

“Healing for a divided community”

1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:17-23
(January 22, 2023)

What a time we seem to be living through! I was scrolling through some posts on an internet forum. There’s usually lots of helpful information and friendly banter there. But all of a sudden, somebody wrote in to say they’d been offended. And they’re unhappy. And there’s plenty of blame to be passed around. And they’re not going to participate anymore.

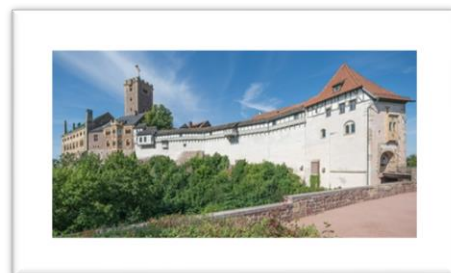
And I thought, “Yikes! Where did that come from? Did someone make an insensitive remark? You know how we put things out there without really stopping to think how it might be received, or how it might affect the lives of others. We’re so intent on letting our voice be heard.

Or maybe someone heard it and over-reacted. Made assumptions about where that person was coming from or what was implied. Communication is tricky at the best of times. And without benefit of facial expression, and body language, and tone of voice, it’s even harder.



Then again, not all disagreements are limited to problems with communication. Some of them have to do with matters of real substance.

I was speaking this week with a Lutheran colleague of mine who made a pilgrimage to visit historical sites marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. One of the places he visited was Wartburg Castle, where Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German.



There he also saw the entrance to a 30 foot deep dungeon where Fritz Erbe, an Anabaptist, was imprisoned until his death in 1548. His crime? He refused to have his children baptized, a conviction he held by reading the very Bible which Luther had translated in the very same building.

Those were dangerous times, for all kinds of people. Holding on to your convictions had enormous consequences.



Photo by Maxim Sokolov,
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Freedom_Convoy_2022,_Ottawa,_February_12_\(3\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Freedom_Convoy_2022,_Ottawa,_February_12_(3).jpg)

Well today is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and thankfully Lutherans are no longer imprisoning Anabaptists. Nor are Catholics imprisoning Lutherans. We’re in a better place, I think. But we still have problems.

It’s a particularly *divisive* time in the world around us. It was about a year ago that a group of Truckers rallied in Ottawa to protest ... well, all kinds of things. I hate to even bring it up. Because opinions differ. And feelings still run high. And none of us seem very well equipped to speak about any of it.

The divisions in our society are glaringly present. Covid, climate change, gender identity, immigration, black lives, indigenous lives, federal/provincial relations – to name a few. Have I touched your hot-button, can you feel your temperature rising?

Sorry! But you see how these things seep into almost every part of our lives. Even in the church. Here, in the community of faith, we are not immune from these outside influences. And on top of these we have our own. Questions of theology and ethics and biblical interpretation and form of worship – all of which are vigorously debated. Sometimes bringing splits and divisions within congregations and denominations.

How do we live our lives of faith in this milieu of controversy? How do we find our centre, a place of healing and stability, in the chaotic storms that swirl around us, and within?



I guess it won't surprise you to learn that the church has always had divisions. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he writes to a community where there has been a breakdown of relationship. Last week we read Paul's pleasant words of greeting. But now he gets down to the nitty-gritty.

"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters ..." Notice how he addresses them as brothers and sisters, members of his family.

"I appeal to you ... by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ... That all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you." That's a tip-off, right away. There are things that divide them.

I want you to be "united in the same mind and the same purpose." How does Paul know there are divisions? Here's where things get interesting. He has spies in the congregation! "It's been reported to me by Chloe's people ..." Chloe's people have blown the whistle on the Corinthian congregation, and word has travelled to Paul.



I hear "that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters." We don't have to dig very deep to find out what those quarrels are.

The congregation has separated into factions, loyal to one leader or another. "Each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.'" How did I get dragged into this, Paul wonders!

"Has Christ been divided?" If so, there is something fundamentally wrong with that. Because it goes against the very nature of who Christ is, and what he came to do.



Is Christ divided in our churches today, we might ask? To a casual observer it might seem that way. How many denominations do we have represented in this city alone? How many varieties of Mennonites? Or Baptists? Or ... any other?

The very fact that we find ourselves in a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity says two things: First, that we still need to pray for Christian unity. And second, that at least some of us *are* still praying for Christian unity! Which is great!

