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Discord – 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Unity is one of the recurring themes of the Bible. But the Bible and our lives are also jammed packed full of disunity. And this is the way that the Bible works. The Bible paints a picture of how we are supposed to live . . . what we were created to do and be. Our lives then are movements towards that ideal.

True unity and the avoidance of divisions seems like such an impossible ideal for us as humans in relationship with one another, though. It is hard enough for Dana and me to agree on a place to eat sometimes . . . so when the Bible calls us to perfect unity, that can seem a little crazy and impossible.

The passage we are going to examine this morning comes from 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. The sin from Galatians 5 that we are looking at is “discord.” Some translations have “contention” or “strife.” But the basic problem is that humans sinfully struggle to get along, even in the church.

Let’s begin by reading this passage. **Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17.**

Paul is calling the Corinthians to avoid divisions and arguments and to be “perfectly united in mind and thought.”

“Perfectly united in mind and thought.” We are often so far from believing this is possible that we convince ourselves that it would be boring or a bad idea. We convince ourselves that it is more exciting to mix it up a little . . . and that no one would want to live in a world where everyone thought exactly alike.

The theme of unity and oneness is unmistakable in the Bible though. In our passage, Paul is not calling the Corinthians to anything new, but is affirming God’s consistent story throughout the Bible.

We understand God as a perfect unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They are separate and distinct, yet one. They think and act in perfect unison.

And at the beginning of time when God creates the world we are told that God created men and women, two separate and distinct beings, but called them to join together and become one flesh.

When God chooses the Israelites to be His people and His followers, he calls them to be a faithful and united community centered on God.

And the work of Jesus Christ is all about restoring our relationship with God, each other, and creation. Jesus became one of us. Died on our behalf for our forgiveness. Resurrected from the dead giving us the opportunity for new life. Left, but sent the Holy Spirit, which empowered us to be one with each other in community. The community of the church becomes “one” in Christ.

You cannot avoid the theme of oneness and unity in the Bible . . . every movement of God is away from divisions and discord and towards community and sharing.

Let's look at what is going on in this specific situation in the Corinth Church. Remember that the sin that we are focusing in on is that of “discord.”

It seems that the problem that Paul is dealing with is that various people have decided they are taking sides in the church based upon who they are following. One says, “I follow Paul.” Another that they follow Apollos. And another follows Cephas. And finally, the last says that he follows Christ. (And we have a winner)

How common it is for us to want to align ourselves with someone, usually the latest and greatest. We see this in our culture and the Christian community all the time. Television and the media have enticed us into believing our most valuable relationships are with those with the most authority or coolest place of influence. We find ourselves telling stories so that others know how close we are to the boss or small group leader or local celebrity or rich person and so on. **We crave access to “insider” knowledge so that we can share it and everyone will know how well-connected we are.**

We take a great deal of pride in who we know and who we are close to. We want everyone to know how awesome we are.

I can remember struggling with pride and wanting to be associated with important people a few years ago. When I was in my first year of law school and before I had decided to enter ministry, I still played

around in the Illinois political scene. **One day I was invited with my dad to an office in downtown Chicago to discuss some horse related legislation.** I didn't know everyone that was going to be there, but I had done some work on some proposals while in law school. There were 6 or 7 of us in the meeting that I can remember. Me, my dad, a colleague of his, the Governor-elect at the time, Rod Blagojevich (you probably know him from The Apprentice – his career went in a bad direction), his chief of staff, and the owner of a couple horse race tracks in Chicago. It was an interesting experience, especially for me being all of about 22. I don't really remember the details, but I remember Blagojevich not knowing much about horses and talking about some idea about possibly campaigning on a barge all the way down the Illinois side of the Mississippi River.

Anyway, I went back to the law school and made sure to name drop the Governor so everyone knew of my “insider” connections. **It is this type of thing that destroys community . . . whenever we, out of pride, seek to elevate ourselves above others, we are no longer seeking to live with, but above.**

This week, Blagojevich's criminal trial continued and one of the people that testified this week and said that he was shaken down by Blagojevich was that racetrack owner that was also in our meeting. Let's just say that Rod and I are not that close any more.

