the glue that binds us together and lends us strength and teaches us forbearance and keeps us from temptations of Corinthian proportions? Different as we are in temperament and background, in thought and conviction, what is it that binds us to each other? What is it, truly, that gives us our unity, when pride and prejudice and other polarizing factors would seek to drive us apart? Is it anything other than the grace of Christ? We love one another, because God in Christ first loved us. We bind ourselves to one another, because Christ first bound God's self to us. The mortar, if you will, the connective tissue that binds this body together is nothing other than grace. And the sign, the seal, and the reminder of that grace is our baptism... and that which casts its shadow across us as the water touches our brows... is the cross. There's the glue. There it is. And it is stronger, I tell you, than *anything* that would ever seek to pull us apart.

⁶ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1998, 159-160.