Paul is aghast at the divisions in his beloved family. “Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” he asks. “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that none of you can say that you were baptized in my name.”

“Oh wait ...” You can hear the exasperation in his voice as he dictates to his scribe: “I guess I did baptize a couple of others, I can’t remember who ... But that’s not the point! The point is Christ sent me to proclaim the gospel.” And the gospel, as Paul sees it, is summed up in the message of the cross.

It’s a message that brings us together. To “those who are being saved” –and that means Paul and Apollos and Cephas and all their followers, the whole the blessed congregation of Corinth, even with all their many fractures and opinions and points of view - “it is the power of God.”



The message of the cross is the power of God. Why? Because there we see the love and grace of God, poured out lavishly upon us all.

You want to know how much God loves you? Look at this! There at the cross we find forgiveness for our sins. There at the cross we receive the gift of reconciliation. All of us sinners. All of us loved by God. All of us redeemed, made new. Invited into a family of faith, the community of God’s people.



Next to the grandeur and significance of the cross, don’t our quarrels shrink in size? Next to the suffering love of God in Jesus, our arguments tend to lose their steam.



You see what Paul is doing here? He’s bringing us back to the *centre*. He’s not allowing himself to be drawn into the argument, whatever it is.

That’s where I get tripped up. I find myself wanting to enter the argument. Because I have opinions, like everyone else. And of course I think I’m right (or I wouldn’t have them.) And I want to convince others, and bring them around to my way of thinking. And all of those things appeal as much to my over-size ego as anything.

Do people always have to agree with me? Well no, of course not! Truth be told (and this is difficult for me to admit) there are times when it’s probably better that they don’t! None of us have the corner on truth, though we may like to think we do. All truth finds its beginning and end in this one we call Jesus.



A Discussion of the Talmud, by Carl Schleicher (1825-1903), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_Discussion_of_the_Talmud.jpg

Jesus, like any good Rabbi, engaged in argument and disputation. But he never stopped loving the people on the other side. He never stopped seeing any of them as anything other than children of God. And in the end, he gave his life in love for them, each and every one.



The saving love of God in Jesus Christ! Isn’t that, ultimately, what we’re about here in our community of faith?

Today we remember our Anabaptist heritage, giving thanks for the values that have been handed down to us. And for the living communities of

believers that have spread around the world. Like that church in Africa that sent us greetings. We celebrate the ties that bind us together in our Mennonite family.

But in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we also celebrate the ties that unite us with *all* disciples of Jesus, folks from many traditions, not just our own. Because together we belong to the whole church of Jesus Christ.



I often think of some wisdom one of my professors in seminary shared in class. “Preach on the big themes of our faith,” he said. “Focus on those. Don’t be held captive by some cause, or pet project, or whatever happens to be popular in the day. Those things may have value. But be sure to emphasize the great themes of our faith.”

In our Gospel reading today, we heard the central message of Jesus, the one thing he was called to proclaim and that energized his entire ministry: “Repent,” he said, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

With this ministry in mind, Jesus began to call disciples. Two sets of brothers: first Simon Peter and Andrew. Then James and John. All fishers by profession, hearing Jesus, they dropped their nets and followed him.



There must have been something very compelling about Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom. And you know, there still is!



We are here because we’ve heard that voice. We’ve answered his call. Me – a person who grew up Baptist, and ministered there for over 30 years. And you – a people called Mennonite, who took a risk to welcome this outsider and bring him into your family of faith with grace and a generous spirit.

Here we are, answering the call of Jesus in our collective lives. Celebrating what makes each of us unique. And working *together* for a larger purpose. I think Paul might be rather pleased!



We began this sermon talking about division. And we’ve moved to the power of God’s love in Jesus to draw us together into one. Here’s what I ask: That you consider what healing you might need to do in whatever divided community you are part of. Whether here, in our church family, or beyond.

Has your loyalty been to something, or someone, *other* than to Christ? To someone who articulates your particular preferences. To a certain political ideology? To a cause, whatever it is, however admirable? Is there division in your own family? Among colleagues or neighbours?

Is there anything you need to do to heal that division? Reach out? Reconnect? Ask forgiveness? Repent? Make amends? Attempt to reconcile?

We live in a divided world – in the church and out of it. But we follow a Saviour who heals our lives. And we proclaim the power of the cross as the source of God’s reconciling love! Amen.