So one way we see unity trashed in the church is people's pride leading them to choose brag about insider connections.

Another problem is the opposite, when people are so averse to leadership that no matter what they say they are a contrarian. Sometimes our pride is damaged when others talk about someone else's gifts or skills. You know these people. You say, “man that is a beautiful yard.” And they say, “yeah, it is because they put masses of chemicals on it.” Or you say, “That guy is really kind, I like him.” And they say, “he might be kind, but he probably gets taken advantage of all the time.”

Our competitive nature and pride will cause us to disparage someone because we feel threatened by them. Usually what happens is that a friend of ours says something praising someone else and we feel threatened, we worry that our friend might think the other person is better than us – thus we come up with something negative that we can say about them to bring them back to earth.

We struggle to understand community as a diverse group of people with some people better at some things and others better at others. Instead, we see the good in others as a threat to us, rather than an asset.

Our pride interferes with community and unity, and causes various levels of discord.

This is what is happening in Corinth. Paul has received news that they are bickering and arguing over who to follow. And they are pitting who they prefer for leadership against one another. Kind of, a my leader is better than your leader type of thing.

And it appears that one of the status things they were using to brag and argue about was who baptized them. So someone was puffing themselves up in the community because they were baptized by Paul and someone else talking about how faithful they are because they were baptized by Apollos. Jockeying for power and prestige within the church.

I haven't really heard anyone bragging about being baptized by someone special in the churches I have been a part of, but I have heard people taking significant pride in the tasks they complete . . . saying for instance, well, the pastor wanted me to do this job. Or I am in a position of leadership. Or I have been here longer than you have.

Such twisted competition destroys community.

Imagine how different our understanding of Jesus would be if on the evening of his last supper with his disciples - if instead of getting down on his knees and washing the feet of his disciples, he would have said, **“you know who my father is . . . yeah, my dad is God . . . who is your dad, that is what I thought . . . just a human . . . wash your own feet.”**

Nothing destroys unity and creates discord like someone that decides that they are better than everyone else. Once “us” becomes a bunch of “I's” community loses its grasp and divisions and discord arise.

So this is the situation that Paul is faced with. A splintered and separated church. To these problems he teaches the truth of the Gospel.

What is it that Paul tells them and us about unity then?

He begins with calling them to a high standard of being “perfectly united in mind and thought.” We find this term, “perfect,” a lot in the Bible and it makes us uncomfortable. I can’t be perfect . . . but when we see the words it is a signal of a standard only achievable with Christ.

Paul then asks, “Is Christ divided?” The answer of course is “no.”

There is one Christ and Christ as God cannot be divided. Often in our world we think of our faith and relationship with God only in individual terms. We say that “I have a personal relationship with God.” And this is true of course, but it is not the whole story either. There is more than simply an “I” and God, there is also an essential “us.” We are not in relationship with God in isolation. We can't be.

The Bible makes this very clear. 1 John 4 is a good example. There the author writes, **“If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”**

Another is example is something that Jesus says in Matthew 5. Jesus says, **“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”**

God takes not only our relationship with him seriously, but our relationships with each other. And when there is “discord” and “quarrelling,” we are denying the work God wants to do amongst us. Christ unites rather than divides His people. A common and united focus on Jesus draws people closer to one another rather than further apart.

The most famous passage emphasizing this point is later on in 1 Corinthians, in chapter 12, **“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.”** The passage is about the various parts (people) that make up the church. We are all different

and fulfill different roles, but we are equally essential. One of us might be the head of the body and another the feet, but we need each other and when the foot starts thinking it is more awesome or important than the head . . . the body ceases to function because it is no longer functioning together.

If Christians are moving further apart from one another, then there is sin in the relationship. This does not mean that we have to be best friends with every Christian that we encounter or that we won't have more things in common with some people than others, but simply that Christ unites people rather than divides them.

The next thing Paul points out is that he was not the one crucified for them. Here the people of Corinth are arguing over who to follow and who should be their leader with the most authority and Paul reminds them that he is not the source of their hope and salvation. No human can be.

Because of our love of celebrities and of strong leaders, we like to jump on board with them and we must be vigilant to ensure that we don't end up following a person more than we follow Jesus. I worry about this as I see the increase in celebrity pastors. No one is Jesus. No human is perfect and deserving of our unconditional acceptance of their every decision.

