

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, January 22, 2017)

Texts:

Matthew 4:12-23 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned."

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake--for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 (NRSV)

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.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: “Called Together”

I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about division these days. Not long division, God forbid, but the kind of division that separates us from each other. Those issues, thoughts, feelings and biases: cultural, political and otherwise that put up a big block between us and drive us farther and farther apart so that we can’t even see or hear what the other person is saying so wide is the divide between us.

This is nothing new, of course. As we look back into the times Paul was writing in when he wrote today’s letter to the people of Corinth, we can tell that the new church is having its own challenges with division as the members quarrel over who they belong to, making their alliances based on who baptized them and dividing themselves like some nasty Christian pie that’s been cut up in so many pieces and put out to dry.

But what they had forgotten, as so many of us do, is the One who made the pie in the first place. (You know how I like to stretch a metaphor!) It doesn’t matter who cuts the pie or even serves it up if you don’t remember the creator and the one that put everything together in the first place.

Instead of remembering that it was the message of Christ that is to be proclaimed, the people of Corinth, as people before them and to this day, are more interested in finding that which separates them rather than what brings them together. And Paul teaches them as he does us to concentrate not on the differences that divide, but rather to put one’s focus on and one’s faith in the power of the cross that binds all of us together in love no matter our differences.

For Christ made the ultimate sacrifice that we might come together as one in the love that covers us all and is meant for every person who walks the face of this earth.

“Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul returns to the problem of the presence of divisions in the church,” Professor of New Testament at Eastern University, Dwight Peterson, tells us. “For example, he laments that the Lord’s Supper, the meal that is supposed to emphasize the unity of the church, has been turned into a showcase for disunity, probably around socio-economic lines. When the church participates in the Eucharist, they eat from a single loaf of bread, a participation that signifies their unity. But their practice of the Eucharist manages to demonstrate their divisions instead. Still later in the letter, Paul paints his famous picture of the church as the body of Christ, which emphasizes that all the different parts of the church must work together and mutually honor each other if the body is to be healthy. Parts of the body work with each other for the good of the whole. Discord, or division, is not healthy for a body, and it’s not healthy for the church at Corinth, either.”

Throughout our world today we see so many ways that people are divided. Many of us feel it keenly right here in the United States as we enter the realm of a new administration, voted in through our legal electoral system, but way off kilter in the popular vote as millions wonder if their vote counted at all.

The deep divides in how we see the world, our country and each other threatens the very thing that make these our UNITED states. Is there a way, I wonder, for us to come together when our beliefs and our views on what is fundamental to our very selves seems to be so very far apart?

As with all things, the only answer comes in returning to the one who made this...pie, we find ourselves in right now. Just as Paul encouraged the divided people of the Corinthian church to focus on the power and the substance of Christ’s message embodied in the symbol of the cross, so we must always return to the message of love, forgiveness, tolerance and understanding that God has given us and Christ calls us to. This doesn’t mean forgetting our differences or even diluting them,

but rather working together as the brilliant and wonderfully diverse people God created us to be in this multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-multi work of creation we inhabit.

“Paul’s apostleship is ... built on allowing, but disregarding many of the differences which the surrounding world saw as important,” writes Paul Bellan-Boyer in his article, “No Divisions?” “Foreskin or circumcised? No difference. Slave or free? No difference. Man or woman? No difference – in Christ Jesus. Clothing yourself with Christ does not erase our differences, but it does cover them, set them aside, [and] put them in a new context.

“Paul does not ask that the Corinthians be identical,” he goes on to say, “–only that they cease to work at cross purposes, and instead work for cross purposes. They are to stop working against one another (through competitiveness, quarreling, and maintaining imperial divisions in their fellowship). Instead, they are to work together by emulating Christ’s radical upset of the world’s power relationships.”

Throughout the church’s history there have been many rifts. Quarrels have erupted over what would appear to be the silliest and most trivial things to the outside world. In my own tradition, Mennonites have started new churches based on their beliefs of how long a woman’s covering strings should be or whether they should drive a buggy instead of a car, or could have a car if they painted the chrome black (we called these people, “Black Bumper Mennonites.”) Now doesn’t that just sound ridiculous to your modern ears? But, trust me, these little differences of belief have affected and probably do still affect countless lives throughout the generations.

And, to some degree, the differences and divisions are understandable when we realize that, for most, they are simply trying to follow the Way as they interpret it and to abide by what they feel is the law set down for them in the Bible and interpreted by their leaders.

But, as Simon Fry states on his blog, “Another Radical Reformation,” “if our focus is really on following Christ, our concerns should be for the same things He cared about. Christ did not focus on outward things as much as He addressed the heart. When outward issues were obvious, He addressed the heart issue that was causing the problem.”

And when Christ called his followers, he was always looking at the heart and not the outer appearance or the differences between them. As we heard from the Gospel of Matthew today, Jesus called the simplest of people to work with him. They weren’t carpenters like he was, they were fisherman. But Christ saw not what they did or who they were as the reason to call them to follow, he saw their hearts and their souls and offered them the great light which was dawning then and continues to shine in our lives to this day. “Maybe...calling is less about what we do than who we are,” Dr. David Lose wrote in his article “A Being Before Doing” this week. “Think about it for a moment: God’s call isn’t simply to do something, but rather to be something, a child of God. Maybe being comes before doing. Maybe being even makes doing possible.”

What will we do and how will we be as this new time dawns for us? Will we allow the disparate beliefs and distinct differences we may experience to pull us apart or will we let our voices be heard and our love be known so that all people may come together to unite us in God’s common purpose?

You, as I, may be tempted many times in the days and months to come to pull away, and to deny and decry those people and policies we see and experience before us and I’m certainly not saying that God doesn’t call us to sometimes do so. But I also believe that Christ’s ultimate call is to unity. “That they may all be ONE,” is the guiding command Christ gave to his disciples and to us as the UNITED Church of Christ.

Let me leave you today with an absolutely inspiring quote from one of our strongest spiritual guides working today, Father Richard Rohr, who sent this around on Friday:

“Today in the United States we inaugurate a new president. While I pray President Trump leads with wisdom, compassion, and justice, we cannot simply sit back and watch whatever unfolds. We the people have a tremendous responsibility to work together, to speak truth to power, to peacefully advocate for the rights of all beings and the earth. This requires maturity and contemplative consciousness, empathy for the “other,” and courage to stand with those who are suffering. It is not a popular or easy path. But as human beings, we are called to be active participants in our salvation and mutual survival. I hope that by rediscovering the great gifts of Christianity we might live as our whole selves, becoming the united Body of Christ.”

Amen!