I think we have to keep leadership in perspective, especially in the church. I am the pastor of Riverside, but Riverside is not mine. In fact, I serve you. As we talk about Riverside's vision and where God wants us to go, our process for doing this is not me coming up with something and then convincing you of it. My job is not to tell you what we are doing because of what I want or because of my vision.

My task as your shepherd is to guide a process by which we collectively discern what God has for us in this time and place. The vision is not mine, but ours collectively. And this is essential . . . God is the only being in this room that will still be here in 120 years. When the vision is God's, it lasts.

Let me tell you about an area that I think our culture is really at risk. Because our modern media gives us information in 5 word headlines and 15 second soundbytes, we struggle to develop any depth of understanding and wisdom. And so, especially in today's political climate, we get really good at labeling people all good or all bad, because it is easier. It is much easier to drop down on the conservative side or the liberal side and then to demonize the other side than to say, "I really like when George Bush did that,

but it was wrong when he did this.” Or “I disagree with Obama when he urged that legislation, but I really appreciate his passion for this policy.” Instead we presume Bush is all evil or Obama is all evil.

It is shallow and not a biblical lens. When Paul reminds the Corinthians that he was not the one crucified for them, he calls them to a higher understanding of the world. They do not look at life through their preference for a leader or their political ideology or their likes and dislikes . . . they are called to look at life through the lens of Jesus Christ. He is the one that has been crucified for us.

Paul then reaffirms what he has been saying by pointing out that they have been arguing over who was baptized by who. And in what appears to be a fairly frustrated tone, he exclaims that is glad that he did not baptize more of them or there might be more arguing and fighting.

In verse 31, Paul says, **“Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”** You can brag all you want . . . but brag about God . . .

The human who baptized you is not important, but what is essential is your identification with Christ in baptism.

Paul concludes with, **“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”** Paul is putting his finger on one of the reasons that the church of Corinth is debating who to follow and also pointing out one of the subjects of their debate.

Apparently they are arguing over who has more “human wisdom,” though they were probably referring to it differently. Perhaps they were comparing who had more education . . . who was better managing the affairs of the church . . . who was smarter and better at solving problems. Some translations translate “human wisdom” as “eloquent wisdom.” If this is more of the idea, then perhaps the church of Corinth was arguing over who was a better speaker. Who was more dynamic . . . who used big words and told good stories and was more persuasive?

But Paul is quick to point out that his purpose is not to impress a whole bunch of people with his human wisdom or eloquent speech . . . his goal is to share the Gospel. And the Gospel is powerful because of the cross, which is a symbol of sacrifice and death.

Paul speaks the truth. And the truth is not always palatable. When people focus too much on the external preferences and style, they drain the Gospel of its power because the focus is on these petty things as opposed to Christ and his sacrificial death. Some people are impressed with lights and fancy talks, but the true believers see beneath the glitz and look for the power and wisdom of God.

You should not judge me on my niceness or on how good of a sermon I give or even on my skills . . . you should ultimately evaluate me on whether in my life and my words you hear the results of a life lived wrestling with the Bible and a God that calls me to pick up my cross daily and walk with Him.

God deserves the glory for the good that we do. So much of discord and struggle in the church occurs over who gets credit for what. Ultimately our pride exists because we want others to affirm us in some way.

When I do weddings I sometimes share a quote that I heard one time, which says that married life is not about two individuals staring in at one another, but about them looking forward in the same direction. Life in the church is to be this way too. Life in the church is not so much about us looking around at each other and comparing ourselves to others or to the world . . . life in Christian community is about looking towards God together. . . moving forward together in harmony with a common purpose.

In my mind it is the difference between cars navigating around a parking lot, moving around thinking primarily about other cars so that you don't run into them . . . and cars driving together in the same direction on a one way highway . . . the focus then is on the destination.

The church is to be a group of people not consumed with their present differences, but focused uniformly on God and movement towards Him and his ways.

God's call for us this morning is to be unified by the power of God . . . to look forward together and to be "perfectly united in mind and thought" because God has transformed us in this way.

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